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Petr Nemirovskiy

JENN

Short Novel

Chapter 1

“Here is your office; please come in,” said the head of the hospital’s Department of Mental Health, ushering me inside. “You have a phone, a computer, two chairs: one for yourself, the other for the patient. If you would like, Adam, you can move the table somewhere else to be more comfortable, as long as the door is easily accessible to you in case of emergency, so that the patient would not be able to block your exit. By the way, underneath the table, right here, you see, there is a panic button to sound the alarm. Do not forget to check if it is working. Overall, it’s quite safe here. However, proper safety measures should be followed. In a psychiatric clinic one has to be ready for anything.”

“Yes, yes, I understand. I am not a newbie; I already have some experience in this field. I spent a first year working as an intern in an outpatient psych clinic in Harlem, and completed my second internship in the detox unit of Bellevue hospital, where I have come across some things as well,” I replied, looking over my new office.

I lifted the phone receiver to make sure that it's connected; then I opened and closed the top table shelf.

"You can obtain pens, folders, basically all office supplies from the secretary," the director added.

"Thank you," I replied, sitting down into the black chair with a high back. I pressed the handle underneath the seat to adjust the height.

"Are you ready to see patients?" asked the director jokingly.

Unexpectedly the door opened, and there entered a...

"Adam, allow me to introduce Mrs. Jennifer Levy. She will be your supervisor for the duration of the year," the boss said.

I stood up and took a step towards the woman, who was not tall, wearing a white doctors' coat and a red hat, under which incredibly beautiful black hair cascaded down. She looked to be about forty years old. I extended my hand, doubting right away whether I did the right thing; can a strange man who is not Jewish shake hands with an orthodox Jewish woman? The handshake, however, did take place; her little hand dove into my palm and instantly slipped out.

"Jennifer is a psychotherapist with many years under her belt. I don't doubt that you will work well with her and gain valuable experience," The director added.

"Of course we will work well together, right Adam? Please, come to my office tomorrow at nine or, rather, ten o'clock. And you can call me simply 'Jenn.'"

If I were a professional writer, then I would thus start to describe the events which played a truly fateful role in my life. But, alas, my literary abilities are very ordinary.

I have major in Business Administration, and after graduation from the college I worked in several companies. But I never liked business and administrative jobs, regardless of salary and the benefits I got. This was probably one of the reasons I started spending too much time in bars and eventually began abusing alcohol.

In contrast to me, my wife was successful in her career as a computer programmer, quickly being promoted to the position of manager for the IT department. She wanted to start a family, but something inside of me resisted this.

I often got laid off or left yet another job myself. Because of all this, family life suffered. Nicky and I had more and more conflicts, which arose easily from any trifle. We began to cheat on each other and eventually it all ended in divorce.

The day after my divorce I was gripped by a strange anger at myself and entire world. I got drunk and went to wander around the city asking myself the same questions: Who am I? Will I ever find my calling? What to do next?

I don't remember how I found myself near NYU. The white marble board hanging on the side of the building had the course names written in large gold letters: Law, Theology, Psychotherapy.

"This is exactly what you need!" my inner voice whispered.

The curriculum for the Master of Psychotherapy program included an internship in various medical settings. I worked part-time in an advertising agency, rented an apartment in a high crime neighborhood in East New York, and got a loan for my studies.

My inner voice did not steer me wrong. I did not even once regret making the decision to become a psychotherapist. It was a simple and, it seemed, obvious step, but to have made it required so many years for me!

So, this is actually a short preface to how I found myself in the office of the outpatient psychiatric clinic of a hospital in Brooklyn, where I will have to complete my last internship, and where I met Jenn.

Chapter 2

At first Jenn offered for me to get acquainted with other psychiatric divisions of the hospital. In addition to the outpatient clinic, the hospital had Psychiatric Emergency and Psychiatric Inpatient units, which the patients themselves jokingly called the “cuckoo-house.”

According to Jenn, any psychotherapist should know, as you say, the cycle the psych patients go through from the Psych Emergency to the “cuckoo-house” and then back to outpatient. In addition, the season of the autumn Jewish holidays was starting. Jenn requested time off in advance and did not want the future young shrink idling without anything to do in her absence. That is why I went to the Psych ER first.

People there are brought via EMS vehicles and often accompanied by police. Not everything is so horrific there, not everything. Some patients are very calm: lying in the beds or

sitting in armchairs, waiting for when the doctor on duty calls them in and decides where to direct them to next.

On rare occasions, the doctor on duty would send those in “psychiatric emergency” on their merry way after conducting an examination.

It happens that some come there voluntarily. I remember one such volunteer. He was an African-American guy, with an athletic build, who came and confessed that his hatred towards his girlfriend’s ex-husband had reached a critical point. His desire to murder turned into an obsession. He can easily obtain a gun, but does not want to go to jail because of that “fucking jerk.” He requested to be given sedatives and to be “locked up” for some time at the “cuckoo-house.”

Knots swelled up on his unshaven face with its prominent cheekbones. I was taken aback by the manner in which he talked about his desire to kill someone, so coolly and unhurriedly.

Also I remember a quiet Puerto Rican, a little over sixty years old, came on his own and said he wanted to commit suicide. He cannot handle the problems of life burying him under: constant lay-offs, illnesses, and loneliness. Night and day he sees the Brooklyn Bridge in front of his eyes and himself climbing over the high handrails. He spoke calmly and could not stop smiling guiltily, even shyly.

The overwhelming majority of patients, however, are delivered to the “Psych ER” in a state of severe mental breakdown or psychosis.

Heads banging against walls, wailing, attacks on the staff, attempts to grab pens and pencils (mistaken for knives) from the table, intervention of the hospital police with handcuffs, syringes in nurses’ hands—all this is part of everyday so-called routine in the “Psych ER.”

I also spent some time in the inpatient unit—the “cuckoo house,” where most of the patients are transferred to from the “Psych ER,” already dressed in hospital gowns.

The “cuckoo house” is not the most appealing place in all aspects. Metal nets cover all the windows there while sliding steel bars with locks block access to the elevators. Psych technicians guard the wards with “dangerous” patients.

The most severe internal routine is enforced there. The announcements are strictly voiced through the speakers: for all to attend dinner or approach the medication window. The patients are pumped full of psychotropic drugs and slowly, wordlessly, wander the halls, shuffling their slippers.

Almost all of them, regardless of their condition, want just one thing: “to leave this place as soon as possible.”

I was introduced to some patients as a student completing my internship. When left alone with me in tête-à-tête, the patients started to prove their well-being right away, that they have been already cured and “normal,” begging to be released. I apologized, attempting to explain that I cannot discharge them since I am just an intern. They either did not get it or didn’t believe that I was telling the truth. As soon as they finally understood that I really could not order their discharge, they lost interest in me right away.

Only the sharpest ones quickly realized that release from the “cuckoo nest” directly depended on three golden rules: not to demand anything, not to complain about anything or anyone, and—most importantly—to take all the medication without any discussion. However, not everyone could grasp these rules, at least not immediately. “Human rights fighters” got the worst of it. Those who complained about the bad taste of the food, the unbearable

behavior of their cellmates, or the nasty treatment from the personnel were destined to linger in that place longer.

“It’s good, Adam, that now you have an idea about different psych units of the hospital,” Jenn said when her absence, due to Jewish holidays, and my introductory tour, came to an end. “It’s quite possible that some of your patients soon will have to visit those wards as well.”

Chapter 3

Anyway, back to “simply” Jenn.

She was extremely charming and curvy. On top of all that she was smart. She wore plain clothes in the clinic like all employees and her white doctor’s coat hung on the hanger in case she had to go to the “Psych ER” or “cuckoo house.”

She was a religious Jew and, if I’m not mistaken, conservative, but she never showcased her religiosity. The only thing which gave away her Jewish faith was a hat, which she never took off.

She had decorated her office in a professional way. The only exception which stood out from the medical entourage was a small hanging picture of the famous Degas painting *The Star, Dancer on Stage*, which showcased Jenn’s love for either Degas’ art or for ballet.

Her ease of communication and her openness composed a mask, rather her professional style of experienced shrink. As the winter sun, Jennifer gave her sweet smile to colleagues and to patients. However, if the situation required it, she could frown and sigh sadly. I could not distinguish when she remained nonchalant only by masterfully mimicking these emotions, as opposed to when she really was empathetic.

