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A WALK DOWN MISERY STREET

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To Michael

PREFACE

When undertaking this book, I set a simple task before myself: to share with readers the personal experience of a man who decided to try himself in the role of a substance abuse counselor, without having any idea of what addiction really was. I wanted to let the readers know what impressions, feelings, and thoughts my experience evoked as I became closely acquainted with the closed-off and bizarre world of drug addicts in New York.

However, this facially simple task turned out to be extremely difficult. During the time of writing this book, I constantly went off on a tangent. I began to present knowledge that might be interesting and useful only to a limited number of professionals, who are working in the substance abuse field but not to a wide range of different readers. Or, conversely, I strayed into the tone of fiction, and my story gradually turned into a novel with an exciting plot, which possessed artistic merits but did not reflect the documentary angle of the reality being described.

That is why it took me about ten years to write this book! I constantly rewrote chapters and changed the protagonist's character. During this time, obviously, a lot was changing in our country, in the substance abuse field, and also in my personal life.

But the "stretching" of time for this book has been greatly beneficial. As a result, this work reflects the gradual "growth" of the main character, both spiritually and professionally, from when he began his career as an ordinary addiction counselor to when he became a professor at a well-known university.

What is the meaning behind this title? I first heard this name from a patient; he was a gifted poet, and one of his poems about drug addiction was called "Misery Street". Indeed, over time, working in the field I began to imagine drug addiction as a symbolic street—a long and winding road. Such a street exists in any city, village, or populated area. You can find yourself on this street via various paths, each taking their own. One person might find themselves there due to a hereditary, genetic predisposition to alcohol and drugs, while another came there under peer pressure, and someone else, out of curiosity. Of course, no one was going to linger on this street for long. For the first time in life, when raising a glass of wine or smoking the first blunt, no one does it to become a drug addict or an alcoholic. No one believed that it would happen to them. "It could happen to anyone else but not with me." O, ye. Some lucky ones, having been on this street for a while, sooner or later managed to get off, while others stayed there forever.

This book was practically finished when the Covid 19 epidemic suddenly exploded. Due to this epidemic, a lot is changing around us and inside of us. However, I decided not to include this period of the pandemic in my book, although I have already accumulated a lot of invaluable material. Without a doubt, after this pandemic completely passes, many of us will be re-evaluating our views on life and death, our values, and our relationships with others. But this experience will still require comprehension. All of this is still ahead.

And lastly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to the teachers of the Outreach Training Institute, the professors of Fordham University, the colleagues with whom

I have worked in various clinics and hospitals of New York, as well as all my patients. Without YOU this book would not have seen the light of day.

*To protect and maintain the privacy of all patients and clinicians,
names, places, and locations have been changed.*

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Part One

IN THE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

I came to America with the green card I'd won in a lottery. No bribes or fake marriages here. Such things do happen. When I won the green card, I took it as a kind of sign from God and left with little hesitation.

My life in Russia never seemed to move forward. Firstly, I did not like the political regime there. In addition, I couldn't understand who I was or what my calling was. What I knew about myself was that I liked to read novels and ponder over life; that is why I enrolled at the College of Science and Art, with a major in philosophy. But after studying there for three years, I became disillusioned with classical philosophy and dropped out of college without getting a diploma. Then, I worked as an agent at an advertising agency, and then as a proofreader in a publishing house. None of these jobs brought me much money or any fulfillment. And despite all of this, in my heart of hearts, I always believed that my life should be unique, that God had a special plan for me, and that I certainly had a mission on this Earth.

Imagine the enthusiasm and joy with which I packed my belongings to go to the States! I didn't doubt that I could quickly find my place in America, the country of unlimited

opportunities. There, in the United States, all of my potential would actualize and I would flourish.

What can I say? This is how we—humans—are built! We hope that a change of scenery will fundamentally change us, and most certainly for the better—“The Geographical Cure.”

Finding myself in New York, I quickly realized that the situation here is very different from what I expected. All my hopes and illusions were quickly dashed. I had nowhere to go. I was in a foreign country, basically penniless, with poor English and no college degree. I couldn't even get a job as a grocery stock boy.

Once, having rescued a half-broken rocking chair from the sidewalk, I sat in my tiny half-basement apartment on the edge of the Capital of the World—in Brooklyn. I rocked back and forth, accompanied by the squeaking wood, and deliberated my next step.

Was it really my fate to perpetually seek something and wind up with nothing? Would I ever find my calling? I had no idea what to do. I felt like a helpless puppy, abandoned on a dark street in an unfamiliar city.

I didn't know a soul in America at that time. There was only one person in New York to whom I could turn: a distant relative of my mother (her second cousin's wife). I called her and asked if we could meet and talk. For some reason, she chose to meet at a pub.

Nestled at the bar, I asked for her advice: What profession should I choose? “Tell me my dear aunt, what do you think?” I asked with a humorous tone.

Treating me to a fine cocktail, she without hesitation advised, “My dear Peter, why don't you become a drug counselor? Treat drug addicts and alcoholics!” Ironically, she raised her glass in a toast, as if the matter was settled and all that remained was to drink to it. “I myself have been a drug counselor for many years. It's really not difficult.”

I was a little confused by what I was seeing and hearing. This sweet lady, a drug counselor, is sipping on her second cocktail and advising me to treat alcoholics? There was something very off about this picture.

I uttered, “But I don’t really have any specialized education. I’ve never used drugs. I only drink occasionally.”

“Listen, in America, you only need to study for about a year to get your substance abuse certificate. You don’t need any specialized medical training. The salary isn’t that high, but it’s good enough to keep a roof over your head. Besides, in your own words, you like to ponder about life. You can’t imagine how addicts like to philosophize, better than professors at any university. I believe that the substance abuse clinic is your rightful place. I’m sure you’ll be great at it.”

As I parted ways with my relative, I thought to myself: Can I really become a substance abuse counselor? Hmm... I suddenly remembered the names of some of my favorite writers—Hemingway and Fitzgerald—and many famous rock idols for whom drugs were a big part of life and led them to a tragic ending. To become a substance abuse counselor, I’m going to deal with interesting, creative people who can still be saved.

I was also thinking that for a period of time my dad heavily abused alcohol, and because of this, our family life was so harsh. I knew from my own experience how much suffering alcohol brings into people's lives.

And this work seemed aligned with my faith, specifically the Christian sentiments of fairness and compassion.

Okay, let’s give it a try. Go ahead.

HOPELESS PHILOSOPHER

It was one of those Queens neighborhoods where I imagine any well-dressed man would be uncomfortable during the day and downright terrified at night. Even the trains roaring across the tracks seemed to me in a hurry to pass through. I kept noticing suspicious characters hanging around street corners and bodegas, their eyes hidden behind sweatshirt hoodies or baseball caps.

