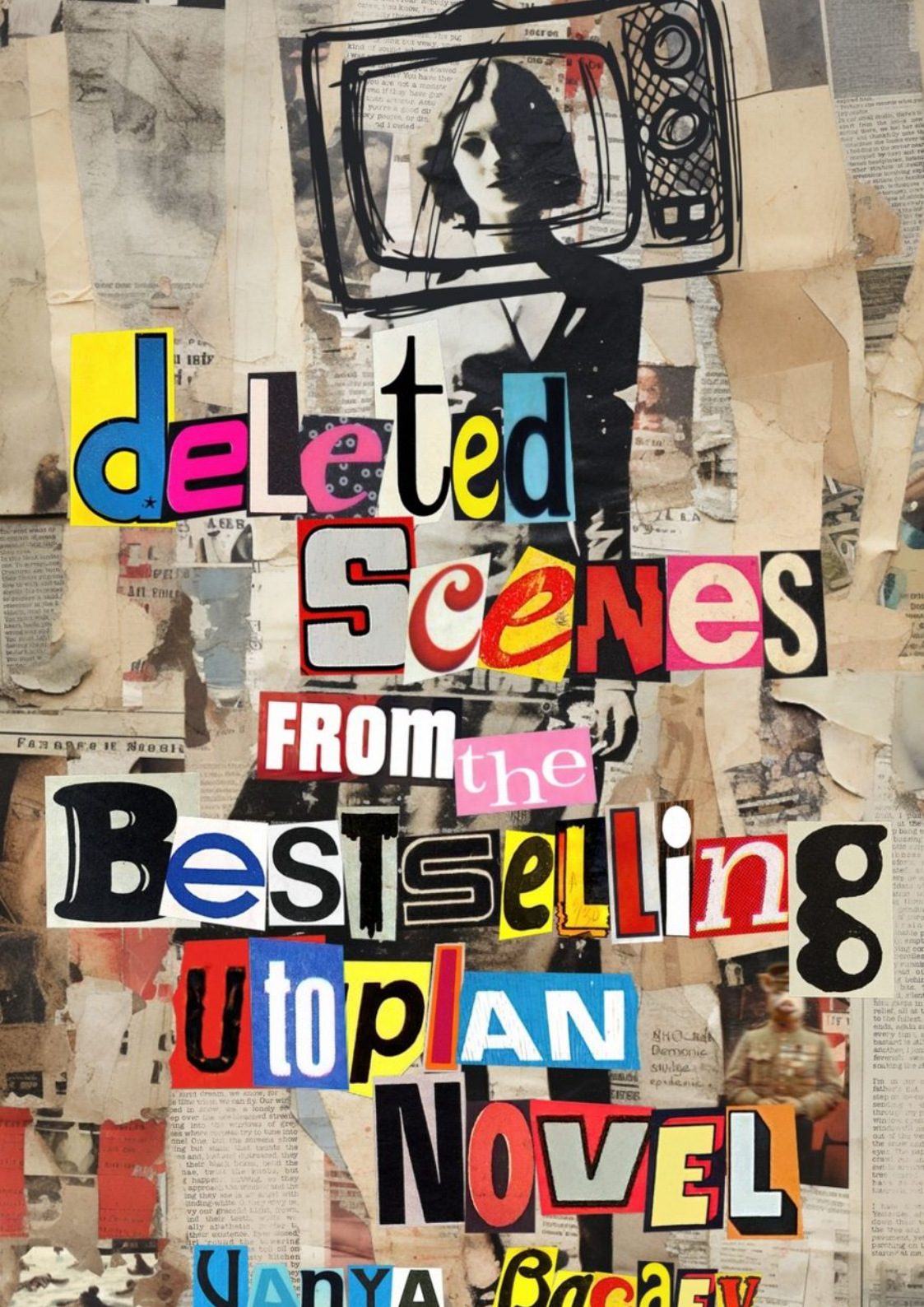

deleted
Scenes
FROM the
Bestselling
Utopian
NOVEL
YANYA BAGLEY

Dream

nova-nevedoma.com/dream/

This story is a part of my book "Deleted Scenes from the Bestselling Utopian Novel".

