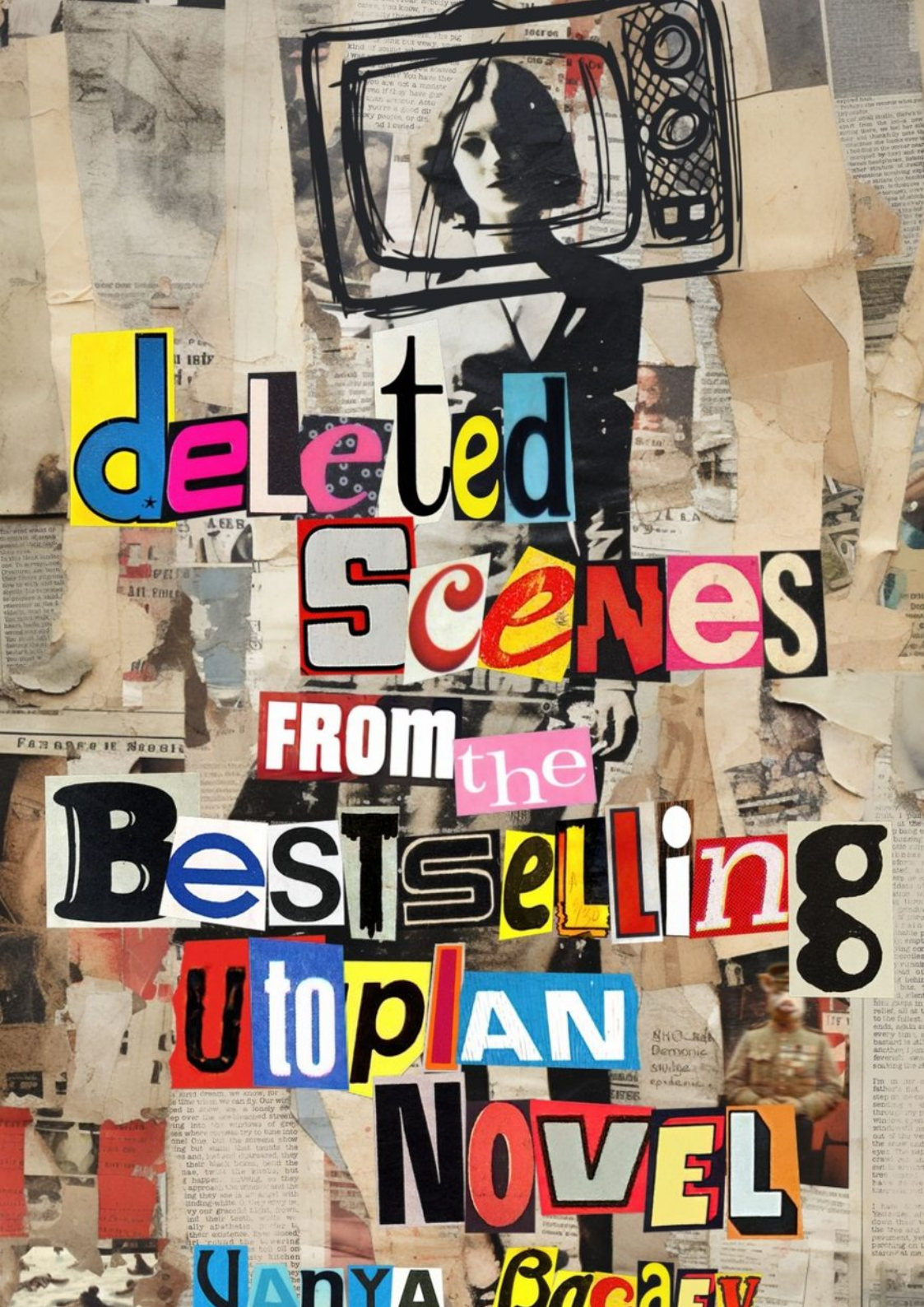

deleted
Scenes
FROM the
Bestselling
Utopian
NOVEL
YANYA BAGLEY

Deleted Scenes

№1.1: Lacuna

nova-nevedoma.com/lacuna/

Every snowflake that settles on the frozen city carries the weight of silent dissent. Buried under the drifts, we gather our strength, stretch out our hands and soar. It is but a lurid dream, we know, for that is the only time when we can fly. Our wings draped in snow, we, a lonely androgynous angel, sweep over the age-bleached streets, peering into the windows of grey houses where corpses try to tune into Channel One. The screens show nothing but static that taunts them and, lost and distressed, the corpses smash their black boxes, bend the aerials, twist the knobs, yet nothing happens, nothing — the static does not disappear and they give up. They approach the window, and the first thing they see is an angel with wings blinding white. Oh, they envy us, they envy our graceful flight, frown, and grind their teeth, while we, angelically apathetic, dismiss their existence. Eyes closed, we whirl round the towering buildings as the corpses boil oil on their foil-covered rusty kitchen hobs, and the moment we pass by their windows, all together they douse us with the bubbling liquid. The oil sizzles and splashes, our white wings disintegrate, the skin on our face peels away to expose the bare flesh beneath, we scream and [...]