And at one intersection: the sparkling, brand-new three-story Institute for Substance Abuse Counseling. This was my new alma mater!

After completing the interview and reviewing my application, the Assistant Director, Teri, who at first glance seemed a somewhat distant and arrogant woman, handed me a booklet with a list of classes and the rules of conduct for the Institute. She firmly warned me that there is no drug use on the premises of the school and violators would be dismissed immediately. It sounded very strange to me because I was going there to study and not use drugs. She quoted the tuition fee and I agreed with the terms. Then she congratulated me on my acceptance. When we were parting, curiosity got the best of her and she asked:

“Tell me, Peter: Why are you doing this? You seem like an intelligent man.”

“What do you mean?” I asked her.

“Well, it’s all . . . drug addicts, alcoholics . . .” she grimaced.

“Aren’t they troubled souls in need of help?” I responded, not understanding why the assistant director would say such a thing and with such a look of squeamishness.

“I see, I see.” She looked at me both pensively and sympathetically.

I felt that she saw me as a hopeless romantic and philosopher who had no idea what he was getting himself into.

WORKING AS A SECURITY GUARD: THE ART OF DOING HOURS

I was accepted to the school. It was a good step, but how to make ends meet and how to pay for this education?

Already having a prior unsuccessful attempt to get a job as a grocery stock boy, I started thinking about where I would be hired. What if I tried to be a security guard?

This time I hit the bull's eye. It turned out that it was very easy to land the job of a security guard. All you needed was a high school diploma or a GED, plus a few lectures for a hundred dollars. Also, you needed to have a clean record, not dirtied by criminal affairs. I had all this. In a few days, having listened to the lectures and paying a hundred bucks, I received the certificate of a security guard and was ready to stand guard in the capital of the world, adding to the army of thousands of security guards, with whom New York is teeming like cockroaches.

I quickly put together a resume, where I wrote that until recently I had worked as a traffic police officer in Russia.

The next day in the tabloid's "help wanted" section I chose the first "security guard wanted" listing with "no experience or references required." I called there and was invited for an interview right away at a large company which supplies contract guards in various city locations.

The interviewer, glancing briefly at my resume, inquired why I needed this job. I lied that I was a traffic police officer in Russia and it was my cherished dream to become a cop in New York. However, as I said, I was not yet ready to be a cop in New York, because I had lived here

for a short while and this job had many requirements which would take me a long time to meet. But I have to pay my bills now, and this is why I am here, looking for a job as a security guard.

Apparently, the boss liked my guileless, honest explanation. After all, I could not convince him that I dreamed of working as a security guard all my life!

“Okay, man, you’re hired, for 15.50 bucks an hour. It is a decent salary for a first job. I am sending you to a great spot.”

Right after the interview in the office, I was handed a uniform, gray wide pants, a heavy jacket, a visor with an emblem, a winter jacket, and two white shirts. The next evening, I was on my way to the new job, which the boss referred to as the “great spot.”

This great spot turned out to be a five-story supermarket in the famous Time Warner skyscraper on Columbus Circle. My new supervisor greeted me there and, after a brief introduction, commanded me to go to the Security Operations Center to get a walkie-talkie and then quickly get back to patrolling the first floor. Thirty minutes later, I was walking along the wide corridors, from the revolving doors at one end of the corridor to the door on the other end, eyeing the shop window displays.

The shops were closing, and patrons were exiting the supermarket. I was walking around, waiting for the action to start. I expected that I would be restraining law-breakers every hour, chasing thieves, and discovering terrorists. However, it was quiet and calm there. I kept roaming, waiting for when I would start doing something specific. Yet on the first day, I had no clue what my new job entailed, its essence. I didn’t expect that when one became a security guard, he would find himself in a purely surreal world of what security guards call “making hours.” “How many hours did you do today?” “How many hours do you plan to make tomorrow?”, etc. These commonplace phrases are found in the security guards’ vocabulary.

While patrolling the empty corridor I started singing my favorite songs. “Yesterda-a-ay, all my troubles seemed so far awa-a-ay...” “Mama-a, I just killed a ma-an...”

I recalled the times when I was crazy about Western rock music as a teenager in Russia. I often visited the record store where they sold some electronics, vinyl records, and CDs with patriotic Russian songs. Usually, there were not a lot of visitors, but outside the store were always scalpers and music fanatics, modestly holding cheap burlap sacks in their hands, with recordings from the Beatles, the Doors, and Queen concerts. The rare records, discs, and posters were sold or exchanged.

Close by in the alley, there were undercover policemen closely watching the sellers of western propaganda. Sometimes they staged raids, taking everyone to the police station (the sellers and the buyers). I was also arrested a few times and taken to the police station, and then my parents and school’s principal were informed that I am a reckless student and not a Russian patriot, but a traitor to my homeland.

My nostalgic memories were interrupted by screams into the walkie-talkie:

“First floor! Wake up! What is the situation there?” It was the shift supervisor returning me to reality, and in the blink of an eye, I was mentally transported from the record store in Russia to the first-floor supermarket in the Time Warner skyscraper in New York.

“Everything is ok here. Calm and quiet.”

Upon finishing my evening shift, I got into the subway and got home around 1:30 at night. The next morning, having slept for five hours, I traveled to Queens, to the Institute for Substance Abuse Counseling for my first class.

DRUG COUNSELING SCHOOL

When I first crossed the threshold of the auditorium and quietly took a seat, I felt baffled. There was a lecture going on. I was expecting to see a room full of thoughtful, enlightened individuals brought here, like me, by a noble desire to do good and save the lost.

Instead, I was met with a lot of noisy commotion. I was overwhelmed by the sight and sounds, and I didn't get a good look at my classmates. I was secretly hoping I had entered the wrong auditorium. I decided at the first break to go and find my noble and refined classmates.

A somewhat nondescript teacher was giving the lecture. Students were constantly joking, and the auditorium frequently erupted into laughter. My English was poor at the time. I knew little slang, so I didn't get most of the jokes. The only words I could make out through the flood of chaotic speech were "fuck" and "shit"—the two swear words resounded throughout the auditorium. Even when everyone was silent, including the professor, the words "fuck" and "shit" kept ringing in my ears. Most of the male students wore beards and mustaches and were covered in tattoos. Their smiles seemed predatory. Many of the women looked disheveled and roughed up. What was wrong with them? Are these my classmates? Why did they look like they just been released from jail?

My hunch about them wasn't too far from the truth, as I learned later. The hope that I'd mistakenly entered the wrong auditorium was dashed. I had come to the right place, where yesterday's drug addicts are metamorphosed into tomorrow's substance abuse counselors.