She used this set of techniques on me to the full extent. Once a week in her office she listened to my description of the psychotherapy sessions with the patients, and then together we analyzed the cases. Usually, during this time Jenn attentively stared at her manicure or her face in the compact mirror, or she spoke on the phone with her relatives. Visitors often interrupted our talks. One such visitor was...Mark Baron, the head of the otolaryngology department, which was located on the fifth floor in the same building as ours.

I was getting to know the patients and absorbing myself in the workings of the complex mechanism which is this huge New York hospital, and...every time I struggled with myself at the sight of Jenn's toned calves and embroidered hat.

A few times, when she was getting ready to go to lunch, I half-jokingly offered her my company and once casually mentioned that I was going to the movie theater. She rejected my attempts at wooing her with the most stern politeness.

...Some new wind, unbeknownst 'til now, blew and fanned my soul, when in my office I first saw her smart, passionate eyes (a bit cunning) and her black hair falling on her shoulders, emitting the color of a crow's wing. And this unknown wind blew from the moment nonstop; it blew from all four corners of the earth.

However, there were too many "buts" to hope for something. Jenn was older than me by ten years: in reality she was not forty as I initially thought, but forty-nine. She was an orthodox Jew. She owns her own house in the upheld part of Williamsburg. She has an ex-husband and two children.

How about me? I am still a student, renting a cheap apartment in a high crime East New York area, and am hardly able to make ends meet.

And even if putting aside all these “buts,” deleting them for a minute at the wave of a magic wand, then there will be one more, undeletable “but,” which is the head of the Eye, Nose, and Throat Department—Doctor Mark Baron. It’s silly to call him Jenn’s boyfriend, considering his respectable age—63! That is why we will call him Jenn’s fucking lover in the old-fashioned manner (by the way, he was married).

Nevertheless, something was glimmering in Jenn’s eyes when I was with her, some light sparkling, something unsaid remaining in her eyes. At least, so it seemed to me.

On the designated supervision day, I shaved most thoroughly and brought myself into tip-top shape. I flew, not walked, down the hall into her office, hoping that Jenn was also impatiently awaiting my arrival.

Chapter 4

“This is unfair, Jenn. You know quite a lot about me—what family I am from, what background. You also know that I got divorced two years ago. Yet you never say anything about yourself. Seems like a one-way game,” I reproached her once.

There was an ounce of truth in these words. Jenn obviously had some interest in me; during our supervisions we dedicated more time to subjects which had nothing to do with psychotherapy.

However, she still remained for me the sun shining over perpetual frost. In all honesty, our relationship in time became less strained. In her office alone with me, Jenn threw off her “religious” hat with ease.

I appreciated this uninhibited gesture of trust; however, things did not go beyond the hat. I remained her secret intern-admirer, just like the ones who came before me, and surely will come after.

I understood from her phone conversations and certain short comments that she is long ago divorced from her husband, but a relationship dealing with the kids and finances still exists between them. Her son recently finished school and is studying in college. Her older daughter is married and working as an accountant. Also, Jenn was a member of a Jewish charitable organization helping the victims of the Holocaust. This is all I knew about her. Oh yes, there's also this son of a gun Doctor Baron.

“What do you want to know about me?” she asked.

“For example, you never told me about this picture. Why do you keep it in your office?” I pointed to the reproduction of Degas' *The Star, Dancer on Stage* hanging on the wall.

“That's all you want to know? Such a trivial thing?” Jenn's voice contained a trace of disappointment.

“At times some small thing can tell a lot more about a person than their whole autobiography.”

“Hmm...” She put the nail file aside and focused her stare for a while on the reproduction. “I honestly don't know, Adam, what is so interesting in this story. But if you want... For as long as I can remember, I loved ballet. I adored it. I convinced my parents to allow me to take ballet lessons professionally in a studio. My parents and I had constant conflicts

because of this. It was shame for them; a daughter from an orthodox Jewish family—instead of wearing a long skirt, reading religious books, and helping her mother around the house—gets almost completely undressed and shows the world her legs and ‘tuchus.’ Do you know what ‘nafkeh’ means in Yiddish? Yes, yes it means a loose woman, a whore, to put it simple. My parents always set my older sister Sarah as an example for me since she was a very proper girl. This family war lasted for years, but at sixteen I had already danced my first roles, and at seventeen I received a special prize at the New York youth ballet festival for my role as Odette in *Swan Lake*. I got admitted to the Ballet Institute, but...” Jenn trailed off with a sad smile.

“You were forced to marry against your will, and your husband turned out to be an insensitive bore who understood nothing of the arts. And your career as a dancer was over, right?” I guessed.

“No. My husband really did not understand anything of the arts, but at that time it didn’t matter to me. He was an orthopedist, and if not for him I would have been disabled my whole life. I was in a car accident. Thankfully I survived, and got off with a few serious fractures. After that, I never get behind the wheel. This is the whole story. Nothing interesting, I warned you.”

She threw a peering look at me.

Right now in front of me sat a little girl from a Jewish orthodox family, who once dreamt of dance and fame, and for this dream rebelled against all her relatives and centuries-old traditions.

“Everything you’re saying is very interesting and a little sad,” I said.

Her eyes shone gratefully. Unexpectedly, pushing off of her feet, she rolled the chair to the side in a way that she became fully visible to me.

“The most serious trauma was here.” She put one foot over the other, bent down, and touched the right ankle with her fingers, right at the strap of her high cork wedge platform shoe.

By the way, I really did not like those shoes of hers. In my opinion, cork wedge platforms take away the slimness of the woman’s leg and making it appear thicker.

“Here my whole bone was shattered.” She caressed her leg from the shoe strap to the knee, which the hem of her dress barely concealed. “There were so many stitches that we both don’t have enough fingers to count them...Mister Adam! Hell-oo!”

I was staring at her outstanding legs with distinctly outlined calves, having difficulty stopping myself from the temptation to caress them.

“I hope I satisfied your curiosity?” Jenn rolled the chair back to the table, not awaiting the outcome of this struggle. “Now, Adam, you know the most important things about me.”

After a few days I was on my way to the supervisor’s office with a file in hand. I carried copies of professional journal articles and process recordings. Enclosed between them was a white sheet of paper on which...

“Is this me? Wow!” She was holding my drawing in her hands. “This is a real artistic sketch! Thank you, dear Adam. I have a folder where I keep letters of gratitude and cards from my interns. I will place this drawing there at the very top.”

“I am flattered.”

“Hmm, am I really like this?” Jenn approached the window, holding the paper in such a way as to allow for better lighting.

The drawing depicted a young woman wearing a tutu, in a “Jewish” hat with a visor, sitting on a mat. She was bending down and stroking her foot. The resemblance of the young dancer and Doctor Jennifer Levy would be easy to guess. The bulky cork wedge shoes instead of ballet slippers gave a certain caricature-nature to the sketch.

“Yes, Doctor, it is you alright in the image of Odette from *Swan Lake*.”

“Adam, this means you decided to make me your model? Did I figure out your intention correctly?”

“Well not exactly. I just wanted to try a few sketches in the manner of Degas.”

“No, no, and no.”

Yes, Doctor, yes.

I liked to draw in adolescence, even frequenting an art studio. However my painter’s abilities turned out to be weak; I could work with neither colors nor composition. The only thing that always turned out well for me, what was my strong suit, was drawing the human body in sketches with a plain black pencil.

“Adam, is this alluding to my past?” Jenn asked, looking over a new sketch, where a young woman in a tutu was running out of a synagogue.

Her table drawer already contained a special folder for my drawings.

“I don’t know, this is a by-product of my sub-conscious. I cannot explain it rationally.”

At times Jenn demanded that I stop with these drawings. She burdened me with difficult assignments, such as asking that I prepare a detailed written presentation of the patient’s case, or to read some long, tedious article in a professional journal. I rushed from the hospital to the university and from there to the library, sitting there till closing time. On top of this, I worked

part-time in an advertising agency. I ate on the go, whatever I had on hand, and slept on the subway. When I drove the car, I feared falling asleep at the wheel.

Where did I get so much strength from?! Hunger. Hunger and libido are the two main sources of inexhaustible human energy!

“In my opinion, Adam, art interests you more than psychotherapy. Maybe you need to seriously consider whether you chose the right career path.”

