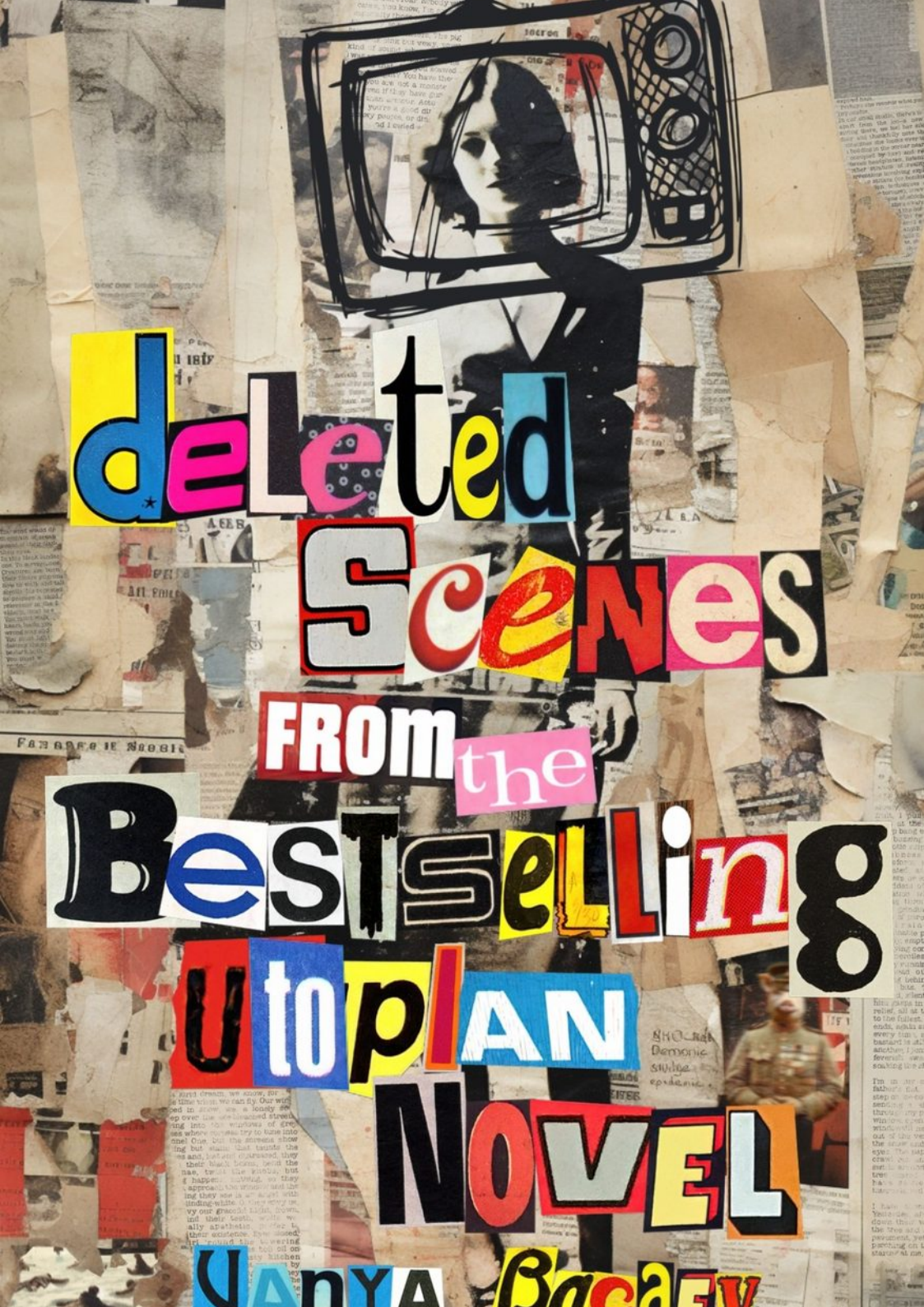

deleted
Scenes
FROM the
Bestselling
Utopian
NOVEL
YANYA BAGLEY

№1.3: Embrasure

nova-nevedoma.com/embrasure/

The world is collapsing, thousands tortured and killed, and we are making an omelette at three in the morning. The crackling oil sings in unison with crackling hearts. Suddenly the oil sizzles and splashes, hitting our skin. We scream, jerk our hand back and drop the spatula. TVR shakes her telly-head and lowers the flame on the hob.