I soon learned that the government was paying for their education. According to US labor laws, people with chemical dependence are categorized as disabled and therefore have the right to a free education at training programs and even colleges. The main requirement to study in a

substance abuse school on a government grant, is that a drug user has to be clean—free of any junk or alcohol for at least three months.

“Is it fair and just? While one person has to work as a security guard and stand still for hours in the supermarket, counting every penny to pay for his education, another, who has been getting high for years, learns for free?!” This was my initial angry reaction.

Sylvia, the Lioness

Of the whole group of twenty people, only three, including me, were not in recovery.¹ Now I'll introduce you to several students in recovery.

I'll start with Sylvia, as I found myself sharing a desk with her on the very first day of school.

She was an American of Italian descent, about fifty, with luxurious black hair and in good shape for her age. I was soon surprised to learn that she wasn't fifty, but . . . forty! Sylvia retained some charm, but her beauty was obviously fading. It struck me that, had she not picked up the syringe twenty years earlier, Sylvia would have escaped misfortune and still be driving herds of lustful men crazy. But in life, unfortunately, “coulda, shoulda, woulda” don't exist, and we can only speak of what we have now, not of what could have been.

Still, Sylvia tried to maintain her image as a lioness, portraying herself as a sort of socialite. She dressed provocatively: short skirts and tight blouses.

On the second day of classes, during break, this lioness went on the hunt, and I was her intended prey. When we were left alone in the auditorium, Sylvia began to inquire about who I was and where I was from. She talked about herself, intriguingly raising her eyelids and leaning

toward me so closely that our foreheads almost touched. I didn't even notice how she had caught hold of my hand—whether to shake it or to press it to her chest. By the second break, I already knew that Sylvia was single and lived in a studio apartment in Brooklyn. Her thirteen-year-old daughter was living with her mother in New Jersey and she had divorced her husband a while ago. And . . . she was completely free this evening after school!

I wasn't prepared for such rapid development in a relationship. All I knew was I had to rush to the other side of the city to patrol the supermarket in the Time Warner building.

Sylvia found my excuses unconvincing, especially when she learned I was a bachelor. She continued her hunt for the next several days. She would move close to me for any reason. She played with the button on her shirt and invited me to her place “for coffee.”

I remember Sylvia's wide-open eyes when we did our first assignment together, and I brought up famous writers and philosophers, even mentioning something about the United Nations. The longer I spoke, recalling such “weird” names and references that were as distant to her as faraway planets, the wider Sylvia's eyes got. Then it hit her! She finally understood who was sitting next to her. A bookworm!

Upon her realization, Sylvia decided to correct her error without delay. She had wasted a whole week on someone she thought was only playing around, pretending to be a “goody-two-shoes.” But he really was one!

The next day Sylvia fluttered away, like a butterfly, to another desk, to another male student. Actually, I had thought of her as a lioness, not a butterfly, and this comparison seemed more accurate. Soon she had this other guy wrapped around her finger.

All the students and teachers observed the growth of their sweet romance for several months—how they helped each other cheat on the exams, how they walked to the café together

during breaks, and how after classes she would get in his car and theatrically slam the door shut. They'd talk about how crazy happy they were since they met each other, and thanked God for bringing them together in this auditorium!

Soon enough, they began to skip classes together. After one particularly long absence, Sylvia finally reappeared. Her face was very pale and her eyes were cloudy and glazed. Sylvia barely found the strength to sit. She'd prop up her chin with her hands all the time, drooping forward, almost resting on the desk, sweating, shivering as if she was freezing. Cliché as it sounds, she looked . . . like a cold turkey. Her black, uncombed hair contrasted with her porcelain-white face. She had on a worn jacket. She stared blankly at the board, where the teacher was writing something.

Only now I can imagine how she was struggling. Poor Sylvia, whose joints were aching, leg muscles wrenching, stomach-churning. She had to hide her cloudy, doped-up eyes from the students and teachers. But they all knew: Sylvia had relapsed! In addition, she dragged her boyfriend into the abyss with her and he also picked up drugs. Why did he need her? He would have been better off studying alone.

Everyone was looking at Sylvia. Was she still a goddess, a lioness-socialite? Or was she now your so-called useless, dirty junkie? How embarrassing it must be!

Sylvia didn't finish school. She relapsed several times, then finally gave up coming to classes altogether. The thousands of dollars that the government granted her as a scholarship were wasted.

Then I started to realize that my angry reaction against the distribution of government funds to help drug addicts in getting professional education was very superficial. The real problem is not that the government funds are distributed unfairly (as some allege), but that even

with such generous support a good percentage of drug users were not able to change their life and after unsuccessful attempts returned to the dreadful world from which they came.

Before I finish with Sylvia, I have to mention one more incident that perplexed me greatly.

During a class, Sylvia raised her hand to answer a question posed by the teacher. Then she unexpectedly spoke openly in front of the whole group on a topic apparently unrelated to the lesson.

“My older cousin molested me when I was thirteen. I haven’t been able to have a normal relationship with a man since. I live with shame. I’ve been sexually promiscuous from the time I was seventeen. I’ve never considered myself a normal woman. I was embarrassed and hated myself. I hated men and I feared them. I dreamed of meeting my ideal man and becoming his true friend, but I lived like a prostitute! Then heroin entered my life . . . “

I was in shock. I hadn’t imagined it was possible—a young, thirty-nine-year-old woman speaking before a group of strangers about what would be hard to say even to one’s closest friends and family! She cried, practically howled.

The students’ reactions also impressed me. Some paid close attention to her, knowingly nodding their heads. Others half-listened, and still others utilized the pause in the lecture to sneak a peek at their iPhone.

Listening to Sylvia’s confession, I simultaneously felt compassion and a kind of distaste for her. I had no doubt her story was true, yet something unnecessary, even artificial, came in through her revelation. What made her share it in front of everybody, with her boyfriend present?

In the not-too-distant future, I, like any substance abuse counselor, would often hear similar outpourings from women (and from men, too, by the way) who were molested. At the time, however, I was taken aback and bewildered.

Remembering Sylvia today, I can see the connections between her relapses and her public sharing. It was not coincidental. She was comprised of two halves: Sylvia the drug user who “lived like a prostitute,” and Sylvia the young girl who was molested. These were the only two ways she knew herself. Every time she tried to kick the drugs, she encountered this “stained and denigrated” girl who hated herself with all her soul.

What was the meaning of her confession? Was it just for show, an attempt to draw attention? Or was it a cry of despair before a coming relapse?

She left the Institute and I never saw her again.

There are many Sylvias, with very similar stories and nearly the same destinies, who cross the threshold of substance abuse clinics every day in America and other countries.