“Okay, Doctor, I will think about it,” I muttered, handing Jenn a new sketch, which depicted her sitting on a couch, a light white robe carelessly covering her.

Although her voice sounded strict, she readily accepted these drawings, and I think impatiently waited for new ones. She was dressing with even more taste and finesse than before, and her clothes already definitely went beyond the limits of professional style. She constantly changed her manicure and pedicure, and utilized more and more mascara and lipstick. Her never-ending outfits, stiletto pumps, coral beaded necklaces, gold chains running down below the neckline, shiny specks on the eyelids, a firework-display of hats...

In short, she was all sparkly and shiny. During our supervisions she now often got up and walked around the office, watering flowers in pots or searching for some book on the shelves; while doing so, she very gracefully bent over as if posing.

What I have not seen on her ever again were those cork wedge platforms. Instead, a few times she wore high black sock boots with a wide fit at the knees.

Ah, what the devil possessed me?! It was the fault of those boots of hers.

“Adam, I acknowledge your talent.” This time Jenn’s voice sounded really firm. “However as a direct supervisor of your internship I demand that this art activity come to an end. It has gone too far! And if it’s excusable on your end, since you’re—forgive me—a bit of a

bonehead, then for me there's no way. You are finishing the university and paying a lot of money for your studies—probably one hundred thousand, right? So, you see. As your supervisor I have to do everything to make sure that you gain the maximum professional knowledge from this internship. Instead, you have taken a frivolous interest in art, and I am, sorry to say it, unwittingly fucking enabling you.”

Her eyes shone angrily and her cheeks flushed. She returned yet another of my sketches where she was portrayed almost “nu,” wearing sock boots and a very short skirt, standing with her back half-turned, with large spread out wings—*The Black Swan*.

It would have been a pity to destroy this sketch; it was a real masterpiece. I hung it in my house on the wall. Then I lay down on the couch, folding my arms over my head.

I thought about my life, about my parents in Connecticut, with whom I have not spoken in a long time. They own a small restaurant and always hoped one day I become a successful businessman. They judged my decision to change career and to become a shrink. In a moment I imagine my parents, our house, backyard, and a basketball hoop near the garage.

I was also thinking about my ex-wife and about Jenn: no regret about divorce with Nicky, impossibility of love with Jenn.

It is empty in this small, cold apartment. The fucking wind on the street, the chilly winter wind, strives to permeate into every slit of the window frames. It is empty. The fucking howls and whines of dogs press from the street all the way into my room.

Chapter 5

Among the patients I worked with as a psychotherapist was Francis Morales.

Francis was a twenty-two year old Puerto Rican. His parents got divorced when he was nine years old. The whereabouts of his father have remained unknown since. Francis did not complete his education (eleventh grade), and he had no professional specialization or qualifications. He lived in a shelter in Brooklyn, and his mother and younger sister stayed in another shelter. Francis was never married and had no children.

Half a year ago he had been arrested for an apartment burglary. During the criminal investigation some questions arose regarding his mental competence. The guy was directed to special medical professionals to evaluate him and understand the reasons for such strange behavior: why he had no job, why he was not studying, and why he was living God knows how. They came to conclusion that Francis has some type of mental pathology which doesn't allow for him to adapt socially. They could not determine which one in particular, just putting down "depression," and transferred his case to the Brooklyn Treatment Court, which handles criminal cases when defendants have a serious mental condition.

Francis was sentenced to a year of probation for the burglary, but the judge agreed that since the guy has "issues" he needs to be placed under the state's guardianship. Francis was offered Public Assistance benefits, and was put on the waiting list for subsidized housing. In exchange, he had to attend a psychiatric outpatient clinic. Francis agreed to these terms even though he did not consider himself sick at all.

He was so thin, almost emaciated. His face was dreadfully pale with two black button eyes as though pinned into a plaster cast mask. His dark hair was cut short and he had a black

prickly beard on a narrow chin, with a black mustache further accentuating his paleness. His stare was completely detached. His whole appearance had some kind of hopelessness, seediness.

This is how I would start to describe Francis. All his clothes were loose. He wore old wide jeans hanging below the waist; his sneaker shoelaces were always untied. Francis had a strange walk: with his hands in his jean pockets, he took wide steps swaying side to side with his whole body as if on hinges. During our sessions he rarely looked me in the eyes, but instead stared somewhere into the corner of the ceiling.

I don't know how he spent his free time prior to our acquaintance. When I met Francis, he was seriously preparing... to join a youth street gang. I found out about this when I asked him why he wears T-shirts with depictions of guns, skulls, lightning, etc.

"Are you a gang member?"

"Almost," he mumbled.

"Are you serious?"

As it turned out, he had not joined a gang yet but was getting ready to do it. Meanwhile, he was deciding which one to choose.

"Most likely I will join Latin Kings. It is currently the toughest gang in America; they are fucking cool."

Latin Kings actually is one of the major street gangs in the U.S. Its "main office" is located in Chicago, with a "branch" in New York. For the most part its main members are Latinos, but there are some whites and blacks as well. The number of members is not counted in dozens but hundreds of thousands. It's a whole army with its own ideology of hate towards the "white millionaire state," its own "Manifesto," and a multi-level hierarchy. The lowest level has the "street knights," and the top has the movement leaders, "Kings." Today they rule the streets

of many American cities and in prisons among the convicts; tomorrow they will seize political control of the country.

“It is very interesting. I don’t understand, however, why you need to be in this gang?” I asked Francis after he informed me about the Latin Kings.

“Why I need it? They have organization, justice, brotherhood. Maybe one day I will become a ‘King.’” Once again directing his disconnected stare at the ceiling, he started to tell me about the rituals of this gang, the history of its origin, its Kings—basically the whole information which he had thoroughly gathered from various sources, including the streets and the internet.

From that day on, we found a favorite topic for our discussions. Of course I figured that what attracts Francis to the gang is not cruelty or violence. He was drawn by the deceptive impression of brotherhood, friendship, and love—everything he lacked in his own life.

I was sure that he will never join any gang, that he invented this idea to fill a void of his existence. He came up with God knows what. In his imagination he sees himself among the “good and kind” killers. The myth of his imaginary power enables him to compensate for the feeling of his own insignificance.

However, at times he spoke of his gangster future and the past criminal adventures so animatedly, his eyes shining so brightly during these moments, that I admit I was lost in doubt. Maybe he really did want to be a cool macho gangster? He did participate in the apartment robbery, though I don’t know what role he played in that crime.

“You want to be a gangster? Okay. But let’s try to look at the situation at another angle,” I offered him. “Maybe it would make more sense to do something else? How about going to college? You are not a stupid guy. Just think. You will get a degree in, let’s say, computer science, then get a job, buy a sweet ride, and go on vacation with your girlfriend to Miami.”

Francis, on the other hand, did not share my enthusiasm regarding “doing something else.” He did not want to go on vacation to Florida in his own vehicle, not even with a girlfriend.

“I don’t give a fuck, doctor, about what you’re saying. I want to join the Latin Kings. Too bad that I got a year of probation instead of jail time. In prison I would have made a career faster.”

So, Francis was joining the gang and I discussed with him his upcoming criminal plans. Our chats on this topic peacefully lasted for a few months, and it didn’t go beyond our talks. I did not have the slightest clue about how one enters a gang. Is there a special rite of passage or ritual? Does one have to rob or kill to prove one’s loyalty to the order?

Chapter 6

Once I had a meeting in the area where Francis’ shelter was located and I decided to pay him a visit.

Francis was very surprised to see me. He invited me into the room and sat on the unmade bed. He offered me a chair, but I stood by the window, leaning on the windowsill.

“Don’t worry; nothing happened. I was just nearby and I thought I’d come over.”

He peered at me suspiciously, then shrugged his shoulders, like, “It’s up to you, doc.” He took out a cigarette from a pack and started smoking.

“Do you by any chance have a cigarette for me as well?” I asked.

“You smoke?” he held out the pack to me.

“I indulge sometimes.”

I really did smoke very seldom and now after a second puff I inhaled too much smoke into my lungs and started coughing. A smile slid across Francis' face.

"Is it true that a pack of cigarettes costs ten dollars nowadays?" I asked.