Living together with someone is lovely, isn't it?

Most of the day, she hangs around our flat observing us, holding a leather folder and black pencil in her ashen, skeletal hands. From time to time, she seductively licks its graphite tip and writes something down. Perhaps she records what we watch, listen to, do and eat, including the omelette with possibly expired ham.

Perhaps she records what you think, too?

Impossible.

In our small studio, there's nowhere to hide from her, apart from the loo—a newfound sanctuary. Even sitting there, we feel her silent presence behind the door and thankfully note the absence of a spyhole. Sometimes she looms over us, examining how we lie on bedding in the

corner near the dining table (our bed is occupied by her) and read or squeeze our head between headphones, listening to wireless news from another stratum of reality about strategic aerial interventions involving explosives performing kinetic precision strikes (or bombing, or shelling), enhanced interrogation techniques and coercive persuasion methods (or torture), irreversible justice delivery (or executions)—none of which are broadcast on the telly. We're unsure if she's aware of what radio channels we tune into and what the hosts tell us because even if we lie still, embracing the radio and pretending to sleep, we can hear her pencil scratching paper. Sometimes it's louder than anything else. Occasionally, she watches us frying eggs or cooking porridge with water and a pinch of sugar, cautioning us not to overcook it or advising care with our fingers when dismembering a year-old frozen chicken.

—First, lay the chicken on a clean, flat surface,—she says smoothly.

Her caring guidance annoys us. We don't want to wait for her instructions and hurry. The knife slips and cuts our hand, leaving a long trail of blood on the cutting board and chicken. Cold tap water soothes the pain.

—Start with the wings. Find the joint where the wing connects to the body. Carefully cut through the joint and set the wing aside. Repeat this step with the other wing.

That was elementary. Dismembering 101.

—Next, move on to the legs. Like with the wings, find the natural joint

between the thigh and body. It should give way easily, if you've found the right spot.

Well done.

—Repeat with the other leg. Now, the breast and back. Cut along the spine, keeping the knife close to the bone. This should leave you with two halves.

Very good! You're a born butcher.

—Lastly, split the breast down the middle, and you should have two separate pieces. You can do the same with the back if you wish. And there you have it—a fully dismembered chicken.

There you have it, a fully dismembered chicken covered in your own blood. You should've listened to her from the start, silly.

—Remember, practice makes perfect, so don't be discouraged if you don't get it right the first time,—she finishes, a grin illuminating her screen.

We try to ignore her and walk around the house as if she doesn't exist—this is the easiest part, for it's not new to us at all. When we collapse into an old and dusty armchair to watch the telly, she stands like a watchtower next to us, observes, and comments. If the telly malfunctions and statics, she comes over and gently adjusts the two long telescopic antennae, just like hers. If that doesn't help, she slaps the telly with her hand, the static disappears, and she says "lovely", softly

caressing the telly before returning to her position next to us.

After a certain period of cohabitation, she has started turning the telly on in the early morning and turning it off late at night, keeping it running during the day. If we try to turn it off, she waggles her index finger, turns the telly back on again, and scribbles something in her notebook. Thus, the telly broadcasts incessantly throughout our slumbering hours, and perhaps would broadcast even at night, but none of the government channels have anything to say at night.

The telescreen unremittingly exudes effusions of a special life, a mélange of obstinate asininities.

(THE OLD GENTLEMAN in a wig enters the scene.)

OLD GENTLEMAN: Our other "humanist" and, pardon the expression, "equalist" neighbours...