I’ll say more about female drug users in due course.

The Peter Brothers

As soon as Sylvia left me, a man by the name of Peter sat next to me. My namesake, with Irish roots. He looked to be about forty-seven, but it would soon be revealed that he was thirty-eight.

Seeing as this is the second time I’ve mentioned a discrepancy between age and appearance, I’ll tell you that the majority of drug users look older than their years. Some in the drug world believe that heroin users look younger than their age, allegedly because heroin has a “freezing” effect on the aging process. This is a myth. A fifty-year-old male heroin user, if he lives to such an age, looks like a very old man. It was difficult for me to believe that the majority of the students were my peers, ages thirty-five to forty, but looked at least a decade older. In their

complexion and facial expressions, one saw old age, weathering, and sickness. Sickness was particularly true because many students suffered from serious chronic illnesses: hypertension, diabetes, asthma. A few of them had AIDS. Moreover, because most of them had been clean for only several months, the alcohol and drugs have not yet fully evaporated from their pores—not to mention their brains.

So, then there was Peter. He had a good build, straightforward and angular facial features, and short light brown hair neatly combed to one side. The reddish bristle around his mouth and on his chin gave Peter a somewhat aristocratic look. He smiled broadly, showing his uneven yellowed teeth. Or to put it more accurately, he didn't smile—he snarled.

At that time, he told me he and his wife were in the process of divorcing. He worked the night shift as an assistant to a substance abuse counselor at a rehab clinic. He took me under his wing. As a “psychologist” (his degree earned at the University of Real Life), he immediately had me pegged as a guy who knew nothing about the drug world but was academically strong.

Soon Peter admitted to me that, once upon a time, he had smoked a lot of weed and now had memory problems as a consequence. I didn't know if it was from the grass or not, but Peter really couldn't remember many of the technical names and clinical terms that we students needed to know.

Peter and I had a mutual regard since the day we met. He started calling me his “Russian brother,” and I assumed the role of his “helper.” I helped him on the quizzes and exams as well as I could.

By contrast, Peter (salute to him!) was like a walking encyclopedia. He knew words and terms that were not found on examinations, but often slipped off the lips of both students and

teachers: dope, boy, coke, blue, sour, booze, blow, and so on. In short, the unabridged dictionary of an American addict opened up to me, and there were so many priceless treasures!

“What’s dope?” I asked Peter, hearing a brand-new word.

He smiled broadly, spreading his thick reddish scruff to each side. He looked at me with the kind of love a father must feel when he watches the first steps of his one-year-old son.

“Dope—this is heroin, my friend. You know, the grayish powder in a little plastic bag.”

“Aha. And what’s coke?”

“That’s cocaine. It’s also a powder, but it’s white. You must remember, my Russian brother, dope is usually injected and coke is usually snorted.” Peter enigmatically held a thick index finger under his nose and pressed his large nostril on one side. His whole face grimaced. “Will you remember? Don’t get them confused.”

In his voice, I heard the emphatic irony of a parent: he had to tell me about things—the pipes for smoking crack, the syringes, the pills—things that even today’s school children know. Just like a good teacher, Peter was patient. Several times he showed me how to snort imaginary coke, roll a joint, or cook and shoot dope.

That’s how we helped each other at school.

Peter loved to joke around and laughed a lot. He was down-to-earth and happy-go-lucky. As they say, he was an open book. But sometimes I noticed a deep sadness flicker in his eyes, an incomprehensible longing, and a melancholy so poignant it was painful to look at him, for he concealed something deep in his heart.

Our classmates called us the Peter Brothers. We had lunch together in the diner. Sometimes I complained to him that I understood little, if nothing, of this subject of drug addiction, and that it was probably in vain that I came to this field of study. Maybe it wasn’t my cup of tea.

Homesickness began to gnaw at me. More and more, I recalled my home in Russia, my parents, our garden, and the river where as a kid I had gone swimming and fishing with my friends. I was feeling like a stranger among these coarse, noisy students who were always chuckling at something I never could comprehend. They looked at me as if I was a weird overseas creature carried by some random wind to their land.

Once during a conversation, I noticed something off with Peter. He was walking next to me, responding “yes-yes” to my comments, but he clearly wasn’t hearing me. We walked to the diner and Peter was behind me the whole time for some reason. I turned around. Was this the same Peter? The jolly fellow, the jokester? No, I saw a haggard, pale, old man. He could barely keep up with me. He was trembling all over, his shoulders shaking and his head quivering on his tense neck.

“Peter, what’s wrong?” I asked, alarmed.

“I’m fine, bro. I didn’t get any sleep last night. I had a lot of work,” he answered, looking off to the side.

Having seen Sylvia with her dope-sick cloudy eyes not too long ago, I now looked at shivering pale Peter, and I saw a striking similarity. In that moment, I also recalled what we were learning in school. I sensed what was causing his condition. Drug withdrawal! This is what drug withdrawal looks like.

Peter was able to graduate from the Institute and receive his diploma. For all his openness, he never let me into his personal life. He would offer half-hints about difficult and painful divorce proceedings and often talked about his problems in general.

After the Institute we kept in touch, but less and less over time. It turned out we had little to talk about. Our studies had ended, our mutual assistance was no longer required, and sympathy

wasn't sufficient to evolve our relationship into a friendship. Soon Peter stopped taking my calls.

We met again a few years after graduation. I was working in an outpatient substance abuse clinic, and here comes Peter—as a patient. I saw from the documentation he gave me that he had been in prison for six months for beating his ex-wife. The beating happened two years before, but for various reasons, the verdict was postponed and only this year the judicial red tape was resolved. Peter was sentenced to a half-year in prison, served his time, and was released that day.

The next paper he handed me revealed the cause of the deep sadness I had often seen in his eyes. Pete was living with AIDS.

He told me the rest of his story. He was referred to the drug clinic on his way out of prison. He had no place to live and no money.

He looked the same as before: thick red hair and bristles around his mouth. His beard was thicker, but he no longer had the look of aristocracy. He did smile in the way he always had, with open yet slightly mischievous eyes.

Peter sensed right away that I was no longer a rookie who needed to be told that you shoot dope and you snort coke. He could see that his “Russian brother” was already immersed in this world of misery and desperation.

“Pete, my Russian brother! How have ya been?!” he exclaimed, not showing any sign of surprise at our unexpected meeting.

I saw no hint of envy or shame in Peter's expression. Who was he now, a “homeless, ex-convict, AIDS-infected junkie”?

By this time, I knew that drug users don't display their shame in the same way as "regular" people. It's hard for many of us to imagine the kind of senseless and desperate acts drug users sometimes commit because they are ashamed.