"Yes, but here in the shelter they sell stolen ones in bulk and you can buy three packs for ten bucks."

I started to talk about the weather. Francis felt much more at ease here than in my office. It's understandable: a hospital is an establishment where he had to serve his sentence and seek treatment, God knows what for. But here, although at a shelter, at least he was home.

And of course, it was a significant event in his life—the "cuckoo doctor" coming to visit. Doctor Adam himself! After all, even his own mother, father, friends, or girlfriends (although he did not have this last) did not visit him. Only shelter security came to check on him, along with exterminators and court-appointed social workers overseeing his treatment.

In his room there was a strong odor of chlorine, unwashed clothes, and weed. There was an old computer on the table. All the walls were decorated with posters containing images of scar-faced gangsters holding guns and knives.

Completely out of place with this gallery of violence was a small picture of some holy Catholic figure in the far corner.

"Yeah man, it's a tad creepy in here."

All of a sudden a huge roach ran out from under the floor rag and raced towards the heater. I attempted to squish it with my foot, but he slipped out from my shoes. I chased him ready to strike until he disappeared in the crack beneath the floor baseboard which had come unglued.

My roach hunt greatly amused Francis; he even burst out laughing. So much fun—the “cuckoo doctor” chasing cockroaches around the shelter!

“The rascal got away,” I complained.

“Roaches are the least of my worries. Let them run around; they don’t cause any harm. As long as it’s not bed bugs. I remember when I lived in another shelter once with my mom and sister. Now that was a real fucking nightmare! Every morning we woke up in bloody blisters from bedbug bites, and no ointment creams helped. We took off all our clothes and slept naked on rubber mats. No matter how much my mom yelled, demanding to have them exterminated, nothing happened. In another shelter there were fucking mice. We sprinkled poison around the whole room and then found dead mice everywhere, even in the oven.”

“That’s why you dislike your mother so much?”

“My mother? Because of her I bounced around in shelters and strangers’ homes. Because of my dad and her...” Frowning, he squeezed the corner of the blanket in his fist. “Nobody knows what people did to me in those adopted families. In one Dominican family there were two sisters, older than me by three years. I was thirteen then. These fucking bitches with their long arms and fat asses tied me to the bed, took off my pants and tortured my ‘dildo,’” he lowered his head, pointing between his widely spread legs. “They dragged it, poured some kind of foul-smelling fluid on it, and when their father came home these fucking bitches complained that I supposedly grope them, and I was punished. I did not tell the truth to anyone because I was afraid that I would be placed in a much worse family,” he sniffed, ready to cry at any moment. “One time I climbed up on the roof wanting to jump to my death.”

At this moment, the fearsome Francis, this almost-king of one of the most bloody street gangs in America, resembled a helpless kid, who for some reason grew a mustache and beard.

All of a sudden I heard music behind the wall; someone was playing the piano.

“It’s Kevin. He moved in recently and brought an electronic piano with him.”

Listening to the melody, Francis closed his right eye, while the left one was open so wide that the eyebrow above it twisted sharply.

“Fucking idiot! Who plays Mozart like that?!”

“You know how to play the piano?”

“Yes, in the school where I was studying we had a music class. I even played in the school orchestra. That was the best thing in my life. My teacher said that I was a genius, that I will be a star, but then my mother was jailed for prostitution and I was taken out of that school and put in foster care.”

Behind the wall someone continued playing piano.

“Hold on.” I took out a cell from my pocket. “James, do you mind if I come over now with one guy?”

Hiding the cell back in the coat, I zipped up.

“Let’s go, my friend. Now you’ll see a real king.”

I was acquainted with James, who was African-American, for almost two years. I treated his wife Margaret in a Harlem mental clinic for depression, which she suffered after her son committed suicide. James was sixteen years older than his forty-five year old wife but looked like a youngster. He was slim, fit, and basically in great shape. I was impressed by his hipster

style from the thirties of the last century. He preferred fashionable jackets with patch pockets, loose shirts with raised collars, and narrow-toed shiny shoes.

James worked in show business, and not just that, but he was the owner of the recording studio Magic Music Corp. for more than thirty years. Once upon a time he recorded music on vinyl records, and now on CD and electronically.

James loved various types of music, as long as it was a “good product,” he liked to say. He recorded jazz, spirituals, rock, and folk. The walls in his studio had vinyl records which he’d recorded and received prizes for.

James had an egg-shaped head with tiny coiled black hair. He was tall. He waltzed down the wide halls and rooms of the studio like a showman, with flapping folds of his unbuttoned jacket . Here James also had a school of audio recording, teaching whoever was willing to work with this damn difficult equipment—which cost, in his words, two million dollars.

As previously stated, I met James thanks to his wife, who was so severely depressed after her son’s suicide that she ate nonstop, had insomnia, and even started to hallucinate. James drove Margaret to the sessions at the clinic himself and courteously waited for her in the hall, showing enviable care.

Margaret was his third wife, not counting numerous past lovers. They had no children in common. Margaret was never a great beauty, but after the tragedy with her son she completely lost her womanly charms and stopped taking care of herself. But James, notwithstanding all this, remained insanely devoted.

One year after the tragedy, Margaret started to return to normal little by little, even smiling sometimes. She was one of the first and most successful patients of mine. My internship was over by then, but we stayed in touch. Sometimes we called each other. Occasionally I came

to James' studio. Grateful for my help and notwithstanding my total lack of an ear for music or a good singing voice, James persistently offered for me to record my solo concert, even ready to provide backup singers and accompaniment free of charge.

...So, Francis and I are in James' studio. We asked the secretary where the maestro was and walked over to the hall.

James was in the recording room. Another three guys, around twenty years old and wearing headphones, sat behind the same controls, pressing some buttons and moving levers.

"Stop! Stop! One second!" James ordered. Seeing me, he nodded cheerfully and signaled for me to wait.

Thick glass divided the hall from the recording room, where a jazz band was playing. I offered Francis a seat on the bench. Since he did not expect to find himself in a real recording studio, accompanied by the very "cuckoo doctor" on top of it, a stunned Francis sat down without another word.

When the recording session was over, we went with James to his office. I inquired how Margaret was doing and in general what was new with them. Then I asked if he can take Francis on as his student.

"He is a good kid. He loves music and used to play piano. Now he is unemployed and has no idea what to do with himself. I don't know how you will decide the matter of payment with him, though."

Without going into details, James agreed. He grew up on the streets of Harlem and understood everything without any further explanation.

"Adam, buddy, don't worry about money. Your Francis and I will talk it over together, so long as he wants to learn."

We shook hands on it and came back to the hall where Francis was waiting. We were laughing on the way since James liked to tell jokes. At the entrance into the hall I grabbed James by the flap of his jacket.

Francis was sitting at the piano pressing the keys. Shiny music stands and microphones surrounded him.

Ta tata...

He was clearly visible to us from there. A bright light from the ceiling streamed onto his pale face, reminiscent of a cast mask. Francis pressed a key and then withdrew his hand as his shoulders rose heavily underneath his black T-shirt. He furrowed his brows, shook his head, hit the key again and pressed the pedal hard. It seemed to him that the instrument was not producing the right sounds. Francis was anxious, stared at the keyboard puzzled, clenched the fists of his raised hands, and bit his lips. His face was twisted as if in pain. He slowly unclenched his fists, and, trembling once again, touched the keys with his fingers.

Ta ta...La la...

He was bending down and strangely turned his head one way and then the other. He opened his mouth wide, sighing deeply; his face showed some inhuman suffering.

“W-o-w,” James stretched out the word.

La la... Ta ta...

Chapter 7

"To tell the truth, it's hard for me to work with Francis. Sometimes he is kind of normal, and sometimes he is closed in. He loses contact with the outside world and his own fantasies become the only reality for him," I said.

We sat in Jenn's office. She was wearing her white Doctor's coat, not having had the time to take it off. She had just returned from the "cuckoo house," into which one of her patients had gotten admitted.

