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Petr Nemirovskiy

NEW YORK STREET BUM

Short Novel

Chapter One

“For a long time I couldn’t get used to sleeping on a bench and, squeezed between two drinking buddies, I also couldn’t get used to sleeping on a damp mattress. One day I complained about it to one of my friends. He said, “A street isn’t a five-star hotel. But everyone’s gotten used to it and you will too.” He had been tested by years of life on the street and like myself now, belonged to the very same enormous army of New York street bums. And he predicted the next five years of my life: I got used to sleeping not only on benches, but on boxes, on the wet grass, on the naked concrete, in abandoned houses, in precincts cells...”

“Well, that’s something,” said David, when Martin had finished reading and put the written pages back into his backpack.

Squinting so that there were deep wrinkles in the corners of his eyes, Martin brought a half-smoked cigarette to his lips. It got dark and he read the last pages more quickly, often stopping to bring the paper closer to his eyes.

The last beach-goers were leaving the beach. Three shouting Latinos carried their friend who was filled to the gills; his feet were dragging in the sand. You could still make out the trash cans full of garbage, the tall chairs for the lifeguards, the playground. The waves threw algae and muddy foam on the sand.

David and Martin sat on the huge rocks of the breakwater, which extended about a hundred meters into the water.

"Then I lived with two Latinos. At first in a tent, then we snuck into an empty garage and finished the winter up there," Martin pulled so heavily on his cigarette that it burnt down to the filter. Pursing his lips he let out a puff of smoke and flicked it away. He rose.

Martin is 34. He is short and wears a denim suit and black boots. On his head is a gray hat with a big visor, despite the fact that it is June, and it is warm and pleasant on the beach. If you look closely, you can see that his body leans slightly to the right and he walks with a slight limp in his left leg. It's the result of an accident: a BMW hit him while he was begging. In the car were some cheery kids who had been partying, probably returning from a night out. That's how Martin the beggar wound up on the curb with a broken leg and a concussion.

His face is coarse, fleshy, with deep lines as if cut with an axe; a crooked nose with flared nostrils, a curved chin, cheeks with scars, and thick lips. His hat hides his forehead. His face is typical for a Slavic peasant, despite the fact that he is a Pole and should have finer features. Oh, yes, the eyes—ordinary, gray, cloudy, bloodshot—unwell eyes. In a word, the face of an alcoholic, though Martin had not had a drink in more than

a year. But many years of hard drinking can't be erased. What is the face of an alcoholic? Stupefaction, emptiness, despair. That can't disappear—at least, not in one year.

But the strange thing is that another face exists beneath the half-stone mask of the drunkard. When Martin smiles, his face shifts, instantly becoming softer, and beneath this kindness appears some sort of cleverness and cunning. But thoughtful Martin looks like a philosopher immersed in his thoughts. His thoughts, by the way, are deep and strong—from life, though he often rattles on, growls some Polish or broken English. David is used to this muttering. He knows that it is due to Martin's lifelong loneliness.

David doesn't always pay attention to what Martin is muttering. He does not always understand what Martin says. But he knows that Martin simply needs a patient listener, someone around him. If instead of David, let's say, a deaf-mute Hindu were to stay by his side, Martin would mutter in the same way, telling him about his everyday problems: his boss is greedy and all the time aiming to cheat him; the landlady at home, where he rented an attic room, a Polish woman—she is a glutton and slattern; his parents in Poland are ailing; he wants to buy a parrot, and so on.

“Look, a rat,” Martin tracked the rat running out of one trashcan and watched how the dark hairy lump rolled along the sand to another can of garbage.

“Yeah,” answered David, shifting his glance from the rat to Martin.

Martin smiled.

“I lived here once with these rats.”

“Here?”

"Yes. I slept there, near the house with showers." Martin tilted his head toward the short building. "The rats sometimes crept up on me. But I was drunk, it didn't bother me."

It grew dark finally, and the sun sank into the ocean. An early half-moon rose in the sky. Somewhere along the water, a boat slipped with a raised white sail.

David, who was sensitive to the beauties of nature, even more so to those of the sea—yachts, gulls, the moon, the foamy waves—always fell into a sentimental mood at such moments, the tears coming to his eyes. He knew that Martin was also feeling the beauty now. But a simple thought came to David: how differently they look at the world! Just then a rat ran by. David noticed her and forgot right away, returning again to enjoy the landscape. But for Martin, the trail of this rat had led him to some remembrances of his life. Otherwise, why would he have such a cat-like expression on his face?

"I'm so bored with my magazine! I don't care if somebody burns its office down," complained David when they got up from the rocks and slowly walked along the sand to the wooden planks of the embankment, where the lights of the carousel twinkled and music boomed from the open bars.