Every time in my lurid dream, I shoot, but he refuses to die, the bastard. My heart stops as I cock the hammer and hold my breath, then slowly, as if squeezing a succulent fruit, I pull the trigger. The same flash at the barrel's end, the same sharp bang echoing into the distance and buzzing in my ears, the same narcotic sulphurous smell, the same numbness in my shoulder. I transform into a bullet and fly, liberated, as if my body no longer matters or exists—I'm a saviour, I'm a goddess of death. I savour every sensation when I enter his skull, slicing through his thin, wrinkled skin, grinding his bone like a fake piece of porcelain, digging deep into his brain—I'm in the most abominable place in the world, slimy and sly, empty of love and full of shit. His dying convolutions suffocate me, his merciless thoughts plead for mercy running behind me, but I exit his head out on the other side, leaving behind a trail of blood and brain bits. The Tsar falls to the ground, silently, as the crowd around him gasps in a mix of awe, fear and relief, all at the same time and none to the fullest. Here, my life as a bullet ends, again and again

and again. But every time, as soon as I realise the bastard is still alive for one reason or another, I jump up from my bunk in a feverish sweat that pours off me, soaking the sheets.

I'm in my childhood room in my father's flat. My skin shrivels as I step on ice-cold discoloured linoleum, sending a shiver back and forth through my pale body. I approach the window, open the curtains, sit on the windowsill naked and start smoking out of the vent. The sun reflects off the snow and mirrors right into my eyes. The papirosa smoke refuses to crawl out onto the street and just swirls around me. On the bare black tree dusted with snow, bullfinches have settled at oddly regular intervals, red like plump apples.

I hate them fucking bullfinches. Yesterday, after I came here, I took down their wooden birdhouse from the tree and smashed it against the pavement, yet they keep flying here, perching on the black branches and staring at me.

I remember the crunch of snow as I dragged along with my father through the city outskirts, trying not to step on protruding rebars and not fall through an open manhole. He was carrying an air rifle on his back and a papirosa in his teeth. I was carrying a bag of tin men, figurines we had cut out of his beer cans together. I made fun of how the stars from the beer logo miraculously ended up where the hearts of these men were supposed to be. My father walked confidently in front of me, paving the way, whilst I staggered along, trying to find his footprints with my little frozen feet. If I were to say I was freezing, he

would've led me right back home. I didn't want that, I wanted to shoot. It was frosty, but the cold was pleasant, tickled rather than bit, reddened my cheeks. It was bright; I had to squint, just like now. I've always loved days like this. It's that kind of day that reminds you that you love winter nonetheless.

We came to a desolate yard of an abandoned manufactory. My father trusted me to hold the rifle whilst he took the bag from me and went to remnants of the foundation of a demolished building to arrange the figurines, carefully putting them at oddly regular intervals. The targets were a few metres away but in my memory they were right in front of my face, as far away as the fucking bullfinches are now.

—Remember, baby girl, shooting is not just about pulling a trigger,—my father told me, and I believed him. Discipline, patience, posture, grip, breathing—of course, these are also important, but as soon as your finger hits the trigger different things start to matter. He offered to let me shoot first, took the rifle in his hands, pressed its butt against my shoulder, pre-padding it with his knitted cap. The figurines were already on the scope; there were seven of them, a lucky number. I chose the second one from the end. I don't know why. It seemed to me, silly girl, the chances to miss were lower for it, for it looked more miserable than the others. My father hugged me from behind, helped me point the rifle, reminded me to close my other eye. I nodded, swallowed, stilled. Impatient, all I could think of was how in a second my father would shout "well done" and we would go together to see where the figurine had fallen. And lo and behold, in the middle of the

shimmering blinding snowdrifts, I saw a star in the scope, but the moment I squeezed my index finger, out of nowhere, right in front of the tiny tinny man, a fucking bullfinch appeared, red as a plump apple, and a second later they both fell into the snow together. I remember him lying there on the white glistening snow with his grey wings spread, making a snow angel. I didn't know whether to worry and cry because I had killed the poor bird or to rejoice at my remarkable marksmanship.