"First of all, Adam, I am repeating one more time, you have to get through your thick skull the most important thing: if a person finds himself in a psychiatric clinic, it means there is definitely something wrong with him, no matter how normal he seems otherwise. Secondly, what you call 'strangeness,' the *The Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders* calls 'Schizoid Personality Disorder.' Can you remember that? Schi-zo-id," she repeated by syllables. "This disorder is not as destructive or pronounced as—let's say—schizophrenia, and only a good doctor can place a diagnosis. However, overall you described everything correctly. Such a person sometimes behaves inadequately; he cannot establish himself in reality, cannot understand his own self and so resorts to living in a fantasy world. By the way, schizoid is a very prevalent disorder today among American youth. I read an article recently where there is convincing evidence that in the last quarter century all psychiatric diseases in America "got younger": schizophrenia and manic depression are more often found among the youth. I am not even talking about drug addiction and suicide, but that is understood."

Jenn rose and, taking off her coat, went to the coat-hanger to hang it up on the hook.

Tap-tap-tap, little thuds from heels on the floor behind my back. Returning, she straightened out her dress and then her hair. Lately she felt very comfortable in my presence.

“When my children studied in school, their friends came over to our house sometimes. They asked to live with us for a while because their parents badgered them when they learned that their kids were not like everyone else, whether homosexual, or pot smokers, or mutilated themselves with tattoos and piercings. You cannot believe how many of these teenagers were schizoids, just like this Francis—Oy Vey!”she finished on a Yiddish note.

Chapter 8

The next morning, a Saturday, I parked my car in Williamsburg, in a predominately Jewish part of the neighborhood.

The wind carried screams of crows to the salon through a slightly ajar window. They were circling the tall sycamore trees and above the synagogue roof not far away. The synagogue doors opened at times; men and women of different ages exited, many with children. Jenn was still there, inside the building. She was alone, all by her very lonesome. A half hour ago I saw how she entered, saying hello to some young couple.

What is she praying for there, in the temple where the drearily-drawn out cries of a rabbi can be heard? Does she go to the synagogue due to actual belief? Or tradition? So the neighbors don’t point an accusing finger at her for not being holy enough? In order to meet with the teachers of the Jewish school where her children studied? Not to lose needed connections? To be in a crowd?

What did I know about her personal life or her family? One time she told me about her grandmother, who miraculously survived in the Dachau concentration camp, working as a nurse in a typhoid barrack. In her old age, the grandmother got sick with Alzheimer’s and relatives sent

her to the nursing home. Jenn was tortured with guilt because of it, although she was just a teenager then. When she described for me her grandma's last days and death, even thirty years later she still got a bit rattled.

Jenn's father held some administrative position in the Yeshiva until retirement, while her mother was a housewife. She also had an older sister, Sarah. You can tell from the tense tone with which Jenn spoke to Sarah on the phone that the relationship between sisters was not the best.

I was familiar with the episode of her unsuccessful attempt to become a ballerina. Incomplete role of *Odette—the Swan*. The conflict with her family because of this had surely given her an inferiority complex—the feeling of an ugly duckling never having become a swan.

It's unclear why Jenn stopped on such a low level professionally, why she did not go further climbing the career ladder. She could have become the clinic's assistant director; she definitely had more than enough knowledge and clinical experience. Was it the temptation of a peaceful, comfortable life? Strolling through boutiques, buying fashionable clothes, attending spas—did she prefer all these flashy rags and gold bling to her career?

Or maybe she busied herself with her family and children, not having enough time for anything else. When she became Dr. Baron's lover she no longer needed to overexert herself as much at all.

And her children grew up, the oldest daughter having already flown from the nest, and her son set to fly in a few years. Jenn will be left alone in an empty nest. The only things left would be her sock boots and damn nose-and-ears Doctor Baron.

I remembered one professor in the university, when we discussed the topic of “midlife crisis in women and men,” touched on the so-called “empty-nest syndrome,” and shared her

feelings when her own children grew up and left the house. “The smells are gone! The house lost my children’s smells!” the professor exclaimed. “I walked around the whole house, sniffing everywhere, but it became empty and foreign; it no longer smelled like my children!”

I imagined Jenn in the role of a “sniffer.” Children fly away and probably years pass until they feel a sharp homesickness for the abandoned home and the mother in it.

Cry, Jenn! Cry! Your whole personal life—with your ex-husband and with Baron—is all transactions, business contracts! But let only God judge you for your relationship with an ageing family man. Let only the fearsome singing of the rabbi, appealing to the Almighty, awaken remorse in your soul.

Is it for me, a person secretly stalking you, to judge your life? I was also married, and I also cheated on my ex, by the way. But I watch, watch wistfully as you now are exiting from the synagogue doors, where godly things were given unto God.

You are wearing a black velour coat and ankle boots. You are fixing your hat, exchanging words with some woman. You’re probably laughing, but your laughter does not reach me. I only hear the croaking of the crows and the roar of cars passing by.

You’re nodding; maybe someone’s inviting you to visit for some Jewish holiday. There you will drink kosher wine and eat challah. You will discuss how things are going: someone’s circumcision or someone’s Chuppah in an expensive restaurant, or the disgraces occurring in the charitable organization assisting Holocaust victims.

There are bottomless chasms between us, which even no Boeing can cross.

Goodbye Jenn!

She steps to the side, stopping right by the curb. She is probably waiting for a taxi like she did it on last Saturday.

She waits, shifting from one foot to the other and slightly shrugging her shoulders. It's chilly; there is November wind. Dampness oozed from the black earth and wet asphalt.

Tap-tap from the boot heels. And all of a sudden her black coat slips off of her, the strong wind picks it up and carries it somewhere behind the synagogue building, past the road and behind the bushes. Her boots fly away behind it. Her long skirt and blouse, everything, everything flies away ripping to shreds in the wind!

And so...rum-pum-pum...snow white Jenn is gliding wearing her tutu. Rum-pum-pum... her hands are quivering as if shaking off drops of water from the feathers. Her chest is trembling and her neck is gracefully extended.

It is quiet and gloomy on the night lake. The swan is melancholy. Her enchanted soul is weeping. The moon pours its light from the sky, which drowns in the lake's abyss.

Sorcerer Baron like a black raven is circling around the Swan and laughing viciously.
Caw-Caw!

Where is the prince—the young, enamored prince—who will fire an arrow and defeat the black Raven?

The taxi pulled up and came to a stop.

Jenn opens the rear car door. Before getting in, she suddenly turned to look back and throw an uneasy glance in my direction.

Chapter 9

Francis was lost for days on end in James' studio, learning sound recording, cleaning, vacuuming, and distributing mail. In his spare time, when the hall was empty (recording at times

went on until midnight, or until two a.m.), he played the piano. He even stopped smoking weed. Basically the guy found himself in the right place at the right time.

Occasionally he shared his plans for the near future with me: to form a cool punk rock band called Crazy Brothers, record their first concert and video, and put it on YouTube.

Yes, sometimes he became withdrawn and went inside himself like a snail into its shell. But during periods of reemergence he was very fascinating: he spoke freely, even insolently at times, and was uninhibited in his gestures, while his expressions were more loose and his movements more flexible.

Looking at him, I got angry at Jenn that she had so easily written him off as a schizoid and that was that. Oh, these shrinks! They will brand a person on the forehead with the “schizoid” or “chronically suicidal” stigma, and be done.

Francis is an artist, a real artist! An artist without a stage, a movie set, or concert—suffocating like a fish out of water. An artist cannot remain for long without art, not doing what he is attached to and what God made him to do. Yes, all real artists, musicians, and painters are peculiar. But that’s what talent is for—to be special, to be unique.

And she said “schizoid, schizoid”! The guy did not know or understand his whole life what he was born for, or maybe he secretly dreamed of a career as a pop star, but never sharing his fantasies with anyone. Instead of the stage, piano, and spotlights directed at him, all he saw was his drunk, promiscuous mother, rats inside the shelters, and degradations in foster care.

Hey, all shrinks! When a new patient enters your office, and you find out that he is an artist, painter, or musician, I ask you to please shut your thick psychotherapy books! Step away from this person as far as possible, even if your office space is small! Give the artist as much free space as possible and let him feel himself on stage, behind the piano, or at a canvas! Become his

grateful spectator, a fan, and you will rescue him faster than any medicine, injections, or all of your God damn boring psychotherapy sessions!

“I want to ask why you wear a cross now? I don’t recall you wearing it before. Is this a new style? Your new artistic image?” I asked Francis once and nodded towards his big silver cross dangling from his chain over his black t-shirt.

But Francis acted as if he didn’t hear me. He stared straight ahead, gloomily pinching his beard, which had grown longer and thicker than before.