"Deya-avid, is it possible to get bored working at a magazine?" wondered Martin. He pronounced his friend's name in a sing-song manner, dragging out the first syllable, changing the 'a' to more of an 'eh-ay.' "How about mixing cement or painting walls 10 hours a day, what then? You're an editor, you sit in your office, meet interesting people, you're surrounded by intellectuals," continued Martin. He pronounced certain words in his own way, softening hard vowels and lisping a little, because he didn't have many teeth—he'd either lost them in fights or they were rotten.

“Sure, I’m surrounded by shitty intellectuals,” snapped David. “My fellow journalists only know how to kiss the boss’s ass.”

They went out on the boardwalk and stopped by a bench. David brushed the sand off his feet so that he could put on his sandals. He happened to look at Martin’s heavy, black, tightly laced boots. It seemed they were made to last. You could walk in them late into the fall, even winter. No doubt they would be pretty hot now. “It seems like we understand each other. I’d say we’re even close, to some extent. But what different worlds we are from!”

Meanwhile Martin sat on the bench, lit up again, and began to mutter: “I have to go to the dentist, but I don’t have money. My boss stiffed me for 20 bucks, said he’d give it to me next week, *kur-rva...*”

David, who was born in the US, but whose parents were Jews from Poland, did not fully understand this weird Polish-English dialect; sometimes he just guessed what Martin meant.

A black guy and his girlfriend, holding hands, walked past them. The girl wore a red t-shirt and very short denim shorts, which tightened her large butt. The man wore a loose black shirt decorated with white skulls, hid baggy pants hung low at the waist.

“Have you ever slept with a homeless girl?” David suddenly interrupted.

“I had one love from the streets. Her name was Christina.”

“She was a Pole, wasn’t she?”

“Yes,” Martin didn’t start reminiscing as was his usual habit. Instead he became quiet and sad.

David is 46 years old. He has a pretty rugged build, and is slightly overweight. He is a little taller than medium height and his movements are sharp, rigid, which reflects an active nature, but an expansive and nervous one at the same time. Grey, insightful eyes hide behind the glasses that rest on his large Semitic nose. His short curly hair is still fine both in back and on the sides, but is already a little thin in front.

He doesn't really like his job. But should he, with a Master's degree in Literature, a Columbia University graduate, intelligentsia to his very bones, the author of two books—go to work as a driver or a doorman?! His place is at a writer's desk, behind a computer in an editor's office

It was difficult to say what brought these two seemingly different people together.

David first met Martin when he was writing an article about a shelter for homeless people run by some Protestant church. Martin was then living there. He confessed to David right away: he is a Pole and a Catholic and he would not attend service in the Protestant church, even if the shelter had such a rule. He was only living in the shelter temporarily, while it was cold outside and while there was no money to rent an apartment. David was surprised by the impudence of this strange Pole. The other residents of the shelter lied godlessly about how the church and priest helped them to live a sinless Christian life. By the way, a strong alcohol smell emanated from some. They asked “Mr. Journalist” for 10 bucks to cure their hangover. And Martin, an insolent person, called the Protestant priest a “boring padre” and didn't beg for any money from David.

Indeed, he clearly stood out among these down and out people, who were beaten by life. He kept to himself and smoked in the church courtyard while glancing over his shoulder at how the journalist talked with the residents of the shelter.

When they both sat at the table and began to speak, David quickly turned off the recorder. He understood with a gut instinct: in front of him was sitting not a common homeless person but someone special.

The only thing that confused David was the odor emanating from Martin. New York street bums have a specific stench: the pungent, heavy smells of dirty clothing that hasn't been cleaned for months, stiff socks, and a body that hasn't been washed in ages, mixed with the odor of perspiration seeping through the pores after hard drinking. Even hot water and soap, even deodorant, shampoo and new clothes couldn't kill the stench. A New York street bum absorbs into himself all the fetid stench of the great city, all its slop containers, dumps, cesspools, all its evaporation, urine, vomit, decay, decomposition, rot, lewdness, sperm, spit, trashcans, garbage trucks, rats, dead cats and pigeons. All this stench breaks through and is sucked into the pores, into each cell of his body. And this proud Polish Catholic exuded the stink of a New York bum like no other.

David was an aesthete, but he had practically no sense of smell. He could recognize only a few sharp smells. But he was blind to tender perfumes that always annoyed his ex-wife. Though he did recognize and remember well the scent of her body. Besides, his son's skin smells the same. He hadn't seen his son for almost two weeks...

Then David met Martin once again, but not at the shelter. He allegedly wanted to finish his interview with him, to hear the rest of his story.

They walked along the canal, where the fishermen on the wharf sold freshly caught fish. Something stirred in his soul, when Martin talked about his life. Some type of dark beauty blossomed in this homeless man. Suppressing fastidiousness, frequently snorting and sniffing, sometimes turning away or stepping back a half step, David still walked alongside, listening to Martin. Then they met once again, without any occasion.

“And what about Christina?” asked David.