A lurid dream there was, a week ago or so, a bullfinch was sitting on the Tsar's head, and I, hidden on the roof, was watching them through the scope. It felt theatrical: people were emerging and disappearing but I couldn't see their faces, automobiles were passing with no fume, the wind was singing but I didn't feel it. It was the only time I knew for sure it was a dream, my fantasy, and not just another day at work, because of that bird. Magically undetected, the bullfinch had landed on the Tsar's head when the motorcade stopped and he got out of the car, surrounded by two muscular louts. On the rooftop on the other side of the square sat my colleague, and possibly several others who had not been reported to me.

As usual, I watched the bastard walk, raising his hand feebly to wave to the crowd of civil servants forced to be there, struggling to put on smiles or at least neutral expressions instead of their gargoyle faces. If one of these angry and sullen faces suddenly jumped out of the crowd armed with a shiv or an awl, I should have shot the poor fellow. He would fall, the louts would grab the Tsar under his arms and drag him back to his armoured car. The crowd, meanwhile, would freeze like mannequins,

and their jaws would clench like those of a nutcracker. The sound of that would fill the air and make it vibrate, creating odd optical illusions, similar to what you see in a hot desert. The family and friends of the culprit would be found, interrogated meticulously, the rest of the conspirators would be identified, and they all together would be put against the wall at equal intervals and taught love for the Tsar. In my memory that happened only once, when the Tsar was ostentatiously buying ice-cream from a fake saleswoman. Suddenly a bloke from the crowd rushed at him from behind, shouting, but after my shot, collapsed on his ruler, covering him. After that the security measures swelled to paranoid proportions; the Tsar was not seen in public for several months. But then, apparently to prove that he was still alive, he came out to people again. That time only on the stage, as he put it, away from the scum.

Distracted again. The dream.

So, lo and behold, with the fucking bullfinch on his head the bastard walks, barely moving his legs, as if he had porridge instead of kneecaps. The bird flutters on his bald head, nesting, asking for a bullet. I feel like it's smirking at me as much as a bird could do. I can see that from the scope. The bird whispers something unrecognisable. It is where I should aim, slightly higher than the bastard's head.

But I know my objective.

In my dream, I'm always that poor fellow-traitor, sitting on the roof with a weathered face and dry, cracked lips. The Tsar appears in front of

the tribune and as he opens his mouth I pull the trigger with orgasmic pleasure. At this point, everything except the bastard, the bird, and the bullet disappears, as if someone has cleared the stage—it's a grey-blue emptiness, in which the target is about to meet his portion of lead. He falls before he can utter a word. The bullfinch flaps its wings and flies away. My heart beats arrhythmically, like a shaman's drum. A victory, finally, a glorious victory. I've saved them, the crowd of nutcrackers.

The next moment, I find myself, already beaten, in a torture room. It's just me, a flickering light bulb, and the interrogator, an old man with an utterly mental smile, deranged slanted eyes and an ugly hussar moustache, wearing a white coat and disproportional black rubber gloves. I hear how he giggles connecting electrodes to my head. The room, at the same time, begins shrinking into itself slowly, walls and ceiling moving towards me with a jittering motion. The interrogator says in a funny voice, —Girl, baby girl, it was just a double. What did you think?— My eyes widen. I taste iron in my mouth. I've bitten my tongue, bitten it off. With an angry snort, I roll a piece of it in my mouth, giving my palate a last chance to feel what it's like to be me, to feel the taste of myself before I spit it in his face. In response, he laughs at me and pulls a knob. The electric current flows through the wires into my brain like an avalanche and I smell my smoked skin, the scent no different from a smoked, freshly killed hog. The room shrinks into itself further. Nothing. The end of it.

You know those little bittersweet memories from childhood which, upon stumbling upon in adulthood, stir something inside? For someone