(At the word "humanist", the audience gasps, and at the word "equalist", they gasp doubly, either with shock or disgust.)

OLD GENTLEMAN: ...have refused to relinquish our plutonium and copium and now are boycotting our economy, whilst they themselves are in the deepest economic crisis. For them, it seems, their—again, please forgive me—made-up "humanist" principles are more important than the well-being of their citizens. At a time when our economy is demonstrating slight negative growth due to external pressures from the United South, they themselves live in absolute chaos, with the

population slowly descending into savagery and beginning to conform, as it seems to me, to the level of the Evil One's ideals.

(The audience laughs.)

OLD GENTLEMAN: Now, we have our first guest, a professor of economics and culture. Hello, esteemed professor!

(The picture splits in two, and a rotund man with a pink mug appears on the right side.)

ESTEEMED PROFESSOR: Greetings! Thank you for having me on your splendid show once again.

OLD GENTLEMAN: Of course, distinguished fellow of science, ser. Tell us, what is the situation in the mainland South now?

ESTEEMED PROFESSOR: The situation is deplorable, to put it mildly. In addition to a noticeable economic decline, quite a severe one indeed...

OLD GENTLEMAN: Oh, indeed...

ESTEEMED PROFESSOR: ...there has also been a cultural transformation affecting even the most basic domestic changes. People are being advised to do less laundry, use fewer household appliances, wash less, and now, one of the recent innovations, dictated among other things by their economic insolvency, is that citizens are being encouraged to eat insects. Packs of worms, flies, and house cockroaches

are already available in their grocery shops.

(The audience gasps.)

OLD GENTLEMAN: Don't they even have cockroaches at home and have to go to the shop to buy them?

ESTEEMED PROFESSOR: That's exactly my point. Shocking, isn't it?

OLD GENTLEMAN: Absolutely shocking. Are they prepared to give up their favourite rare steak and *foie gras* in favour of... that? It's hard to believe, dear professor.

ESTEEMED PROFESSOR: Truth is always hard to believe. That's why Truth is Truth. You have to make an effort. For them, it's heralded as an innovation and an achievement of the food industry! You'll be even more astounded to learn that slug tartare is now considered an exquisite delicacy there.

OLD GENTLEMAN: Ugh!

ESTEEMED PROFESSOR: Yes, ugh indeed. I had to try it.

OLD GENTLEMAN: And how was it?

ESTEEMED PROFESSOR: Absolutely unbearable.

OLD GENTLEMAN: Unbearable. How do they endure over there?

ESTEEMED PROFESSOR: Well, it is not what you would call a

utopia, that is for sure. Endurance is our virtue. Always has been.

(The audience is ecstatic. The old gentleman bids farewell to the professor and invites the next guest, a pallid man dressed entirely in black with short black hair and the countenance of an undertaker. Here follows a fragment of his speech:)

PROPAGANDOID: Our humanist pundits and dissidents are slinging mud in our Novo Tsarstvo, working off the money paid to them by the United South. These dissidents subsist on imperialist money and are pliant puppets to their overseas masters; it is no secret that all so-called "reformists"—the enemies of our state—are financed by the plutocratic imperialists, living off their handouts, and so does anyone who takes to the streets with a banner or makes a snow angel against our ongoing peacemaking operation in Slobodna Zembla. All snow angels are fallen angels!

(While the propagandoid is speaking, the telly shows young people being arrested by the police. The image cuts to the same young people making snow angels in front of the government building, then cuts again to the same young people sitting in the police patrol car, their hands cuffed.)

PROPAGANDOID: Not wanting peace equals wanting war. These elements are the real traitors; they are the spies and scouts of the United South in our country. They wish for the defeat of our army and an immediate attack by the enemy on our sacred island! They have even conspired about how, if anyone invades our great island, they will surrender their homeland at once! Our beloved Tsar and I have already

spoken of the surging swell of patriotism that will not allow anyone to play with our country and will never allow treason to be plotted in our home with impunity. For every step of this dastardly treason, it will demand retribution with their heads, with the life of a traitor! They are preparing treason, they are preparing to open the borders of our country to terrorists from Slobodna Zembla, they are ready to open wide the gates to a foreign invader, but they want to portray this affair as if it were the dark deed of foreign hands! And this they call their supposedly "genuine" patriotism. Their game is exposed! The mask of treachery has been torn from their faces once and for all!