“She was very beautiful but miserable. To tell the truth, I wasn’t feeling very happy then myself,” admitted Martin.

“What did she look like? I vaguely remember a homeless woman from the shelter, blonde, who wore a hat and had a black eye.”

“Yes, most likely, that was her. It happened once everyone in the shelter got drunk and started fighting over her.”

They were approaching the subway. It was noisy near the entrance. Several buses stopped nearby and passengers emerged from them. The heat was monstrous. The asphalt, which had been thoroughly heated by the daytime sun, gave off warmth along with vapors from treated gasoline, and oil from exhaust pipes.

“I remember we met in the park. She was sitting on a bench and drinking beer. And I fell in love with her right away. I called her Sunshine...” Martin was again digging for a cigarette in the pocket of his jeans.

“I’ve got to go, sorry. I’ve got to finish the article,” lied David, interrupting sharply. After two or three hours together, Martin usually started to irritate him.

Having a canine sensitivity to everything that related to him personally, Martin obediently nodded his head and put the cigarette back in the pack.

“Listen, man. Why don’t you write a short story about this... who is she...Christina?” offered David.

“A short story about Christina?” Martin squinted. “Deya-vid, you sure know that I plan to write a serious big novel. Today I read you the first chapter—about how I started to live life as a street bum. You didn’t even say whether you liked it or not.”

“A big novel? It’s still early for you to write a big novel. Now, don’t get offended, but I don’t think you’re ready to deal with a larger form. Forgive me, but the alcoholic shows up even in your writing—immediately you get caught up in the grandiose thing without having learned to deal with the trifles. Try to become a dab hand with the small forms. Actually, it’s up to you. So long. I’m off.” David shook hands with Martin and quickly walked toward the silver turnstiles.

Climbing the stairs to the platform, David for some reason brought his right palm to his nose. He sniffed it. There was hardly any scent. There were no scars or cuts, no wedding ring on David’s hand. His hand was perfectly clean.

Chapter Two

“She grabbed her purse and, swearing at me a fucking Pole, left. I waited for Sunshine for several weeks, in spite of being certain that she wouldn’t come back. And my intuition was right.”

What happened to her later I don't know. Recently I saw Sunshine in my dream—she drifted across the river. She was wearing an astonishingly white dress. She called me to her. I woke up with tears on my face.”

"That's Shakespearean emotions there!" David pressed the arch of his glasses and held his index finger for a moment on the bridge of his nose.

He recalled that bum when he visited the shelter to write the article. The short blonde who had a large black eye and wore a silly hat, she walked through the churchyard and laughed loudly. David went up to her—she was drunk and in rags. He started to urge her to get treatment for her alcoholism.

She listened to David and seemed to agree with everything. She suddenly grabbed him firmly by the shoulder and pulled him close, repeating deliriously with a heavy Polish accent: "Yes, yes, I'm an unfortunate, I am miserable whore..." In a blink David even felt the strength and heat of her still young body. But it lasted only a moment. Suddenly she started to laugh insolently and, pulling away from David's chest, screamed: "Go to hell, you, bald bastard! *Kur-r-rva!* Come back to me in a few years!" And she ran off toward some guy. That was all he really remembered about her.

"Well, did you like this chapter?" Martin asked cautiously, disrupting the protracted silence.

"Yeah, it was not bad. But her character isn't sketched very clearly in your writing; it's somehow fuzzy."

Because of Martin's offensively jointed eyebrows, the deep wrinkle appeared on his nose bridge; his lips twisted. Martin put the written pages in his backpack.

They both sat in the sushi bar and ate sushi.

"The scene, when you poured the vodka on the sand, I liked it," continued David. He started feeling sorry for Martin. "But I'm not sure that all the readers will be able to appreciate the value of it."

"Why?"

"One has to know what an alcoholic in severe withdrawal goes through. He'd do anything for a shot of vodka or whiskey. Picture this: a woman whose hands are shaking, who has the chills and is burning up at the same time, and who came to Martin in the morning asking for vodka in order to fix herself. And our Martin has a full bottle, but instead of giving vodka to the poor lady, he pours vodka on the sand in front of her. And what's more, he does it with a roguish smile. And he gets great enjoyment out of this revenge because the night before, the woman fucked not Martin, but another bum."

"Deya-vid, you're quite the literature critic. And in addition, you're a sharp psychologist... I'm very lucky to have met you. I'd be lost without you."

"Really?" replied flattered David. "You lived all those years without me. You spent five years crawling around the depths of New York and you survived. You know what I was thinking? How about I publish your story in my magazine, ah? Let's call it 'Bum and Beauty'."

"In the magazine? My story? Is the story really good enough for the magazine? You just said that the character isn't sketched clearly, it's all fuzzy."