Peter and I embraced, slapping one another on the shoulders.

"Bro, look how we ran into each other just like that!"

We briefly recalled our days of student life and studies.

"I haven't lost everything in my life yet! I've still got something left," Peter said as I filled out his intake forms. "I have the two most important things in life," he announced, holding up his fist. "For one, I'm alive." He emphatically put up his index finger. "And for another, I have God." Another finger went up. Then he made a fist again and pumped it over his head, as if he'd just won a significant battle. "Life and God! You see?"

I nodded approvingly, impressed with his resilience. What a guy, I thought. He seemingly lost everything but is keeping the faith. Life hasn't hardened him, and he hasn't given up his soul. I neither judged nor blamed him. But I also did not pity him.

Smiling broadly (his smile was even more wolfish since prison), Peter suddenly thrust his hand into his backpack and took out a folder with different documents from prison and photographs. He found the picture he wanted: he and I together at the Institute at the graduation ceremony. We were standing together, arms around each other, diplomas in hand.

"Wow! The Peter Brothers. I don't have one like it. Let me take a shot." I said.

"Sure, take it."

I took my cell and shot a picture.

I didn't ask Peter about his AIDS or his ex-wife or prison. That would have been too much for our first encounter. And what was the hurry? There was so much time ahead of us, I thought.

A few other patients awaited me in the hall. The director stuck his head into my office with an expression as if to say, “why are you taking so long?”

I handed to Peter a list of local food pantries that gave free food to the poor and homeless. I called a sober house and arranged a place for him to stay.

“This is just the first step. We’ll file a housing application, based on your medical things with AIDS. With time you can get a job in a substance abuse clinic somewhere. You’ve still got your diploma and work experience.”

He nodded, making a fist as a sign of his full determination to fight and win. He kept his somewhat strained eyes on me, as if in expectation. I looked at the closed door. I put my hand in my pocket and took out two crumpled twenties.

“Take it. You can give it back whenever.”

Peter took the money, sighing lightly as if relieved. Then he pensively furrowed his brow.

Of course, he knew that substance abuse counselors, like all workers in any drug clinic, including secretaries and janitors, were strictly forbidden to give patients any money. Peter would have understood had I not given him a cent. He had nothing to lose, but I could get into trouble at work. Regardless of how nice and honest a patient may appear, crossing a professional boundary into a purely human interaction carries a risk, especially concerning money.

Still, I believe Pete expected this from me—this well-meaning though arguably unprofessional act. He didn’t have a dime. Only a subway card. And his life. And God.

He hid the money in his pocket. He was in worn-out sneakers, ripped jeans, and an old sweater. We hugged again and agreed to meet the next morning.

Peter didn’t show up the next morning, or the following week. He never showed up at the halfway house I had arranged for him. His cell was disconnected. I had no way of finding out

what happened to him or where he went. All that was left in my cell was the picture of us together—students at graduation.

What happened to him? Why did he disappear? Had I done the right thing in giving a chronic drug user, just released from prison, forty dollars? Such a sum amounted to four bags of heroin or cocaine.

“You snort coke, shoot dope. Make sure you don’t get them confused, my Russian brother.”

Did he buy himself a hot dog and some sneakers, or those damned bags of drugs? Had he gotten high and landed himself back in prison? Was giving him money an act of good or evil? When dealing with drug addiction, common sense and ethical principles are often challenged, if not turned upside down.

I never learned any details of his terrible illness and his domestic violence criminal case. Did his ex-wife by any chance infect him?

What’s with him now? Where is he?

God help him!

Kevin: The Riddle of the Sphinx

Kevin was a mystery. Nobody could figure him out. He was a riddle to our group. After Sylvia’s revelation about her molestation, the endless stream of public confessions continued until graduation. By the end, all of the students knew who was molested, who had what illness, and who had done time in prison.

Over time, I came to appreciate the different aspects of this sharing.

Drug users and alcoholics who have been in treatment engage in psychotherapy, either individual or group, where open confession is a key factor in their recovery. Clinicians encourage their patients: “Don’t keep it inside! Don’t hold any secrets within! Let go of what you are hiding! You are as sick as your secrets.”

In my first years working with drug users, I couldn’t help but sense that I was entering a world not of real people, but of some type of ghosts. I observed that drug users love mystery. They love the shadows and the twilight. They hate the light. They won’t remove their sunglasses, even on winter evenings. Baseball caps are pulled low over their eyes. They cover their heads with hoods in sunny weather. They wear dark clothing. They prefer cars with tinted windows. Light is their arch-enemy. Drug users are night people, nocturnal like moths. They don’t fly in the light but distance themselves from it as if it is their worst foe. They need to hide things and hide themselves, even when it seems unnecessary. They complicate and befuddle everything they can, and they create mysteries out of nothing and then carry these mysteries in the gloom of their wailing souls, where they can nurture the monsters.

Unfortunately, sharing with others is no guarantee of success. The fact is that such revelations become routine. It may be difficult to disclose something shameful for the first time and maybe even the second. By the third time, disclosure is a little easier. By the fourth time, you are already used to it. Such disclosure in and of itself no longer becomes helpful, because you may not be concerned about connecting with painful feelings anymore, but rather with just impressing your audience. How striking it is to stand before everyone and proclaim: “Because of dope, I cheated on my husband with a famous baseball player” or “I sold crack and was shot three times, but by some miracle, I survived.” Wow!

Moreover, just as a maestro works on his composition, many drug users often change parts of their confessional stories slightly to sound a little more artful, like writing for a dramatic film or novel. (Writers and screenwriters who lack inspiration and plots could find in any addiction clinic an inexhaustible source of creativity for any genre—from soap operas to action films).

Unlike the other students, Kevin was a man of few words. He responded to questions briefly and without theatrics.

He was an American of Norwegian descent. Clean-shaven, he was always neat in appearance, punctual and polite. He rarely kept the conversation alive. He was a quick study, passing every exam on the first try.

But Kevin's stubborn unwillingness to answer the question of whether or not he used drugs evoked general irritation and even some anger from the students. They posed this question to Kevin from the first day to the last day of school. Everyone asked him about it—first the students, then even several teachers. Yet Kevin remained enigmatically silent on the matter. If he was answering a question on the board, for example, on pharmacology or some other topic, someone would always take the opportunity to ask him: "C'mon and tell us: Are you in recovery? Did you use?"

Kevin would shrug, with a look of regret on his face.

"I can't answer. Sorry, this is personal," he would say with a sigh, and everyone in the auditorium would shoot him a dirty look, thinking:

What a timid one! So sly! He was clearly one of us—a junkie. Why should he contort himself into the semblance of a normal man? Why pretend? Does he think he's better than us? No way! He is cut from the same cloth. He's from the very same dirty, corrupt, screwed-up world we are! Or . . . is he?