“Hel-lo, dude, are you with me? Or did you fly away again somewhere to the Moon?”

He finally came out of his reverie and looked at me. This did not last long and he once again focused on the far end of the ceiling.

“To be honest, Francis, I don’t understand anything. Your life is going great, even fantastic. You have a roof over your head. Your criminal record will soon be expunged. James is paying you a small salary. You are playing the piano and writing music. Yes, you don’t yet have a band, but not everything all at once. Why do you look so unhappy? Why are you silent all the time? James also says you’ve changed lately; you snap back and don’t do what he asks. You started smoking weed again.” I sniffed loudly, letting him know that his clothes have a strong smell of marijuana. “What is with you?”

“I no longer want to be a musician; I don’t want to be a pop star,” he said quietly. He then looked around to make sure that no one was there except us and whispered, “Do you know what happened to me recently? A month ago I saw my saint—Saint Francis, who I’m named after.

When I was little my grandmother told me a lot about Saint Francis and I saw him recently. It happened at night. A chariot of fire rode into my room harnessed with three white horses and in this burning circle I recognized my saint. He wore only a Cossack tied by a rope and was barefoot. He crossed himself with the sign of the cross, like so.” Francis crossed himself. “He said that he is waiting for me and I must follow him.”

I opened my mouth in astonishment. I involuntarily remembered the picture of some Catholic saint hanging in his room in the shelter among the posters of gangsters.

“I don’t know why, Doctor, but since then I feel at fault for everything. I am the most horrific sinner on earth. I am suffering. Oh, why didn’t they send me to jail back then?! Why did I only receive one year of fucking probation?” He clenched his bony fists hard.

“Wait Francis, wait. You are not a criminal. It is we who are criminals for allowing this to happen to you, but you’re not guilty of anything. Yes, you participated in an apartment robbery, but you told me yourself that you were on the lookout and didn’t even know that the apartment would be robbed.”

Nodding, but clearly not listening me, he started to roll up the sleeve of his black T-shirt for some reason. Then he took something out of the pocket of his wide jeans. I didn’t get a chance to see what it was. A moment after the click a blade flashed in his hand.

“I deserve this! Deserve!” he extended his bare left arm forward and suddenly started cutting it with the knife.

“Take this, motherfucker! Take this!”

Blood gushed on his black T-shirt and flowed down to his jeans.

My eyes got blurry. I pressed the secret panic button mounted into the table as hard as possible, mentally reproaching myself for never having tested if it works. Where are the police? Why is it taking so long?!

“Fuck, fuck!” Francis screamed, shaking his head. He stopped cutting his arm and was watching the blood flow. A wild, joyful smile played on his face.

His knife, big silver cross, and even beard were blood-stained.

What to do? Where are the damn police?!

The office door swung open with a bang. Three police officers from the hospital security burst in.

“Don’t move! Everyone stay where you are!”

They knocked Francis to the ground instantaneously. One of the cops sat on top of him, putting his hands behind his back and putting on handcuffs. The other cop grabbed his hair and roughly pressed his face to the floor. Francis’ black T-shirt quickly became covered in blood. The cop’s arms and the handcuffs also had bloody stains.

“Doctor, are you alright?” the third cop asked me. He picked up the knife from the floor and took out a small plastic bag from his pocket, opening it to place the knife inside.

“Yes, everything is ok,” I answered, meanwhile attentively inspecting the perfectly round, red indentation from the button on my index finger.

The cops caught Francis under his armpits and raised him onto his feet.

“Doctor, can we take him?”

“Yes.”

“Where should we get him? To the ‘Psych ER’?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s go, kid.”

Francis jerked a few times; he was obviously uncomfortable in this position, hands behind his back and in handcuffs on top of it, and two cops on both sides squeezing his frail, almost muscle-free, arms.

“Relax, kid! Walk calmly,” commanded one cop, grabbing Francis’s neck from behind and pressing his head forward.

“Aaahh...”

Francis was taken to the Psych ER where he was given a few injections. Then he was sent to the Bellevue hospital in Manhattan, which had a special psych ward for patients who have ongoing criminal cases—Francis was still on Probation.

“What hospital is he in?” Jenn inquired, examining her stunning face in the compact mirror.

Her eyelids shone and sparkled with silver glitter, and her long lashes had a thick coat of mascara. She wore a long fitted lilac dress. Judging by all this, she was headed to some party.

“In Bellevue.” I answered.

“Ok, as a whole I got the picture: the young man could not handle stress and was not able to adjust to changes,” she continued when we were in her office getting ready for the clinic staff meeting, where I would have to present the Francis’ case.

Meanwhile, I sat on her “shrink’s” couch, intended for patients, with folded palms between my spread knees.

“Too much good befell your Francis in a short time. One must get used to good things as well, and turns out he was not ready. That’s first of all. Secondly, Francis started smoking marijuana, and the grass, as known, causes hallucinations in some people. So, in conclusion, his psychiatric illness is not stable, but progressing. Here is the answer to your question why he got a nervous breakdown and cut his arms. You, Adam, did the right thing; you were not confused and you called the police right away. Don’t blame yourself for anything, we shrinks cannot foresee everything.” She snapped her compact closed.

“Yes, yes, it’s all correct—the stress, the grass, hallucinations, psychopathology. However, maybe... Maybe he truly believes in God? Maybe only now having become free, finding himself among people who care about him a little bit, he finally felt God in himself? He felt some sort of remorse and considered himself guilty? He wanted to confess his sins, no matter how minimal they are, but which in his eyes acquired huge importance?” I was looking ahead, where it seemed as if some dark bloody spots appeared and dissolved on the floor.

Jenn shook her head.

“Adam, it will be hard for you to work with the mentally ill. You dig too deep. That is dangerous not only for the mentally ill but for the mentally healthy.”

She got up, letting me know that the supervision was over. She looked at her gold wrist watch.

"That's it. I hope we went into enough detail discussing this case for you to present it to the clinical conference."

However, I stayed put.

I was choked with jealousy: she is going to leave now in her fabulous dress, high heeled shoes, all sparkly—to him, to this damn geezer Baron. And I did not know what to do so this would not happen.

Surprised, Jenn was looking at me, trying to understand the reason for my "passive resistance." She guessed finally. She came to the door and closed the lock.

She came back and squatted down in front of me.

"Darling Adam, I did not want to start this discussion for a long time, but it seems I have to. I know that you are not indifferent to me. But you should be. Don't sit in the car by the synagogue on Saturdays waiting for me. Don't follow me when I go home from work and don't draw me, agreed?"

I wrinkled my forehead. Now from this spot and this angle I could clearly see the smooth lines of her hips in the tight dress. Amazing lines! I don't know what force I was obeying, but I suddenly took Jenn's arms and pulled her to me!

She succumbed for an instant, maybe because of the unexpectedness. I even had time to feel how a strand of her velvety hair slid down my cheek.

This lasted for a moment. Freeing herself, Jenn stepped back to the door. Her cheeks were burning with crimson spots. She threw scorching lightning at me.

"Are you in your fucking right mind?" she said quietly. "This is ridiculous. This is worse than harassment. It's very unprofessional. You're breaking all the rules. Tomorrow I will talk to

the director. Without giving him details, I will ask that you get another supervisor instead of me. It's enough."

Chapter 10

But she never asked the director about anything and she stayed as my supervisor. Same as before, we discussed patients, argued, and spoke about art and ballet.

In a word, not much had changed on the surface. But a certain secret arose between us, which we, like two co-conspirators, now hid from the entire world.

Once Jenn asked if I could drop her at the atelier during lunch, where she urgently needed to pick up some clothes.

The car as they say was provided, and shortly thereafter we were speeding on the Brooklyn streets to the Bay Ridge neighborhood.

Jenn disappeared at the atelier doors. I pushed back the car seat from the wheel and leaned back, settling in more comfortably to ready myself for her lengthy absence. I took out my cell phone to scroll Facebook.

To my surprise Jenn came out in ten minutes with a package in her hands.

"I promised that I will be quick," she said, placing the packages on the back seat.

We drove back.

But returning straight to the hospital would have been an unforgivable mistake on my part, if not foolishness, especially when it's such a warm and sunny February day.

Not saying anything, I drove the car to the river bank of the American Veterans Memorial Pier, located nearby from this atelier.