"Don't worry, it'll be fine as a debut. We just have to translate it from Polish into English. We can do it without a professional translator. You know my parents spoke Polish, and even though I speak Polish badly, I understand it well enough. Let's get

together next Tuesday evening and work on it. I hope we can do it fast. And you'll get some money for it."

"David, I've been wanting to ask you for a long time," began Martin when they had left the bar. "You understand alcoholics so well. Where did you get this from? Did you also drink?"

"No, never... I was just interested in this disease out of curiosity."

"This would never have happened to you, you'd never drink like that, your nature wouldn't allow it," Martin assured him. "You have strength of will, you have goals and interests in life. You're a writer."

"Yes, Martin, you're right," agreed David, but not cheerfully.

Who is he—a writer? A master of literature? Yes, it's so, it's true. David Budny—author of two books. But...

He always dreamed of becoming a famous writer. Being just a writer was not enough for him. Yes, he had some literary skills and ability, but he was far from being a genius. This was a problem. He wanted to shock readers with his books. Vanity and envy of the famous suffocated David from the first day he sat behind a writer's desk. "C'mon, darling. Stop trying to be a genius. Just write a good story better," his ex-wife used to advise him.

Two of his books—collections of short stories—were published in paperback by a mid-level publishing house with a very modest circulation. The books on the whole weren't bad, they contained some very expressive pages, but, being neither widely promoted nor advertised, they sank into the ocean of contemporary American literature.

The whole edition of both books somehow eventually sold out. David received some royalties, a large portion of which went to the editor, literary agent, and book preparation service agency. That was the extent of his literary fame and fortune.

Then his son Anthony was born. And then his wife somehow changed, she became obsessed with the child; she didn't care about David's problems anymore. That's when the family conflicts began.

David got angry more often, complained more loudly, and at the same time, his writing grew worse and worse. He blamed everybody, he blamed his family life and his job because the latter demanded too much time, time that he needed for literary work. Then he began to drink.

Finally, he divorced his wife and quit his job. He thought that having left everything and everyone he would write a great serious novel. Of course! He had brought Apollo such a sacrifice—abandoned his family, his job as a journalist, his money! But, alas, all this didn't mean shit to Apollo.

Hundreds of sheets of paper, marred by his scribbles, flew into the garbage can. Fire did not burn in a single line. He had nothing to write about; he was detached from everything; his soul was dead. He was able to see and hear only himself, and to have empathy only for himself. And vanity continued to suffocate him.

In the end, David, luckily a journalist and the author of two books, allegedly a young and promising writer, stopped writing at all. He faded and even went prematurely bald. Then David, bald and encased in silence, began to drink heavily, leaning in particular on Jack Daniel's. His heart was less gloomy and grew warmer with the whiskey, but his head throbbed from the hangover.

He was not only no genius, but he'd hit a dead end as a writer, and he needed courage to admit this and accept it.

One morning, with his head spinning from a hangover, he went to the synagogue near the house he had moved into since he divorced. He met a grey-bearded rabbi. He confessed to him that he wanted to kill himself.

What did they talk about next, sitting on the bench in that empty synagogue, where there stood a pulpit, and where one hour previously a scroll of Torah wrapped in purple velvet had been placed? Letters in ancient Hebrew and a gold star were sewn upon the velvet. To be sure, the inscription spoke of God, who Himself knows why He beckons to the heavens by angelic voices, but instead of ascensions, He tramples down a person in pigsties. And He demands cruelly: "Love me, the human and be grateful for everything! For I am your God. It's for Me to know to whom to give and from whom to take, to whom to give a lot, and to whom to throw just one pitiful coin. But woe to the one who refuses or does not appreciate ANY of my gifts."

David nodded his head, agreeing with the ancient wisdom of the rabbi that he needs to learn how to live in silence, and that writing is neither the goal nor the meaning of life but only one facet of the rich human heart.

He left the synagogue, just as sick and broken as before. But that evening he didn't drink a drop of whiskey, promising himself that he would look for work in the morning.

And a month later he returned to the previous David—energetic, decisive, and somewhat self-enamored. He took a position as editor of a local magazine, which published some modern literature, political and business commentary. Sometimes he

wrote articles, occasionally took vacations in the Caribbean or Florida. He didn't return to his wife, but he visited his son often. His relationships with women were short-lived. In a word, he lived the tempestuous lifestyle of a bachelor.

For some reason, his two books, which were on the bookshelf, he removed, hid them away in a dark closet, and tried not to recall them.

It seemed he had accepted his fate. But then, all of a sudden, he met Martin.

The United Nations building on 40th Street in Manhattan has such wide staircases! On the walls are close-up photos of United Nations workers feeding hungry children, giving Hepatitis immunizations to poor African or Asian villagers, and testing them for HIV. Children's drawings and posters, in all languages calling for disarmament, cooperation and peace, are displayed everywhere. The lobby is full of tourists, delegates, ambassadors, and guards.