Kevin worked as a counselor in a rehab clinic. He was a teacher by profession, but about a year ago quit the school job and entered the substance abuse field. In the clinic where he was now working, his boss required him to get a diploma as a substance abuse counselor.

I don't know how others saw him, but to me, Kevin was an ordinary young man, educated and with good manners. If I hadn't met him at this school, it wouldn't even occur to me to fish out whether he was an addict. Also incomprehensible to me were the fervor and insolence with which my classmates attempted to extract this information from him, demanding an answer to a question that, in my view, carried little if any weight: "Are you in recovery?"

What a shallow view! How could I not understand that two distinct worlds existed: the world of the addicts and—as drug users themselves refer to it—the world of the "normies"? Who separated these two worlds? Who had drawn a thick line—no, dug out a trench—between them? The users themselves, who had once upon a time crossed over this border? Or the "normies," who cast off these sick, dangerous folks who do not wish to follow the rules of society?

Who created this world of addicts? What is its law and culture? Day after day I started to see the fuller picture.

Drug users form a kind of fraternity, a commune, an order, where everyone is accepted at any age, gender, and status—teenagers and seniors, men and women, the highly educated and the illiterate, the working and the unemployed, the single and the married. Good, gentle, sentimental people. And you will meet true monsters as well.

Within this brotherhood, within this order, there is no mutual affection. They may steal from each other, despise, betray, and kill one another. But the bottom line is that anyone who has crossed the line into drug addiction enters this brotherhood, whether he wishes to or not.

Yes, an addict can detect the special scent of a fellow addict. It's enough for him to notice a fleeting glance, a word, a vocal intonation, a barely discernible movement of the lips or brows of his companion to identify that before him stands a brother. He too is an addict, someone who understands, like nobody else on Earth.¹

Once addicted to alcohol or a drug, a half-pint of vodka or a bag of heroin—put on a scale by your sick soul—will outweigh everything else in your life: the well-being of family, professional career, personal health, and even life itself. This is what definitely separates the addict from the “normal world.”

The world is hostile to the drug users, has no love for them, fears them, and doesn't believe them. We kick addicts and alcoholics out of their homes and fire them from their jobs. We take away their children. The police follow them and put them in jail. Judges bang their gavels after issuing harsh sentences.

The whole world is against them.

Thus, the question put to Kevin—Are you an addict or not? —is not an idle one, but rather of primary importance, to be understood as follows: “Are you with us or with them? If you're with them, Mister Kevin, so be it and best regards! If you are with us, then you are our brother—welcome to the family with much love!”

At that time, though, I still could not imagine what effort, professional skill, and human compassion would be required for me to gain access into this closed order, into this rough brotherhood, where they accept their own—even the lowest of scoundrels—without discussion or condition, while outsiders from the “normal” world, even sweet as angels, are accepted with great caution.

Addicts live in a lawless world like lonely wolves, each for his own survival of the fittest. At the same time, you cannot imagine the depth of empathy and compassion to their suffering comrades. How many times during group sessions have I observed a patient begin to “repent.” Such an outpouring often occurs after yet another relapse, when an addict experiences severe emotional pain.

“I lied, stole, hassled to buy a bag . . .” Listening to these confessions, I sometimes wanted to exclaim angrily, as if I were a judge “So, you picked up again! How dare you!”

But patients are not like judges. They know perfectly well that the man is in real trouble. He feels cut off from the world, like an outcast, with no chance to return. Probably this clinic is one glimmer of hope for him to believe that he may not have been “thrown overboard” yet. He won’t be condemned here but instead reassured. I do not exaggerate when I say that drug addicts and alcoholics know how to forgive and sympathize with each other at the highest level of humanity. This is the real miracle for me to witness—this moment when users with deep compassion and forgiveness resuscitate a hopeless addict back to life. I have rarely come across such miraculous mercy in any other place as I have in drug treatment clinics.

Are drug addicts the greatest humanitarians? Is this a joke?

No, it is true. No one is capable of being more humane to a drug addict during a breakdown than a fellow addict.

They would probably be saints, except for one critical point: They can empathize deeply, but only with and for each other. For strangers, for so-called “normal people,” the addicts’ hearts are often closed, with rarely a drop of sympathy.

Sometimes, though rarely, even the most seasoned addict cannot determine who stands before him: one of his own kind or the other? An addict or not?

That's how it was with Kevin. No one could discover which one he was. He neither distanced himself from the group of students nor merged with it. He was neither ours nor theirs. Not with us, not with them. Decide for yourself. Better yet—don't worry about Kevin. Just mind yourself.

At the graduation ceremony, all of the graduates were expected to give a small speech. Kevin's presentation was awaited with great anticipation. We all knew he was a man of few words. But his apt comments, sharp cutting humor, and unexpected outbursts of laughter suggested that a different man was hidden inside. We hoped Kevin would finally remove the mask and reveal himself.

On the eve of the ceremony, the excitement and curiosity around Kevin swelled. The Riddle of this Sphinx must be solved! Heated debates took place during the break. The majority was of the view that Kevin was one of "ours."

Who was right?

After receiving his diploma, Kevin offered a short speech. He thanked the teachers and wished success to all his classmates. And then, to everyone's dismay, he fell silent.

"Ke-vin, Ke-vin, Ke-vin . . ." one of the students began to call out Kevin's name, rhythmically pounding his hand on the desk.

Others joined in. Within a minute, all students in the auditorium were drumming in unison on the desks.

"Ke-vin! Ke-vin!"

He was taken aback. He looked around as if searching for an escape path.

“Ke-vin!! Ke-vin!!!” thundered the audience.

Kevin blinked several times, then, head bowed low, uttered:

“Yes.”

“Kevin! Why were you silent this whole time?! Why did you torture yourself and us?!
Brother!”

STRANGE VISIONS

“Look at the trashcan!”

Gradually, I got used to my studies. Month after month was passing by. After classes, I took a subway from Queens to Manhattan in order to "make hours" working as a security guard in the supermarket of the Time Warner building.

If you want to know what my job entailed, I'll tell you in a few words. During my eight-hour shift, I was standing next to the high trashcan. Upon the decision of my supervisor, I should hence and forever have the post on the first floor of the supermarket, near the escalator next to the trash bin. My assignment was to watch out and protect. To watch out that the trash bin didn't overflow and, if it did happen, to report it promptly to the supervisor. To watch out for emergencies—swearing, falls, fighting customers on the floor. To look for suspicious persons—possible shoplifters. But the main task, however, as my supervisor constantly reminded me, was to keep an eye on the trashcan.