I loved that place: a wide pier cutting into the Hudson River far from the shore, with space for a promenade and fishing. There is a picturesque view from the piers. There is spaciousness and a wide-open horizon with clouds which lazily crawl, coming in from somewhere blown by the wind. Giant liners pass under the Verrazano Bridge, almost grazing its underbelly—some to dock at the port and others to go from the port to the open ocean.

Arriving at the place, I offered Jenn to come out of the car and take in the view.

We unhurriedly strolled on the cement piers, surrounded by an iron fence. Fishermen cast fishing rods into the water. Near them, on newspapers or plastic bags, were pieces of cut-up fish and crabs with hacked-up shells. They used these as bait.

A little kid about five years old wearing a red coat strayed from his mother and squatted down, studying freshly caught herring in the most attentive manner. The fish jumped up on the concrete and its mug was quickly overflowing with blood from its hook-damaged mouth.

“It’s breathing! It’s opening its gills!” said the child in amazement, touching the fish with his little finger.

“When you grow up, will you also become a fisherman? Or a sea captain?” Jenn asked sweetly, bending down to the kid.

“Miss, you’re bothering me,” the kid replied in a serious tone. “Don’t you see that I am busy with the fish?”

“Wha-at?!” Jenn dragged out and laughed.

All of a sudden, I was overwhelmed by the desire to stand like this someday on the piers—restless sea gulls soaring over the water, the clouds flying, and liners coming to and leaving from the port—with my son sitting nearby on his heels studying a fat herring, touching its open gills and its bloody mouth, watching how it struggles on the concrete while flashing its scales.

I vividly saw this picture for a moment as my future, including my son, and Jenn, and myself with them.

“Aah!” Jenn exclaimed, jerking her hand up.

She was staring at the railing, where a gust of wind had blown her little red hat off her head.

The hat was swaying on the waves, slightly pushed towards the shore, but it was getting a heavy soaking in the water.

“So, the queen is left without a crown,” Jenn joked while fixing her ruffled hair.

“Hold this.” Without hesitating, I gave Jenn my jacket, cell phone, and wallet.

I climbed over the railing and, holding on with one hand to the metal pipe, I extended the other hand to grab the hat. I couldn’t reach it.

“Aah, to hell with it!” Sitting on the edge of the parapet, I lowered my legs and as carefully as I could I descended into the water.

My feet quickly touched the bottom. The water was not cold for February and most importantly was not deep—up to my waist. Taking a few steps in the water, I grasped the hat, which had almost disappeared under it, and turned back. I climbed back onto the piers. My shirt was wet up to my chest, while my pants and shoes, of course, were completely wet—and heavy as concrete.

Jenn turned red from embarrassment, taking from my hands her wet hat, which now resembled a wash rag.

Throwing my jacket on my shoulders, Jenn fussed like a nurse who is readying to administer first aid to a victim.

“Don’t worry, everything is ok,” I said cheerfully.

My conclusion that the water wasn’t cold was a tad premature. My feet, stomach, and groin were quickly getting cold.

“Are you fucking nuts?! We have to go home, home right away!” Jenn kept saying when we left the piers and quickly walked to the car.

“Yes, yes, let’s go home.” I opened the door, started the engine, and turned on the heat.

“You can get sick with bronchitis or, God forbid, pneumonia! And everything because of your unforgivable stupidity!” She quickly retrieved her packages from the back seat.

“Are you really not coming with me?” I asked.

She thought it over for only a few seconds.

“No, you go. I will call myself a cab.”

Contrary to her prediction, I did not get sick, preventing a serious cold and bronchitis with a tried and tested medicine—a couple good glasses of “Absolut.”

Not much had changed in my relationship with Jenn since that day. True, she never asked me to drive her anywhere again—neither to the atelier nor to the supermarket. She managed it herself.

But I remembered well how her eyes shone when we were on the piers. I knew that this special shine emanated from the most hidden corner of a woman's heart and portends that this heart will now be conquered.

That is why I was not surprised that since then the respected fucking “ear, nose, and throat Doctor Baron” entered Jenn’s office very, very rarely and no longer disturbed us during our supervisions.

Chapter 11

Alas, my joy of being alone with Jenn did not last long. In her office soon appeared... Michael.

Michael was Jenn’s son. Of course, he triggered different emotions in me as opposed to Doctor Baron. The latter was my sworn rival, and Michael rather aroused sympathy.

If he didn’t occupy the “shrink” couch in Jenn’s office, on which I recently got used to cherishing certain sweet dreams, I would not have minded. In other words, Michael ousted me from that couch and I was forced to now sit on the chair while he played electronic games on his iPhone in a half-reclined position.

The story of his appearance in the hospital is the following: Michael had left college recently—I don’t know whether he flunked out or took an academic leave of absence. Most likely he was expelled. He did not want to work at all. After arguments with Jenn, her

persuasions and threats, Michael agreed to volunteer in our hospital for some time. Jenn quickly arranged everything. Michael was given a clearance, an ID, a schedule, and a list of duties. He had to help out in the cafeteria two days a week and one day in the library. Basically, not much, but some sort of occupation. Better than nothing.

So, Michael worked as a volunteer, wandered the hospital corridors, and came by Jenn's office at the same time when I had supervisions with Jenn.

He was a tall guy, around twenty, with thick black hair parted in the middle. The feminine softness of his facial features were clearly inherited from his mother. The stare of his dark eyes gave away a certain arrogance, narcissism. But maybe this narcissistic façade hid an insecure child with an inferiority complex?

He was very uninhibited with Jenn; a smirk never left his face even during the minutes when she reprimanded him in front of me that people are already complaining about him from the Volunteer Department.

After yet another blowup, Michael usually asked her for money for a new computer game or to fix his car. Jenn, sniffling menacingly and looking offended, took out the wallet from her bag.

Once after Michael left us, having received money from his mom, Jenn started to defend herself to me.

"I know that this is not right; I understand that I spoil him too much. A normal mother should not behave this way. Everyone tells me about this: my sister, daughter, and ex-husband. But no one understands that Michael is a problem child. He has trouble finding himself and is incapable of committing to anything."

"Was he really never captivated by anything?"

“No, never, except that...he used to like to play the drums. He attended a music studio for a few years, but then quit that. He doesn’t want anything but is suffering because of this himself. Recently I was cleaning in his room, and found a notepad with his poems. Do you know what these poems are about? I don’t even want to tell you...Okay, Adam, let’s discuss your patients, since now we are dealing too much with my ‘yiddishe momme’ problems, and it’s not right. How is everything with your Francis? Was he released from the psych ward?”

“Yes, two weeks ago. His stitches on the arm were removed. He goes to James’ studio again and plays the piano. Basically, the rise of the superstar is continuing.”

One time during lunch I came out of the building to get some fresh air. All of a sudden I saw the pair in front of me: Francis and Michael—together!

They stood next to Michael’s blue Toyota and spoke intensely about something. Then they both got inside the car and—vroom! vroom!—drove away.

So, here it is.

The punk band was called Crazy Brothers, as Francis wanted.

Percussion and lyrics, Michael Levy; keyboard and vocals, Francis Morales; guitar and vocals, Freya Harrison.

It is a fantastic punk band, with a bright future: concerts, tours, CDs, music videos, and basically the ringing of timpani and fireworks, accompanying the life of stars and pop idols.

I have no idea where they met the guitarist Freya. Francis said that it was in a bar where she was performing her songs to guitar. It may be.

When Jenn and I first discovered the newly-created website of the new punk band and saw the photos of the musicians uploaded there, Jenn got visibly miserable.

“What a fucking nightmare...”

Personally, I didn’t see anything horrible in those photos: two guys in ripped T-shirts and with reddish-green colored hair behind the instruments, and a young woman—also in just a low-cut T-shirt, with tattoos and a guitar—screaming into the microphone. Francis’s keyboard also has a microphone into which he is screaming. The drummer Michael likewise has a microphone in front of his face. Basically, you can only imagine the kind of racket going on in James’ studio, where they practiced.

“What a fucking nightmare...” Jenn, not looking away from the computer screen, continued clicking the mouse, rendering new images flashing before her of the guys in ripped T-shirts and colored hair.

Here are the three of them, in the bar playing pool. And here they are in a gazebo on a beach with beer bottles. All three are totally nude on an empty beach.