Sitting in a soft leather armchair in the hall, David scrolled through the news on his cell phone. A press conference given by an important politician had just ended. Then David put his cell into his pocket, stood up, and headed for the exit.

"David?

"Lorna?

A woman of about 35, in a dark modest skirt and buttoned-up dark blue blouse, stood in front of him. Her dark hair was neatly combed and parted on the side, displaying her pale oval face with its smooth forehead, narrow chin and thin nose. Her large dark brown eyes were outlined delicately. She was of medium height and nicely built, though

her shoulders were a little narrow for her hips. But this little disproportion was hardly noticeable, disguised by the well thought-out cut of her skirt.

"Is that you? It can't be!" exclaimed the young woman.

"In the flesh. What are you doing here?"

"I work here. What a surprise... Well, it's been quite a while since we've seen each other, hasn't it?"

"At least 10 years, I guess, since you left for Chicago."

"Yes," smiled Lorna. "And you haven't changed at all. That's the truth."

"I believe it," David smoothed his thin hair. "By the way, you haven't changed at all either," he lied in response.

"Oh, no, no, no. I've gotten fat and old."

"So, you work here. What do you do? Feed ravenous children from Bangladesh? Or are you sleeping with the General Secretary?"

"To sleep with the General Secretary, you need to be well connected, and I don't have those kinds of connections yet. But I think that could change. It's only a matter of time. I have been working in a UN department dealing with ecological concerns. I got the position two years ago, before that I lived in Chicago, as you know, and completed a special two-year program there."

"And where's your mother now? How is she doing?" asked David.

An indistinct picture of an older woman sitting at a table came into his mind. A quiet woman, dressed in something dark and plain, herself also plain; David couldn't even recall her face. By the way, he saw her only once and not for long—about 20

minutes—when Lorna brought him for the first and only time to her apartment in Queens, before going to the movies, in order to change her shoes.

"Mom is doing well, thanks for asking."

She looked into his eyes, smiled, and despite all the imposing posters on the walls, the marble staircases, the consulate officers and guards, he suddenly saw the 25-year-old Lorna, —there was still something of the teenager in her face and body.

He remembered how in Central Park a street artist once drew her portrait, turning a modest biology major from NYU into the elegant Queen of Sheba. After she graduated from NYU, she got a nice job offer in Chicago and decided to move there right away, regardless of David's opinion. David got offended then, believing Lorna valued her future career more than their relationship, and that was the end of the love story.

"I have to go, my lunch is over," said Lorna, looking at her little watch.

"When can we get together?"

"Hmm...I have a meeting tonight at eight with a man from Spain. He's a major from the Peace Corps. A very handsome man, true, but unbelievably stupid. Why I need him, I don't know myself."

"When and where should I wait for you?" David interrupted. He didn't want to hear about the Spanish major from the Peace Corps. "How about this Friday, after work?"

Chapter 3

The Stars of Harlem

I've been released.

A warm, quiet June night. An old man walks along the empty sidewalk, mumbles something under his breath, laughs. He appears completely peaceful.

"What time is it?" I ask him.

The man takes a few deep puffs.

"Half past 12 and three minutes."

"Do you have a smoke?"

The man gives me two cigarettes and leaves, muttering to himself. I have cigarettes but no matches—they took them when they arrested me. On the other hand, I have \$12. The cops didn't take my money away. Good cops. Before I was released from my cell, Officer Perez gave me a slice of pizza and some coffee. All my cellmates envied me.

I shared my pizza with Pedro, who the hell knows why was put behind bars and is waiting for his trial now. It is hard to understand Pedro. In five years of life in New York, this arrogant Salvadoran drunkard hadn't learned even two words of English. By the way, Spanish is enough to beg within Spanish Harlem. Amigo.

That was my third time in jail. Cop Perez knows me pretty well, I am his regular client. And not just me: he knows Pedro, Africa, and all the other members of the gang of bums and alcoholics who frequent the 125th Street neighborhood, on the border between Black and Spanish Harlem.

I can imagine Perez' reaction, when he learns that a judge let me go again. It means that all his work was for nothing.

What did they arrest me for? This time, for an open bottle of beer. Now, when I spot Perez, I have to be doubly careful. I'm sure he'll want to arrest me again. Many bums have nightmares of mice, rats, and snakes. But my nightmare is Cop Perez.

Where am I now? The corner of 36th Street and First Avenue. Well, let's go! Left to Lexington Avenue, then right and up. The tremor has already started: my hands shake from the hangover. Prepared for it, I bought a large bottle of Colt 45 along the way.