I stood, shifting from foot to foot. During this time, I either thought about tomorrow's exam at school or quietly sang my favorite songs. ““Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?””

The first two or three hours of the shift were spent with such thoughts and singing. Towards the fourth hour, my mood was getting seemingly worse, with no desire to sing anything. The last couple of hours of the shift were deathly torture. My legs felt as though they were made of steel from the long hours of standing in the same spot. My back ached.

“Oh Lord, why are You so cruel to me?!”

The scarecrow in front of the University

Not far from the Time Warner building is the Church of St. Paul the Apostle. I went there during lunch often, turning off my annoying walkie-talkie.

It was solemnly quiet. I came up to the white marble bowl in the center, towering above a small marble sculpture of the Apostle Paul. I dipped the fingers of my right hand into the bowl with warm water and then brought the wet fingers to my forehead, touched my eyes and lips. Thin, warm streams ran down my face, dripping on the gray uniform jacket. I made the sign of the Cross and sat on the bench as God's grace descended upon my heart.

I looked upon the high altar, at the sculptures and icons, at the face of Christ and at the Apostles. And my life already did not seem so horrible, dumb, and meaningless. I believed once again that—in my arrival to America, in my strange-at-first-glance choice of career to help drug addicts, and even the dumb and exhausting work as a security guard at this place—there is some

meaning, that God in spite of everything leads me down a mysterious road, to some grand goal, even though I can't yet understand what this goal entails.

“Okay, if I can't understand now, I could later. Sooner or later everything will be revealed; everything secret becomes apparent,” I convinced myself. “I must stick to this path, no matter how hard it may be. While you take the reins, you should not look back.”

Sometimes the organ would sound in the church as the musician performed religious pieces. The Church chorales sounded triumphant under the arches of this wonderful church proclaiming the greatness and power of God, the beauty of life, and the belief that Beauty and Goodness are eternal.

Students passed by the Time Warner building day and night. Guys and gals a bit younger than me, with bags containing textbooks and laptops, walked in small groups or by themselves. Some of them were in a hurry, it seems, being late for class, while some walked unhurriedly, talking loudly amongst themselves. A student is easily recognizable, no matter what country, age, sex, or race.

Sometimes I guarded the entrance to the underground garage in the supermarket. I stood by the wide entry in my cap and wrinkled uniform, which was a size too large for me. From the side, I probably looked like my favorite character from the famous story “Wizard of Oz,” the straw man called Scarecrow.

Once, overtaken by curiosity, I decided to track where these students went to study, which college. Leaving my post in the garage, I followed them and soon found myself by the beautiful building of Fordham University.

I did not know anything about this University then. This building was located across the street from the Church of St. Paul the Apostle, but I had never paid attention to the university's building.

I stood for a few minutes in front of this building, examining its beautiful glass facade and the students and teachers who came through its doors. The weather was wonderful, and I didn't want to leave.

To the right of the square at the entrance, birch trees grew, and under their canopy stood a bronze sculpture of some saint in a torn frock. I went there and sat down on the granite slab. Turning my face towards the gentle sun rays, I closed my eyes. I listened to the chirping of birds on the birch branches and the roar of the cars passing by. The bell rang in the Church of St. Paul the Apostle.

Ding... Dong—a deep, powerful boom rang through the air, muffling all the other sounds.

Suddenly some strange visions began to appear before me. It was as if I saw my future: myself as a student of this university, my future wife, and my own daughter. I saw myself, in a white lab coat, in the emergency department of some hospital, saving a patient from a drug overdose. These visions made me feel a bit dizzy, and I lost track of time.

Ding... Dong—rang the bell.

Suddenly my walkie-talkie squealed, returning me to reality. It was my shift supervisor at Time Warner asking where I was and why had I left the post and what was the situation on the floor.

I squeezed the walkie-talkie in my hand. Such anger seized me that I could hardly resist throwing the damn radio on the ground and breaking it.

"God damn him and his f..king trashcan!" I got up and trudged back to the supermarket, to my post.

SCHOOL'S OUT—INTO THE WORLD!

I was about to write a cliché—"time flies"—and my hand held still for a moment. A year gone by. That is true, but did it really fly by, without me noticing?

How could I forget the bumpy subway cars I had to travel on from one end of the city in Brooklyn to another (to the school in Queens), then to the Time Warner building in Manhattan, and at midnight back home to Brooklyn? Some days I spent around five hours per day commuting on the subway.

In between classes and work, I had to carve out time to read textbooks and lecture notes, complete homework, and prep for exams.

Where to find the time to think, to ponder all that was new and never-before-encountered? To find answers to the billions of questions, beginning from the simplest: how do you smoke this goddamn crack? What does it look like? Like a powder? No, they say it looks like little rocks. The later questions are more complex and difficult: Who are these people, these drug users? They have the same arms, legs, and heads as others do. But there's something unusual, something about them.

Of course, more than once I asked myself: Did I make the right choice? Was it a mistake to believe my "dear aunt" when she said, "What could be easier than becoming a substance abuse counselor?" Wouldn't it have been better to choose something more peaceful, more intellectual? Maybe work as a teacher or librarian? The doubts began to grow, in hundreds of voices—some

gentle, some demanding—repeating, “Leave, drop out!” Then I would remember the pledge I made to myself: that I was going to see at least one endeavor to the end.

Yes, I worked hard for this diploma. Over the course of a year, I didn’t read one leisurely novel, only textbooks. Goodbye, great literature and philosophy, Shakespeare and Tolstoy, Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Goodbye! Hello, heroin, cocaine, and methadone! Hello, rehabs and detoxes! Good day, parole and probation officers! “You shoot dope and snort coke.” I knew this by heart now. I got an “A” on the test. Thanks, Peter, my American brother! Thank you!

Whatever effort it took for me to receive the prized diploma, it paled in comparison with—and I am not afraid to use the term—the Herculean labor my fellow students spent for the same purpose. My classmates, who killed their mind, body, and soul with alcohol and junk for ten, fifteen years in a row. Some of them did not live at home, surrounded by loved ones, but in halfway houses, where there was often fighting and theft. After classes, I went to work or home, but they had to go to a clinic to continue their treatment. Among those who made it through, several were still on parole or probation or involved in different courts.

All of them were still “raw,” not only professionally but psychologically. The majority continued their old patterns: they quarreled often and went into hysterics or anger at the slightest provocation. There were those who went to the dean to snitch on their classmates or teachers and those who flirted. The instance with Sylvia speaks for itself, where a honeymoon for two ended in relapse and an expulsion of both love birds from school.

About a third of them—seven out of twenty—were unable to finish school. They mysteriously vanished, or—simply put—they fell off the wagon. And not for a day or two, but to the point that they forgot they were even enrolled in school.