(The propagandoid receives a round of applause and disappears. The programme ends, giving way to another one. A pig-nosed general with a rubicund complexion, small black eyes, and protruding ears comes out, standing in front of a black and red flag with a large white bird resembling an angry dove, the flag of Novo Tsarstvo. The dove's claws are empty, outstretched, and it feels like the bird is about to grab at someone's throat.)

PIG-NOSED GENERAL: Today, our troops destroyed one thousand three hundred and fifty-four terrorists, thirty-three tanks, six aircraft, and fifty-seven pieces of combat equipment. After attacks on several of our peacekeepers' positions, smoke reminiscent of flames appeared, prompting a decision to tactically regroup. Thirteen fighters were reported missing; the rest are unharmed and happy. The situation at the front is difficult but not critical. We have already dispatched dozens of combat units and a fully manned battalion of soldiers ready to defend

our island.

(On the screen, clattering among the fields, appears a military train transporting a myriad of black tanks with white doves painted on them. The scene cuts to a priest consecrating the tanks by dousing them with holy water.)

JOURNALIST: How are we going to respond to Slobodna Zembla's escalating support from the United South?

PIG-NOSED GENERAL: Armed with the courage and professionalism of our peacekeepers.

JOURNALIST: How long will the mobilisation last?

PIG-NOSED GENERAL: There is no mobilisation as such. We are sending a request to our Tsar for approval to send reserves to the front, but these reserves may need to be replaced at times. Fortunately, this is not required at the moment, but we will inform you as soon as that happens.

(Then follows an interview with the rocket operator who, it appears, is one of those in charge of ensuring the rockets keep hitting the cities and towns of Slobodna Zembla every day. He doesn't resemble an archetypal military man, but more an archetypal scholar of mathematics and physics, a thin intellectual lost within his spacious uniform, wearing slightly tinted spectacles that people often wear in the hope that the light from a computer screen won't scorch their pupils. His skin appears

somewhat ruddy with a purplish hint. On his head, there's a beret, as if to conceal something beneath it. Amidst the perpetual senile stream, the fellow makes an impression of someone who has something interesting to say, the significance of which will not evaporate after every sentence, although there's a high chance that the interview with him, like with everyone else, is fully scripted.)

INTERVIEWER: Why did you decide to become a military man?

ROCKETEER: Well, because this way I can demonstrate my patriotism through actions rather than words, right? Everyone can boast about how much they cherish their motherland and would do anything for it, but what's the point in talking?

INTERVIEWER: That's true. And why a rocketeer specifically, if I may ask?

ROCKETEER: I have been fascinated by geography since I was a child. I remember spreading a map of the entire archipelago on the floor and exploring Novo Tsarstvo and the other islands. In those moments, there was nowhere to tread in our compact flat without stepping on the map, and my mother would always grumble, though she was generally supportive of my hobby. I know all the cities in the archipelago if you fancy a game.

(The rocketeer smiles, revealing gingival embrasures between his upper front teeth.)

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe your day to us, what is your work like?

ROCKETEER: I have to admit, it might seem incredibly monotonous for most people. Some even question, “What type of soldier are you?”

INTERVIEWER: Well, they are undoubtedly wrong.

ROCKETEER: Yes, it’s rockets that win wars, not bullets any longer.

INTERVIEWER: I concur. So...

ROCKETEER: Most of the day, you have to hunch over maps, radars, typing instructions and coordinates into the computer, always with a radio at hand, waiting for directives or relaying them. Just like that. Once the computer has calculated everything, I ensure the calculations are accurate, press the button, and the rockets soar.