You have to follow along the sidewalk carefully. I walked one block and filled my entire pocket with discarded cigarette butts. Oh! There is a whole, even not yet lighted, Virginia Slim in front of me on the sidewalk. Rich people live in this section of Manhattan, and they throw away their just-lit cigarettes. Just try to find such beautiful butts in Brooklyn or the Bronx. Never! You can find excellent food in the trash cans around the cafes and restaurants here: you can even find a wrapped sandwich with roast ham and pickle or a tuna burger with tomatoes. I'm hungry; the slice of pizza, which they had given me when I left the jail, had been digested long ago, and I hadn't had anything to eat since then.

I munch some kind of sandwich as I walk unhurriedly along the empty night street. I wear Nike sneakers—Africa's gift. Very good sneakers—almost new, and my size. Is there any black on earth darker than Jamil-Africa? I don't think so. But the darkness of his skin is not his most distinguishing feature. I've never met such a generous black man. He's always kind and happy. That is because he smokes very strong weed. I remember when Officer Perez put the cuffs on me, standing near Jamil-Africa, who looked upon the scene very gloomily. Of course! The open bottle of beer wasn't mine but his. He just put it next to my cart. Because of this confusion I had to lie all day on the

concrete floor in a cell with a horrible hangover, drink foul water from the water fountain, and shit in the presence of 40 cellmates.

What a marvelous country America is! How generous! After I was acquitted by the judge, they gave me a Metrocard to get home. But my home is the street, and I would go into the subway only in winter, and then only when it was very cold outside. In all my years of vagrancy, I had gone down into the subway no more than three times. The main problem in the subway is that cops don't let you lie down to sleep on the benches. If they see someone lying down, they may come up to him and make him sit up or simply take him outside. And sleeping sitting up on a bench is uncomfortable. On top of that, the train's thunders are bothersome. In order to sleep under these subway conditions, one has to drink till he passes out. But that's not for me. I like to be half-conscious, so at least I'll have something to remember. Half-consciousness is my way, with beer. Full oblivion is the American way, with whiskey.

So, I have a metro card and I need to sell it. I offer it to passersby, at half price. A man bought it. Now I have \$15 already—untold wealth! Not far away, a hydrant pipe protrudes from the wall; an unfinished bottle of Fanta with a straw stands on the pipe. I threw away the straw, sniffed the Fanta first, and then poured a little on the cement. If it foams it means it's Fanta. If it doesn't foam—it's urine. This simple way of distinguishing drinks I learned from my buddy Trevor. But before I learned that from him, I had been mistaken twice and had thrown up a lot.

Now there's the walk straight to the grocery store. I want to smoke. Where can I get matches? The street is empty and everyone is afraid of a bum at night. Three old

Chinese women sit in a circle outside one house, lamplight glowing in the center. The women pray.

"Excuse me, do you have any matches?" I ask them.

One of the women takes matches out of her purse and offers them to me. Her gesture makes it understood that I may take them with me.

Now I could make the last dash to 125th Street.

The 24-hour favorite grocery store appeared already in the distance. The store's door is closed at night: everyone is served through the revolving window with bulletproof glass - the owner takes his precautions as well. As usual, a group of noisy intoxicated Blacks and Latinos hangs out in front of the store; and Jamil-Africa is there along with them. I buy 12 bottles of beer and a pack of tobacco. I give one bottle to Jamil and he gives me a joint.

I've almost reached my destination. I turn off the avenue, cutting through the bushes and the thick grass. There, near a low, one-story building with boarded up doors and windows, I lay my mattress, piece of plastic and blanket. It is my summer residence. This home is in a great location: hidden behind the fences and shrubs.

I notice that someone is here. A black girl sits on my mattress and smokes. She jumps when she sees me.

"Sorry, sorry," she murmurs. "I only sat down to rest. Is this your mattress?"

"Yes. This is my bedroom," I joke.

She giggles, appreciating the joke. I notice in the dark that this girl is pretty attractive. I'd say she is about 25. Judging by the clothing—a very short skirt and cut-off

sweatshirt—she is a hooker. Slung across her shoulder is a purse, which probably holds the slut’s work supplies: cosmetics, cigarettes, and condoms.

"What do you drink?" I asked.

"Everything. Whiskey, vodka, rum."

"What about beer?"

"Beer, too. Do you have any?"

"Sure. Have some."

I give her a bottle. And so, we sit together companionably, smoke her cigarettes, and drink my beer.

"My name is Lily," she said, kissing my lips.

Her lips were warm and smooth as silk. I don’t doubt that Lily is her professional nickname, which is far from uncommon amongst the working girls of Harlem. She speaks about herself openly, without pretense: she has worked the streets from the age of 15, she smokes crack, and, of course, drinks. She dropped out of school, lives in Black Harlem, but “works” in Spanish Harlem. According to her, the competition isn’t as fierce there.

Lily finished the beer and said with a sigh that it was time for her to go to work. She said that she was impressed by this place and would like to bring her clients and serve them here by the fence. She asked if I mind.

"No, I don’t."

She kissed me again and left.