Here they were in some poorly furnished room (it was probably in the shelter where Francis lived) playing cards on the floor. Freya is in ripped hose and has a ring in her nose. Both guys are undressed to the waist.

And here is another scene—Francis is lying on his back on the floor, while Michael is on top choking him. It seems they were fighting about the girl.

“He is asking me for a thousand dollars to record their first concert. You can’t imagine, Adam, the amount of money their music already cost me. I don’t even mention that if someone in the clinic finds out I may have a problem.”

She clicked the mouse and the office became quiet. As if only here on the table the volcano is erupting and this eruption was accompanied by an earthquake to someone’s wails. And suddenly it’s quiet...quiet...

“I once dreamed that my son would become a lawyer or a doctor,” she sighed. “But who knows, maybe something will come out of this thing.”

Chapter 12

There was a yearly tradition in the clinic at the end of May, when the all staff gathered for a picnic. This year the place selected for this occasion was a park in the Park Slope area. Tables were reserved at the restaurant.

It turned out to be a quiet, almost windless day. We drove out at noon. I offered a place in my car to Jenn. To my surprise, she agreed right away. I have to say that lately it’s as if Jenn forgot the past offenses and threats for my “stupid jaunts and freaking frivolity”; she only praised me without measure and even promised to arrange for me the hospital to hire me.

During the ride we chatted about something. Jenn was rocking on the seat next to me, and I occasionally glanced at her snow-white legs from the corner of my eye, and with great difficulty resisted the temptation to speed off somewhere outside of the city into the dark forest.

And so, the culinary part was over for the most part. The staff gourmets were lapping up the dessert in the restaurant while the others strolled in the park.

Jenn was getting further on the lane along the shore, where the ducks and swans swam on the lake. It was unusual seeing her in shoes without heels.

I caught up to her and, shoving my hands in my jean pockets, walked next to her. She seemed unsurprised by this.

“The food was disgusting, very greasy. Now I’ll have to keep on a very strict diet for a week,” she said, stroking her belly as a confirmation of her words. “But what can be done if our director likes such damn greasy food? Aww, look!” she exclaimed.

A swan swam towards us from the opposite side of the shore. It was white with a long red beak, probably hoping to obtain something to chow down from us.

“It’s a shame that I don’t have any bread or crackers on me.” Jenn came to the edge of the stone shore.

The swan was getting closer; its quickly moving feet were already becoming visible under water.

Squatting down, Jenn extended her arm towards the swan.

“Swim here, to me.”

The bird stopped. It was looking with smart, attentive eyes at the woman sitting in front of it, and...kept swimming! It kicked its feet under water and, changing the curve line of its long neck, pressed on towards the hand. Now it will touch, oh God, will touch her palm with its beak!

...“Why do you stalk me? I don’t know you. I don’t understand you. You’re insane! No, you’re a vulture, for a whole year already circling over my soul. But I want to live like before; I don’t want to perish in your claws. Do you understand? I don’t want to! Don’t want to...”

She was touching my hair, caressing my cheeks...

Her dress was thrown on the floor, as were my jeans and my shirt. And all her clothes were no longer needed! The swan was disenchanted. Her breasts were white and warm, and her belly was white and warm, and so too her shoulders. I don’t know anyone more womanly than Jenn on the whole Earth, and don’t want to know!...

The moonlight streamed into the room from the window.

“Caress, caress, kiss me. Here, here, and here, wherever you want.”

Afterwards Jenn sat reclining backwards with a pillow under her back. I didn’t turn on the light but my eyes were used to the darkness. I saw her profile, her shoulders stained by her black hair.

“Why do I need this, do you know?” she asked.

I stayed quiet. I awaited that remorse will follow. All as expected: the committed sin followed by remorse is a necessary part of how a woman is programmed when she enters into a, let’s say “questionable,” intimacy with a man.

She pulled the throw blanket higher to herself as if wishing to hide under it.

“By the way, I have two children. I will be a grandmother soon. And look what fucking happened now. I’m not even saying that I’m your supervisor.”

“Do you want tea? Coffee?”

“No thank you. It’s Friday today, the Sabbath. Queen Saturday...” After a pause, she suddenly sang something in Yiddish. “You know, every Sabbath we sang this song with my family. Sarah and I lit the candles and, after setting the table, waited for my father to return from the synagogue. He came home, read a prayer, and poured wine into a chalice. Then we ate challah; I always picked the raisins out, and my mother said that I had a sweet tooth and was too ‘picky,’ since you have to take what is being offered.” Chuckling, she sang the same song again. “Do you know what this song is about?”

“What?”

“It’s about a woman. That a woman is more valuable than any pearl...I can only imagine Sarah’s face if she saw me now. Is your shower working?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll go get you a fresh towel.”

She got up and, in a minute, I heard the rustle of the oilskin shower curtain and the sound of running water from the shower.

In the morning Jenn was putting makeup on by the mirror. She was already in her dress, her hair brushed, lips made up. Yet she was still barefoot; her shoes were in the hallway.

I was making coffee by the stove and peeking at Jenn through a square gap in the wall separating the kitchen from the room. Shortly I brought out two cups of coffee, a sugar bowl, and milk from the kitchen into the room and placed them on the table.

“Don’t leave. Now we don’t need to rush anywhere,” I said.

“Adam, dear, do you really think that there can be something serious between us? You’re silly. My son can be your friend and I am old, fat, and sick. If I start listing my diseases you will get scared.”

She stepped away from the mirror, and then looked at the walls covered with sketches, where she was in the image of a Black Swan, ballerina wearing a tutu, “nude.”

“It’s an art gallery dedicated to Madam Jennifer Levy, right? It turned out I was not just a supervisor for you, but also a model. I hope not a bad one.” She came to the table where I sat making final changes to the setting with teaspoons. “That’s it. I decided. Can I ask you a favor, Adam? But promise that you will do what I’m about to ask.”

Looking extremely serious, I continued laying out two teaspoons, fixing one by the cup, then the other.

“Forget about me. You hear? I will write you an excellent evaluation for completing the internship. So be happy that you fucked your supervisor; enter me into your list of conquests.”

Frowning, I lay the second spoon at exactly the same distance from the dish as the first. “Ok, do you want to know the truth? I just decided to try with you. To satisfy my woman’s curiosity. I wanted to experience certain emotions. You won’t understand this.”

“How was it? Were you satisfied?”

Without responding, she went to the hallway where her shoes were. Without bending down, using her toe, she fixed the back of the leather shoe, which was tucked under. Then she took out her cell from her bag.

“I want to call a cab. What is your address?”

I gave her my home address.

“You’re not even offering to take me home!” She said resentfully.

“I’m not your personal driver. And it’s about time that you got behind the damn wheel yourself and started driving.”

“You’re not my husband to order what I need to do and what I fucking don’t.”

She called for a taxi, asking the dispatcher how long she will need to wait and complaining about it taking so long.

“Stay. We’re good together, even if I am not your husband.”

“Adam, dear. Yes, I am also fond of you. Is that what you want to hear? I even broke up with Mark, for your information, and now regret it. Lately I started acting terribly foolish. And all because of you. Do you understand? We are very different and I don’t need this at all. Don’t.”
Turning, she took the lock handle to turn it and open the door.

In three long determined steps I approached her, took her into my arms, and carried her to the couch. Jenn jerked her legs and hit me in the chest.

“You’re a psycho, psycho, psy...”

We spent all weekend together. Sunday evening I drove her home. She ran up the front steps and waved goodbye.

Suddenly her waves changed direction and she started calling me to her.

I entered her house. A year ago, I couldn’t even imagine something like this, and now it was taken for granted. I “fused” with her so much in those two days. I felt myself a part of her and her of me to such an extent that I just didn’t understand how I could have lived without Jenn

until now. I didn't even live until now. I just dangled on this earth without any direction or meaning.

We drank coffee. She was telling me stories of the theatrical posters and paintings dealing with Jewish subject matter hanging on the walls. She showed me the beautiful silver and china in the cupboard. I was, honestly, a bit tired of her frequent apologies for the "small mess" in the house, which you could more accurately call a big avalanche.

Michael was not at home; he was in some club. It is going to be such a surprise for him when he sees me in their home, drinking tea or cognac with his mother.

THIS IS THE END OF THE SECTION