it's a smoked hog or the taste of iron on your lips; for others it may be the smell of seaberry, or rather seaberry kissel, that jelly thing my grandmother brewed every time I came to visit her for the summer; or the smell of freshly cut grass, which we mowed together with my father in the evenings; or the taste of my mother's pastries with that special spice. Sometimes it seems that you have forgotten that little memory, perhaps for years, a lacuna in your personal history, but then suddenly it finds you in the crowd, slaps you on the shoulder, says your name, in a voice still so strange, seemingly filled with familiar yet alien notes. You turn round, and it asks, —Is that you? Do you recognise me?— You're all confused, standing there, befuddled and lost, unable to figure out who that is standing in front of you with the arms outstretched, smiling full thirty-two. Only after a few seconds you understand everything, and in your head, having risen from the bottom, casting off the mud, blooms a flower of memories. It can be ugly or beautiful or sometimes both. For me, the main such detail was not the bullfinches, not any of the things I mentioned before, but the melodic clanking of my father's typewriter. It was impossible to hide from it in our flat. He would start in the morning, continue all day long with short breaks for bitter coffee and a papirosa on the balcony and end at night in the kitchen where my mother would send the late typist, pointing out that he was "clattering like a broken locomotive". In response, he would shrug, kiss her on her forehead and, hugging his typewriter, leave their room for the kitchen, where the balcony was nearer to go out for a smoke, and a bin for failed manuscripts was ready to be overflown so that a mountain of crumpled sheets of paper would appear there in the morning. I was used to that

rhythmic clanking from infancy. It was natural to me, as natural as the ticking of a clock or the noise from a telly. Sometimes it even lulled me to sleep, calmed me down and helped me to concentrate. I listened to it not only at home but also at my father's workplace.

After school, on my way back, I often went to his papirosa-scented office, where he would sit with his back tense and almost straight and type something, moving his fingers with great speed, never seeming to miss the keys. But if he really didn't miss them, where would the mountains of crumpled drafts come from, I wonder? He would sit me down next to him, put a book in my hand, and I would wait for him to finish his important journalistic work so that we could go home together. On our way through the snowy narrow streets lazily illuminated with lamp lanterns he would complain to me about where the decadent world was descending, and our country, already Novo Tsarstvo at that time, with it—if not like a locomotive, at least like a draisine, on which, he said, we were jumping up and down, up and down, with utter lack of enthusiasm.

Sometimes, when he was busy, I would sit with him until late into the evening, and whilst listening to the clanking, I would lazily leaf through my textbook and try to squeeze out my maths homework. His office was small: one desk, two towering bookcases, one metal filing cabinet, three ashtrays, a tea-blackened mug, an old pre-Coup poster with the Colossus still standing sentinel over the city, and one plant with yellowed leaves in the corner. He didn't even have a proper window; it was more of a cubbyhole than a room. He smoked right there, smoked a

lot, so we were both sitting in an odorous cloud. I liked the scent; I still do, not as much as the taste—it's rather disgusting—but the scent reminds me of him. His colleagues would come to see him, they would smoke together, laugh, and discuss things I didn't understand, like the historical role of our nation in the fate of the world or the ambiguity of the political situation in the country. They thought the changes the country was going through, the reestablished Tsarism, the commencing censorship, all were just colourful balloons sent into the air to distract the masses and give them things to talk about and didn't have "any substance", for no true change is possible in our country, yet arguing about it all seemed necessary.

After those talks, we would come home in the dark and barge into the flat, covering the threshold with melting snow from our wet boots, coats and hats. Our mother would meet us there, not angry or upset, just tired of waiting for us. At that time the tragedy had yet to befall us, she was still alive, my father was completely different, the country was different, my whole world was different, everything was much simpler and clearer, and I had not yet learnt how to shoot. I remember how once I went to his workplace; the building was abuzz; his colleagues ran around in chaos through the corridors like bees in a disturbed hive, flying in and out of their cells, passing something to each other, whilst some sat on the floor, pulling their hair. I walked down the corridor to his office on the third floor. His door was open, and then my father himself, frowning and hunched over, came out hugging a large grey-brown box full of manuscripts, books, folded posters, ashtrays,