I lit up a joint, a gift from Jamil-Africa. I smoked half of it. You have to be very careful when smoking this “thermonuclear” weed, or you’ll begin to hallucinate.

She came, Annie the Rat. She came to see how I'm doing. She watches with her ruby eyes, cleans her whiskers. Annie is much more beautiful and larger than Brooklyn rats. It's quite interesting—she is gray all over but she has a yellow spot around her tail.

"Today, Annie, I have nothing for you. I was in jail. I'll bring you something to eat tomorrow."

Annie blinked in affirmation and ran off somewhere. I grew very depressed and lonely because I had been dumped by women long ago, no one needed me, not even the rats. All that was left was to talk to myself, with my parents in Poland, with friends, with folks, who already died or even never existed...

I'll drink the last of today's beer and lie down to sleep. Where will I go tomorrow morning? I will not go to Ward Island, which is like a real bum's city. Gangs of Poles and Latinos had sprung up there recently, and I don't need to meet them. It would be better to collect some newspapers in order to know, from the headlines and pictures, what's going on in the world, to buy a lot of beer, and retreat to the Hudson shore.

It's nice there. The river, quietness, space, and the view. There are no Latinos, no Poles, no Blacks, no Whites. There is a peculiar delight in being alone.

The Harlem stars are shining. The Harlem folks are sleeping. I'm going to sleep as well.

"Well, did you like it?" Martin asked with trepidation, zipping up his backpack, in which lay bags of chips, pens, few magazines, a pouch of tobacco, and the pages he had just read from his last chapter.

He looked over his shoulder at David, who was sitting on the huge boulders of the breakwater. It seemed that David hadn't even been listening to the question. Maybe he hadn't even listened to him read the chapter?

Meanwhile, shirtless David looked straight ahead toward the children, who were building castles in the wet sand by the water. A girl and a boy of about five. Anthony came up to the castle builders. He was as skinny as a stick. He carried a bucket of water, which half-emptied along the path, and dug in the sand with a serious expression.

"Deya-vid, why don't you answer?" asked Martin again. He was dressed in the same denim suit, boots, and baseball cap. In such hot weather!

"When are you going to give up the old damn habit of carrying all your stuff with you, huh? You're not a street bum anymore, you've got your own room, even if it's just the attic, but it's yours, and you pay for it. Why don't you leave your backpack and jacket there, at least? And why don't you buy a laptop instead of writing on paper?! This is New York in the 21st century, not a damn poor village in Poland!" David said. Definitely, he was irritated by something.

"You're right," agreed Martin but somehow sadly.

"And your chapter's very good. Perfecto!" David praised him all of a sudden. "It's the best thing you've written so far. You're growing."

Martin looked over at David with skepticism—is he joking or what? No, he is serious. But Martin himself knows that the chapter about his vagrancy in Harlem turned out well.

"By the way, the magazine with your 'Bum and Beauty' story is coming out tomorrow. Practically everyone in our editorial office liked it. Only the proofreader,

when she read the text, frowned in disgust. In any case, no one was indifferent toward it. I congratulate you: your career as a bum has ended and your career as a writer has begun.”

Martin sorted through everything in his head and, realizing that David wasn't joking, cheered up and smiled.

"What time does the magazine go on sale?" he asked.

"E-version at midnight tonight, and the hard copy tomorrow at eight in the morning, maybe nine," said David.

"Just in case, I'll come by at seven, maybe it'll be there by then. How much does a hard copy cost?"

"A dollar."

Martin pursed his lips: "I won't die if I go without lunch for a week. I can get sandwiches on the street if I need to."

"How many copies do you plan to buy?" asked David with a little irony. "Or do you intend to buy the whole circulation?"

"About 30. One issue I'll send to my parents in Poland, though they don't read English. But anyway. I'll show one to my landlady. Let her know who's renting her attic. I'll also bring some to work for my construction co-workers... In a word, I'll buy 30 copies, no less."

The sun is getting hot. Despite the sweltering heat, the beach is gradually filling up.

"Tony! Let the little girl play with your shovel. She'll give it back when she's done!" shouted David.

Skinny and lively Anthony, hearing his father's command, stopped bickering and, reluctantly, gave his shovel to the little girl.

"Even the children in this city grow up damn capitalists. They don't share anything, they keep everything for themselves."

"It seems you're in a bad mood today," noticed Martin. "Is something wrong?"

Of course, he didn't doubt that David wouldn't confide in him. In the year they had been acquainted, David hadn't let him into his life. He never told him, for example, why he had gotten divorced or why he had abandoned literary pursuits.

David had never invited him to his home either. Martin suspected that David would be ashamed to invite such a street bum to his house. He would be embarrassed in front of his neighbors, in front of his journalist colleagues. Perhaps he would even be embarrassed in front of himself. That was alright—Martin had gotten used to it.

"Nothing's going on with me. Everything's O.K." David rolled his jeans almost to his knees and went into the water.