(The rocketeer performs a gesture akin to sending a spoonful of porridge to a child’s mouth.)

INTERVIEWER: How precise are your missiles?

ROCKETEER: The calculations are precise, but as for the missiles ... it varies based on the type.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you always hit some target eventually!

ROCKETEER: That’s correct. “Say where, and we’ll deliver.”

(The rocketeer chuckles, so does the interviewer.)

INTERVIEWER: Is it true that Slobodna Zembla is shelling itself?

ROCKETEER: Not Slobodna Zembla, but the terrorists who have taken root there. A military junta. They're the ones shelling.

INTERVIEWER: What if the United South joins those terrorists ...

ROCKETEER: Well, they're already providing them with weapons. Where do you think they got the missiles?

INTERVIEWER: I meant full involvement, direct participation. What if they declare war against us? Would we be able to retaliate then?

ROCKETEER: We have a bomb, a massive bomb, the most bombastic bomb, a device with absolute lethal capacity that guarantees an absolute hit.

INTERVIEWER: "The Peace Bringer".

ROCKETEER: Exactly.

(The rocketeer smiles from ear to ear.)

INTERVIEWER: Will you be guiding it?

ROCKETEER: Oh, no, I don't think so. *(He waves off.)* It's dropped off a plane. *(He nods, nervously.)*

INTERVIEWER: Wow! That's truly fascinating.

ROCKETEER: Fascinating, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Two final questions ... What do you like most about your job?

ROCKETEER: This might seem odd, but I suppose it's the fact that I can be here in Novo Tsarstvo. Even though I'm in the military, you could say I work "remotely", ha-ha. In the evening after work, I can return home, kiss my wife, hug my daughter, open an atlas with her and study the maps. I love maps and all that, and I impart this love to my daughter too. Perhaps she'll grow up to be a rocket scientist as well. It's a straightforward job for a sharp mind. They say that girls are very welcomed there.

INTERVIEWER: Excellent. And what's the most annoying thing about the profession?

ROCKETEER: I suppose it's having to work during the night sometimes.

(An old man from the Novo Tsarstvo Secret Service, NTSS, a general in full dress uniform, decorated with a dazzling array of medals akin to a New Year fir tree festooned with glittering ornaments, stands in front of the podium.)

NTSS GENERAL: We possess reliable information about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Slobodna Zembla. To prove that, we demonstrate this ... *(He shows off a vial with red sludge in front of the*

audience). This is the chemical weapon being developed a few hundred kilometres away from us. Our security agency found out that bio-laboratories supervised by the United South have conducted experiments involving the causative agents of avian influenza, plague, swine fever, anthrax, cholera, tularemia, brucellosis, Northern fever, hantavirus, tick-borne encephalitis virus, leptospirosis, rabies, and other exotic diseases; including, which we have always suspected, even ones capable of altering a man's very sexual orientation. Some say this vial may even turn one into a demon! Tests were conducted by their terrorist government on their own civilians, including women and children. Simultaneously, they have been developing technical means to deliver these combat pathogens to the battlefield, chemicals that will inevitably be used against us on our own land.

In desperate attempts to shorten the interminable day, we collapse onto our mattress and vigorously rest. But sleep evades us. Our mind is busy with itself, with what it has seen, with what it wants to see but never will. We don our headphones and fire up the radio, tuning into one of the stations where, as we wish to believe, Truth is still spoken and reality takes an entirely different shape—a horrid abomination of hideous monstrosity, a real reality, the one we crave so much. We want to hear about something gruesome and daunting, something vile and excruciating—a fallen rocket in a playground, executed prisoners, cities and villages wiped out from the map, snowy fields strewn with unidentifiable bodies, rivers of blood mixed with dirt and snow. It's not a pursuit for escape but its opposite—a wish to be there at the core of it,

to hurl ourselves on the sharp edges of Truth and suffer at least the smallest portion of real agony.