Yet these “damaged outcasts” suddenly found the inner strength to raise themselves. They attended classes, did their homework, and passed exams for a whole year. Unthinkable! Many could not believe what they themselves had accomplished.

And tomorrow they appear in the clinics and hospitals of New York, not to be treated but to treat active² addicts and alcoholics. *They* were supposed to do this. *They?!*

Graduation was an unforgettable sunny day. The whole classroom was decorated with flowers and balloons. The graduating students were in suits and nice dresses, and everyone was spotlessly clean, fragrant with perfume and cologne. There was endless patting of shoulders; there were jokes and there was laughter.

Alas, not that many spouses were in attendance. Mostly siblings and friends. Of course, teachers, administrators, and the director all came as well. They handed out the diplomas. Each graduating student gave a little speech as a farewell and thank you. Many began to cry before they could finish. No one was able to conceal their feelings. As I would later come to understand, with all their mastery of false facades and manipulation, addicts are unable to deal with emotions, especially positive ones that they’re so unfamiliar with.

Mrs. Terri handed me my diploma. She was the administrative assistant director, the same one who asked me a year earlier “why are you going into this field?” and warned me strictly about drug use on the premises. The students liked her and treated her with respect. They felt that Terri understood them, and forgave her strict approach, as they themselves knew that they needed this discipline and could not be left to their own devices. During the ceremony, students gave her a lot of flowers.

Barbara was one of the last students after me to take the microphone. She was a short, stout Puerto Rican woman. She didn't stand out throughout the whole school year, didn't say much, and preferred to stay in the shadows. She hadn't been a drug user, but because she had been in prison the students considered her one of their own. Barbara particularly did not like to share and didn't make public declarations of dramatic stories from her life. The group did not have that much interest in her.

When she took the microphone, many faces expressed "What a bore!" Now they would have to listen to this boring Barbara, who likely would not sob or sing or run out of the auditorium in tears. It would be better if she refused to talk at all.

Barbara was quiet for a moment, looking through the window. Then she began to speak quietly, pacing thoughtfully throughout the auditorium.

"My husband was a drug dealer. He sold a lot of drugs, and I helped him. My husband was shot and I picked up his business." As she spoke, Barbara continued to walk slowly from one side of the auditorium to another, staring ahead as if she did not see the flowers or the shiny balloons. "The FBI busted me. They confiscated all the cocaine and methadone I was selling. The prosecutor asked for the maximum: twenty-five years by the Rockefeller drug laws, but the judge took pity on me and gave me fifteen without the right for parole." She kept pacing, and her speech floated through the hushed, somewhat startled auditorium. "I was angry, despite the judge giving me such a lenient sentence. I started selling drugs in prison. I saw how people were killed over drugs and some died from overdoses, but I didn't care. I didn't use myself. I shot dope a couple of times out of curiosity, and I smoked pot rarely. One day they tested me for HIV and it came out positive. I went to the prison yard and sat there for a long time. I understood that this was God's punishment for all the evil I had inflicted on others. I decided to kill myself. The day I

was going to carry out my plan, they called me to the medical unit and repeated the test. It turned out I was negative! There was an error. They'd just mixed up my prison number with another woman. Since then, I ask God for forgiveness every day."

Barbara kept slowly pacing from one wall to another, probably as she had done in her cell for fifteen years in prison.

"Next week, I'll be working at the probation office as a volunteer. I'll make copies and do filing. During the interview, someone called the officer, and he left for a short while, leaving me alone in the office. His cloak hung on a coat rack. He trusted me. A Probation officer trusted me. Me?! When I got home, I told this to my mother. She held me tightly and said that God is returning me to His grace."

When Barbara finished, the auditorium was completely silent for a long time—for the first time in the entire, long academic year. Faces were pensive and gloomy. Each recognized his own life, in one way or another, in Barbara's story.

At the end of the ceremony, assistant director Terri took a stand.

"You're needed there!" She pointed to somewhere outside the window of the classroom. "People need you out there! They're waiting for you! You know how much they need you there!" Terri said loudly.

The students listened to her speech with full attentiveness. Perhaps it was the first time in many years they didn't feel themselves as outcasts, as garbage, as thieves or prostitutes. They saw themselves not even as graduating students, but as missionaries who would soon have to fulfill an extraordinarily difficult and often thankless mission.

Then Terri began to pick flowers from her bouquet and gave them out to each of us.

MY DEAR AUNT

“So, you graduated from school? Became a cool pro?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m done with school and got a diploma,” I answered. “I wouldn’t say I am pro just yet.”

“Then let’s drink to you becoming the best substance abuse counselor in New York!” She elegantly raised her glass of warm sake.

“Okay.” I supported her toast, raising my glass.

With my “dear aunt” in a sushi bar, we kept toasting my diploma.

She was about forty five. She sat across from me at a table in a light-colored, décolleté dress, with beads on her tanned chest.

“You’ll be a good counselor, I’m sure. You are interested in people; you are not indifferent to them,” she said.

“Good to hear this, thanks. You’ve helped me like an angel. But how can I get a job in my new profession? Everywhere they require experience. Tell me, how do I get this goddamn experience? I still work as a security guard, guarding that fucking trashcan every day!”

The sushi boat suddenly appeared on the table, thanks to the waitress. It held a variety of rolls and sashimi.

“Is your resume done already?” she asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you want my help with getting a job? There are no openings now in my clinic. But I know the manager in another outpatient clinic. I could ask him to talk to their director.”

“Sure thing, do it. If I get a job, then I’ll owe you another sushi feast.”

We had more sake. My dear aunt taught me how to use chopsticks instead of a fork. Sake warmed us on the inside, and on the deck of the food boat, there were fewer and fewer rice balls and salmon pieces.

The waiter brought the check. I paid for our fine dinner, while my aunt added ten bucks for the tip.

We left the bar when it was already dark. Slowly we went to the subway down the square. We were both feeling loose and relaxed on this warm autumn evening.

“Oh, Peter, it’s so nice being with you, a real feast for the soul!” she said, taking my arm. She pressed her breast against my shoulder.

It occurred to me that she might want to continue the “soul feast” at my house.

“I want to tell you something about your angel. I am going through a hard time now; I am divorcing from my husband.” She kept silent for a while. “While I was going to meet with you today, I was thinking whether or not to sleep with you. I assumed I would feel better then. I feel ashamed to reveal this. So silly, isn’t it? Please, forget what I just said.”

She suddenly stopped and, embracing my head, lifted herself to her tiptoes and kissed me on the lips. “Thank you, Pete.”

“For what?”

“Just for an amazing evening. I’ll help you get a very good job.”

(THIS IS THE END OF THE SECTION)