Going in up to his knees, he bent over and began to splash water on himself—on his shoulders, his neck, and then rubbed down his chest and stomach. The water was cold, but it was pleasant in such hot weather.

"Let me help you a little," he sat next to his son and scooped up sand around the sinking and already shapeless castle. "Who lives in it?"

"The Princess, SpongeBob, Shrek, and a rhinoceros," answered Anthony immediately.

David chuckled. Together, they continued digging a ditch around the castle, which instantly filled up with water. David suddenly recalled his own childhood, when

his family had vacationed in Florida. The sand in Florida is light-colored, soft and smooth; it flows like an ochre spring through your fingers and makes baroque cascades under your palms. But the sand on the New York shore is heavy and coarse, not suited for elegant constructions.

"Dad, will you buy me some ice cream later?"

"Of course."

Anthony threw down his shovel, went over to his father and suddenly hugged him.

It is more or less understood why Martin needs David. David is like a demigod to him. And a friend, of course. Certainly, their friendship is a little skewed, but that's how it is. Thank goodness for it. Could Martin have dreamt about it just the year before, when his only friends had been beggars and street whores?

But the question is: What does David get from Martin? Sure, David was glad to play the role of patron, to feed poor Martin some sushi or pizza. It could be assumed that he is also tickled by pride—the opportunity to teach a beginning author the craft of literature.

Nonsense! David latched onto this Pole like a leach. He grasped Martin like a drowning man in desperation grabs onto anything that floats. In just the same way, old age, envious and grumbling, clutches at youth, or darkness clings to light. David comes to life around Martin, he forgets about the vanity that once suffocated him. The writer's spirit is resurrected by this homeless man.

David observes Martin from a distance and then slowly slips into his denim suit and heavy black boots, into his wound- and scar-covered skin, even into the swollen gums from which spring the half-rotten stumps of his teeth. David could then see the world in all its wonder: the moon, seagulls and flowers, even its filth—everything around changed in appearance, merged into One Sound, into the fullness and depth of the Word.

And Martin, like a golden nugget, reflects sparks of light. He is happy not to live on the street, that he doesn't drink anymore, that he's writing.

Not long before, when they had been at McDonald's and translated the next chapter, David began to make plot suggestions. He suggested making the hero of the next story—Donald—a drunk and throwing him from a pier into the ocean. An effective little ending. But Martin, the literary dummy, stood up for his hero. He was unusually obstinate, affirming that Donald, the musician and sentimental alcoholic, is alive, that he had seen him recently, though he was drunk and beaten up. Donald sang 'Let It Be' and then begged Martin for "10 bucks for the concert." They would have talked some more, but Martin had to rush to work. Why would he kill someone like Donald? So that literary trifles could prevail over the beauty of life's truths?

"You American writers let your emotions out right away, at once dotting all of your 'i's. But we Europeans are different. We love doing things gradually; the essence should be uncovered only with each new word. You American don't have enough restraint and patience, that's why you can't maintain literary forms." Thus said Martin, who had only graduated from high school in his Polish village with a C average.

Returning home, David suddenly stopped next to the supermarket. Three bottle collecting machines were there. A tiny Chinese woman dug plastic bottles out of her huge black bag and threw them into the opening of one of the machines. Something inside the machine clicked, there was a muffled crushing sound, and the red electronic numbers changed on the black screen: the number of bottles received and the amount of money for them.

David stared at this whole process, and the woman began to look worriedly around her, watching this weird man. He came to his senses and moved away.

But, waiting at the intersection for the light to change, he for some reason looked into the trash can. There was an empty aluminum Pepsi-Cola can on the top of the garbage. David took the can and brought it to his face. His senses were suddenly assaulted by the disgusting scent. The odor was so noxious that it brought tears to his eyes. He threw the can back into the trash can and, stunned, crossed the street.

Would he agree to pay such a high price for literary work? Martin had paid. But look how he is writing now. The lines just fly. Why couldn't he, David, produce a word, but this half-literate Pole, who had damaged his brains with alcohol, vagrancy, and dull construction jobs for years, could create work like that?! Or had the Lord, all-merciful and just, given Martin this literary gift but demanded for it such an excessive price in exchange?

David took a shower at home, cleansing himself of the ocean salt, the noise and fatigue. He lay down on the couch, placed his glasses on the nightstand and turned off the light.

For some unknown reason he brought up his right hand to his nose as he had done several times during the day. Why did he have this strange sensation that his palm stinks? And why now, when he reads Martin's stories, does that disgusting, decaying smell suffocate him? At one point he had ceased to detect that smell from Martin at all. Perhaps his nose had adapted to the smell, or maybe Martin had been cleansed of it after a year. Then why does even the remembrance of Martin immediately bring back the intolerable smell of waste all around him?

THIS IS THE END OF THE SECTION