that tea-blackened mug and other work supplies. He set the box on the floor next to the door, reached for the plaque with his name and job title mounted on the wall, took it off and looked at it for a while, tossed it carelessly into the box, and, finally noticing me, stretched out a nervous half smile. He was, as he had told my mother at the time, one of many "relieved of their duties," whether for the words they had printed or because of the place they all worked in—it didn't matter nor does it now. He was not hired for another job. "Higher authorities," as he thought, had sent letters to all the other magazines, newspapers, and publishers, and wherever he went, whether his friends were there or not, all they could say was, —Sorry, we can't do anything, it's a decree from above. Period.— All he could find was a night-time hustle as a watchman at the local library where they let him put a typewriter in, so he kept writing whilst "working". Every day he brought home a few pages, their number dwindling over time until it reached nil. He always considered himself a true patriot who wanted to love his motherland with open eyes, but it always resisted such love in every possible way. In that situation, you either stop loving or close your eyes. My father seemed to have chosen the latter, retreating into a patriotic dreamworld. All I regret now, and probably will regret as long as I live, is that I missed his transformation from a slender, energetic and handsome young man to a hunched, shrivelled, skinny, scraggly fifty-year-old geezer; how he went from the one who taught me about life, morality, ethics, arts, to the one who didn't even turn a deaf ear when his daughter took and threw away the birdhouse, and now observes them bullfinches left without a home, smoking the hell knows which papirosa; how he went

from someone who spent nights typing daring notes for his political column to someone who spent nights drunk, surrounded by empty nips and cans with those same star logos, sitting and staring with cloudy eyes at the telly with a shimmering stream of idiocies on the screen. They confabulated the past, rewrote it, almost, as if no atrocities ever existed—only glorious victories. They spread conspiracy theories about biological weapons, the red sludge turning you into a demon. They simulated a nuclear strike on our neighbours and showed it on Channel One in prime time. They perverted the language, and objects and concepts, both ugly and beautiful, swapped their meanings. They broadcasted a leaderboard of the number of people our delusional soldiers killed during the invasion. They said we're victims and don't have a choice but to protect ourselves. They banned the snow angel as an extremism symbol. And they did all of it in such a subtle and persuasive manner that somehow my father believed it. I cannot imagine what they would've been able to achieve if they only were more competent. When we were left alone with him, we stopped talking and only checked up on how each other was doing, the proverbial things, weather and health. It was like there was nothing to talk about anymore. Talking had become scary. I wanted to comfort him but nobody taught me how to do that. I was angry with him for it because HE was an adult and HE knew his way with words, not me, so he should've said something, at least a sentence or two. I was angry as if everyone else is taught to talk about dead relatives but he didn't want to pass this knowledge on to me. From one social nucleus, we divided and retreated into our separate bubbles. It soon became unbearable to throw out his

empty bottles, to wash his vomit off the carpets, to clean the flat, to cook, to sleep over at my friends' half of the time. I didn't want any of that, I was sixteen. You know that the easiest way to offend an alcoholic, a real alcoholic, is to tell him that he is drunk even though he is sober at that moment. His normal state of mind is lost and it becomes difficult to say what causes this or that behaviour—whether it's alcohol or the fact that he has been so soaked in it that his old personality has dissolved or evaporated. My father was always genuinely offended when I taunted, asking if he was drunk again despite all his futile efforts not to drink. Yes, at one point I thought he was still trying. Who knows, maybe it was after I asked him this question again that he got angry at me, at himself, at any attempts to quit, and went back to boozing. And so, if I saw him in a state even remotely resembling sobriety, I tried not to question it, not to talk to him. I was supposed to be glad that he was trying and appreciate his attempts. Shouldn't I have been? But one day, after listening to another "lecture" from him, a short extract on how I was full of hatred and spite towards my own country and thus to him, for the first time I caught myself thinking that I wasn't happy about his sobriety at all, and I left. Any fast-spinning thought that what my father was saying might be his true thought and not part of a distorted mind was terrifying. It was devastating to realise that it wasn't his delusions that were delirious but the order of things. —Dream on, girl, dream big,—he'd told me a long time ago. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't think of anything to dream about except for the end of it all as soon as possible in any way imaginable. Yeah, that way too. Loving someone and wishing them dead at the same time is excruciatingly hard