We hold out hope for something even worse, something capable of bringing an abrupt end to it all, so endful that even nothingness itself would cease to exist. Yet, there are no new reports, no broadcasts, no static noise. Instead, there, a soothing, serene symphony plays—a lullaby whose composer and title are obscure to us, but we're sure we've heard it somewhere; so sure, it feels as if we wrote it ourselves, sent it to the radio station on an old tape, then forgot about it, and now after all those years, it has found us. A gentle melody emanates from the piano keys, summoning a wistful nostalgia. The left hand marks a consistent rhythm that guides the right hand in a graceful waltz. The music swells, flooding our ears with numerous notes and chords, weaving a tapestry of sound as rich and lush as a summer meadow. It then veers into a minor key, injecting a drop of bitterness, grows expressive, twists and turns, brimming with chromatic unpredictability and blasting crescendos. The piano bids goodbye with a soft and delicate touch, leaving behind a faint trace of emotions—a beauty, birthed from bitterness, recedes and returns to its original theme, looping in the melancholy. Yet, there's an unsettling peculiarity to it—as if a single key in the upper register fails to sound, inducing discomfort in the listener, causing you to miss a heartbeat, and leaving behind the eerie, lingering echo of <...>

You are in the long corridor where all the bulbs have died. Doors flank

it, all shut. A distant drip-drop titillates your ears. A draught tickles your toes. The same symphony resonates from a door nearby. You approach it, press your ear to the keyhole, confirming that the music originates from within, and pull at the handle—it creaks open.

Inside the white room, a grand black piano presides, and on its lid dangles a red skipping rope without handles. Behind the instrument, raised on stools, a duet of a boy and a girl plays the symphony. The girl, with pigtails and wearing a white dress, sits on the left; the slick-haired boy in a white suit and a red bow tie sits on the right. As they see you, the boy and the girl offer a gentle glance and bestowing smile, yet continue to play, uninterrupted. Careful to minimise the creaking, you close the door, return to the corridor, and again shuffle towards the bright light.

At the corridor's far end, a cold, luminescent light emanates, and you see—

Truth.

She shrugs off her garments, and the light behind her, playing with abstractions, illuminates her naked and nonchalant silhouette.

She's indescribably beautiful. She lures us to follow. We open our mouth and—

Shhh! Don't say anything. Just follow the light.

Oddly, the symphony persists as you distance yourself from the

children's room and traverse the corridor Truthward.

We wish we had a body like hers.

You'll never have a body like hers.

Suddenly, the right adjacent door to Truth comes off its hinges. TVR walks out from it, heels clattering. Immediately, she assaults Truth with her bare knuckles. The panicking light behind them starts flashing. You hear grunts and growls, squint, and try to see what's happening. Fending off a few blows, Truth lunges at TVR, forces her to the floor, fists flailing. TVR defends herself with elbows, seeking to dislodge her opponent.

The piano keeps conjuring the symphony. All other sounds cease. The light brightens, transforming the brawling figures into two silhouettes, akin to dancing marionettes in a shadow play.

Abruptly, TVR wrestles back control, throwing Truth off, and retrieves a garrotte from her pocket, crafted from red skipping rope handles and a piano string, and commences the throttling.

Truth flails desperately, grasping at TVR's hands, legs convulsing in a futile struggle, but after several agonising moments of breathless resistance, Truth is quietly quelled.

From atop the vanquished body, TVR rises, a seasoned assassin. She surveys the indescribably beautiful corpse for a moment before turning her gaze towards you.

Frozen mid-corridor, you are paralysed, devoid of resistance.

With exaggerated patience, TVR advances, her footsteps echoing in the silence. She reaches your position and, from her pocket, produces a syringe. The needle pierces your arm, and in an instant, you sense the red sludge silently seeping into your vein, its icy touch spreading through your body.

Read next part

№1.4: Luft

https://nova-nevedoma.com/luft/

nova·nevédoma

A literary locus and samizdat press
for original fictions and translations.

nova-nevedoma.com



scan to subscribe

Find us on Substack

blog.nova-nevedoma.com