and would probably destroy me, yet it seemed to me that for the nightmare to end and for things to get back to normal, someone had to die, someone containing a lump of negative energy so heavy that it was anchoring my world to the bottom. I quickly decided who it had to be besides my father and me, and the thought, nasty, viscous as a slimy sly slug, snuck into my head, leaving a stinking trail on my body, entering through my ear, through my mouth, or through one of my nostrils—any of those orifices, or was born right there from a maggot that everyone has planted in their heads from birth. I'm sorry, I don't know how those thick, ugly creatures with teeth like a spiked-inside collar are born, but I can feel them there in my head, crawling between the folds of my brain, eating me from the inside, showing me those same lurid dreams. I shouldn't have given my emotions a chance to compromise my mission, but recently, years since I left, I decided to visit him right before this final day. I'm a different person now, with a different name, for whom he is a nobody, not even a part of the past. I didn't know if he would recognise me, or if I would recognise him, and to be honest, I expected that no one would open the door for me and I would have to knock on the neighbours' doors to learn he was dead. But when I got to our tower block, I found him lying face down in a drift with his hands drowned in the snow. I knew it was him at once. I pulled the drunken man out of the drift and dragged him into our old flat. It was minus twenty-five and his hands were blue, covered in frost, seemingly icy, too fragile, almost about to shatter like a crystal glass. Luckily, he hadn't lost his keys. The house smelt of smoke, as usual. The heavy dark-brown curtains were shut; only a single ray of sunlight was

oozing inside. I felt like I had entered a musty dungeon or a big coffin, a tomb that pharaohs had, where they were buried together with all their belongings. Cigarette butts were scattered on the table and empty translucent bottles were neatly arranged at oddly regular intervals. I dropped him, already conscious, onto the sofa in front of the telly, wrapped him in blankets, and began to rub his stiffened hands with towels in attempts to bring life back into them. And the life slowly retreated back to his body from his heart, a weak old motor that was still beating and trying to push blood into frostbitten limbs but was ready to give up and halt. He was in a limbo. His fingers had taken on an ominous livid colour, and the blood would not return to them. He sat there, clenched, unaware of what was happening, unsuccessfully holding back thin, quiet moans of pain as I furiously rubbed and rubbed and rubbed his hands with the terry towel. He didn't have tea at home, so I had to pour just hot water. He sat there, dejected, wrapped in three layers of clothes, drinking, drenching himself, from my old mug, clasping it in his slightly pinkened fingers. We sat in silence; I tried not to look at him, I didn't want to see his face and meet his eyes. I was afraid to find something I-know-not-what in his blue eyes and wondered if I should have come here at all. In a wheezing voice, he asked how I was doing. I nodded and clasped his hand in mine. Then, after an hour or two of sitting like this, I took him to the bedroom and went to sleep in my old room. It was only as I dozed off after a series of unsuccessful attempts that I heard that fucking clackety-clack, clackety-clack, clackety-clack, the sound of typewriter keys clicking, hammering unevenly, one after another, a horde of woodpeckers against

my head. Quietly, trying not to creak the floorboards hidden under the discoloured icy linoleum, I left my room and found him in the kitchen. He was sitting hunched over the table, sniffling and rasping in front of the typewriter, trying to type something with trembling, or rather shaking, hands. I watched in silence as he tried to summon the prose out of himself and press it into the paper, but his fingers wouldn't listen. He kept missing the keys, getting angry, crumpling the sheets and throwing them away until the paper ran out, and he folded his arms and lay on them and cried, whilst I stood by and tried to remember the last time I had cried myself.

It was two nights ago. Now, I sit here, count snowflakes, and look the fucking bullfinches right in their little black beady eyes. The papirosas have already overflowed the ashtray. I'm not sad anymore, perhaps a bit melancholic but rather... empty. All I feel is the slug creeping inside my brain and I can hear the sound of mucus coming off its ugly body. As a child, in the summer, after the storm, when the rainbow tarts itself like a bowstring in the middle of the sky, when everything scents of dust from the road, or, as I learned later, "petrichor", an earthy, fresh, sweet and woody smell of geosmin produced by bacteria in the soil, when worms and slugs and snails crawl out from under the ground and overtake all the surfaces, including stones and trees and bushes, I liked to crush them, especially slugs. My father said that I shouldn't touch them, for they carry diseases, but I didn't care. I used sticks, stones, or just boots to squash them. I always leaned down to examine the remnants, their glistening grey bodies, now flattened, ruptured and seeping that viscous

mucus, crinkled like a deflated balloon that oddly chafed as I stepped on them again and again. There was something alien in them, something even demonic, ugly, unbeautiful, that I couldn't understand and accept, and still cannot. And today, despite it being freezing winter, I feel like it's raining again and I somehow feel geosmin in the air. It's in my nostrils. It tickles and itches, makes me want to sneeze, calls me to crush slugs, crush my own parasite slug, but somehow I'm too afraid that it won't die either, like the bastard, and will only grow bigger.

I bury the last papirosa in the ashtray, dress up, and, hiding my face under the hood, exit the building, leaving my still snoring father behind. People, those angry and sullen faces, pass me, looking under their feet, throwing side glances at me. I feel they are scheming something, ready to snitch on me. I'm now one step away from them putting my bloody and bruised face against the wall, getting me "disciplined", hurling my irrelevant body with thousands upon thousands of other irrelevant bodies into a pit, splattering us with diesel, and throwing a single match. The flames would explode with dark smoke and give birth to the odour of burnt skin and melting synthetic clothes. Countless particles of disintegrated corpses would fill the air, casting an ominous pallor on the city. The rays of the dying sun would strain to penetrate the haze, reduced to a faint, sickly orange glow. The cloud of ashes would unfurl its full doom, swallowing the last vestiges of light and warmth, leaving nothing but howling darkness and the rattle of death. I saw that many times, in dreams and in reality.

When the Tsar loses confidence in his guardian-snipers, with or without

reason, he assigns more trusted agents to them, and before each mission, the agents give one of you snipers a blank bullet. If you attempt to assault the bastard, they immediately shoot you in the head. You don't know who gets the blanks—the agent assigned to you gives you the bullets right before the event, right after he searches you. At first, there were only two bullets and two snipers, but now, as the Tsar's paranoia has grown, there are at least three snipers, two blank bullets, and one live, as we are told. Thirty-three-plus percent chance to kill the bastard and die a glorious death, and sixty-six percent to get lead in the back of the head for nothing.

Dressed in white-grey camouflage, I stand spreading my hands as the agent, a man with a scarred face dressed in all black, searches me. It's always the same guy, but I don't know who he is or his name. He's a head taller than me, as wide as a cupboard, tranquil and slow in movements like a python. Without a hint of care or compassion, he checks my pupils, pulls aside my eyelids, then measures the temperature of my body, asks a set of secret questions, hands me a protocol to sign, then hands me a box with bullets. I hesitate, look into his eyes but can't read him. The thoughts are inscribed on them in an encrypted language.

Lo and behold, the square is filled with a cheering crowd that has been herded there like sheep. They wave our black and red flags with a white dove that always struck me as resembling the silhouette of that bullfinch making a snow angel. They shout something; must be calling out for the Tsar, but their voices mingle with the air and the dusting snow, and the wind instantly blows them away before they reach my roof. In a minute,

a chain of seven identical black armoured cars snakes down the snowy grey streets. From one of them, the bastard will soon emerge. It might all be a dream again, for I cannot remember how I got to my position. I always appear where I'm supposed to be. It's automatic, scripted, rehearsed.

Through the scope, I observe the crowd: their faces are blurred, their bodies, all monochrome, start turning into a single amalgamation. Here, the motorcade stops, and from the second car from the end appear two louts, and then the Tsar himself in a huge black fur hat, seemingly bigger than his small round head. My vision narrows and focuses on the Tsar's figure, whilst the rest gradually disappears, and again we're alone with him in an empty space, separated only by my rifle. My hands are shaking, my throat is scratchy, I want to cough. I shouldn't have smoked so much. My eyelid already seems stuck to the metal scope, and it no longer feels cold.

With barely bent knees, the Tsar walks on the paving stones, from which the ice was removed during the night. He stops to cough, and I hear how the crowd is swooning, as if expecting him to cough out his lungs in a bloody fountain and fall. Everything is quiet, nobody dashes; sheep is cordoned off by a hundred of pigs. Here he stands at the tribune and opens his mouth. I catch the aiming point right between his burly grey eyebrows.

My eyes water, my finger on the trigger trembles. Discipline, patience, stance, posture, grip, breathing—these and other of my father's words

are all back in my head now. When it's all over, he'll appear out of nowhere behind my back, pat me on the shoulder, and tell me his baby girl has done well.

After I imagine it, I freeze, stop my breathing and my heart and my thoughts and my dreams, and finally take that shot.

Read next part

№7: Soon

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