A cacophony of thundering footsteps and demonic voices outside our flat on the landing jolts us awake. Sweating and cold, we crawl out of the bed and cocoon ourselves in a thick quilt. Clocks tick in the kitchen, floorboards creak; a draught slithers across the floor. After us? Silent, alone, we float through our flat doorwards. The quilt keeps our pale body warm, fighting the surrounding chill that controls everything: the air, the floor, the blood, and the cold metal door against our cheek.

You're the one who forgot to close the window yesterday.

Through the wide-angle lens of the spyhole, a crystal ball, we look into the landing, our dry eyes irritated by reality's luridness. There on the landing, faceless demons, clad in black ski suits and balaclavas, have gathered under a nervous bulb at a neighbour's door, and, hands crossed, stand stroking their big black batons.

They exchange professional trifles, cursing and sneering, expressing dissatisfaction over the late — nay, early — foray, while simmering in suspense. One of them, a rookie, trembles and paces back and forth, checking his watch, which draws mockery of his unprofessional nerves. The most rotund of the demons shakes his head, shushes the crew, then presses the doorbell's button deep into the white wall (**bzzzzzzzz!**). Another starts pounding the metal door with his clumsy fist, again and again. The industrial din reverberates through the landing while another demon with a chief's demeanour beholds the scene, leaning against the wall, puffing clouds of acrid smoke.

Thirty-eight seconds later, the lock rattles, and the door hesitantly opens

to reveal a young man, crumpled, shaggy, and still lethargic, as if his body alone has come out to greet the visitors, his mind lingering in dreams, like our own, like this one, a beginning of a nightmare. Upon seeing the uninvited guests, his empty sleepy eyes brim with vivacity. The narcotic scent of adrenaline invades the landing and wafts under every door.

Without warning, the bellringer violently grabs the man and drags him out of the flat and onto the landing. In one fluid motion, he forces both of the man's arms behind him and shoves his face against the white wall. The man groans, struggling to break free. Meanwhile, two of the crew enter the flat and dissolve into the darkness.

Gnashing his teeth to dust, the man retorts:

—The fuck?!

The bellringer, baton in hand, responds with a vicious blow to the man's ribs, forcing a guttural cry and the breath from his lungs, echoing throughout the landing. More savage blows follow.

—Shut your fucking gob, you twat!

—What did I do?

—What? Forgot them fucking "peace" posters you scrawled, didn't you?

—What posters? I didn't scrawl a bloody thing.

—“I didn’t scrawl a bloody thing”, he says. Some sort of “Abstractionist,” aren’t you?

—I don’t know what the fuck you’re on about!

—He’s against his country, lads.

Together they start enacting a grotesque pantomime. It’s difficult to assign the words to any of the figures on the landing — demons and our neighbours included — as the whole scene appears as a singular speaking object.

—Tell us, don’t you love your motherland, you fucking prick?

—Or the Tsar? Huh?

—He reckons we lay down arms and surrender, so he does.

—Well then, I’d reckon he’s a traitor, wouldn’t you lot?

—I’d reckon he is. A fucking traitor.

—I haven’t done anything! I haven’t said a goddamn word!

The man desperately struggles to break free from the bellringer’s vice-like grip.

—What sort of women even spawn such worthless blighters!

—Whores.

—Filthy fucking whores, aye.

—Always the whores. Uh-huh.

—You've got the wrong man! I'll call the police!

—Go ahead, squeal, snitch — We don't give a fuck, we are the police.

The bellringer hurls the man to the floor and continues beating him. Each hit makes him convulse and yell, but his cries aren't loud enough, so the demon decides to use his legs to reach the desired volume of agony.

—I didn't do anything! Bastards! You're all bastards!

—Lost your nerve, have you, huh?

Another demon joins the operation, booting the man in the kidney area, until he falls silent and curls in on himself. Each thud echoes through the hall so even our door vibrates.

—Assaulting a police officer!

Thud.

—Resisting arrest!

Thud.

—Defaming the army!

Thud.

—His motherland fucking spoon-feeds him, and he slings it through the muck.

—Bloody wanker.

—Cocksucker.

—Fucking crybaby, all you lot want to do is whinge, make your fucking snow angels, scrawl your fucking rubbish, never doing a real fucking job.

—I didn't...

—Yelling in the streets during the day, at home during the night, disturbing neighbours.

—Anti-social behaviour, that.

—Ahhh!

—Yeah, there you have it.

—Nothing but a crybaby.

—Go on, call your mum, you fucker. I said call your fucking whore!

The spyhole fogs up, blurring our view of the unfolding operation. With a jittery hand, we wipe away the condensation with a corner of our quilt. In suffocating, tomb-like stillness, our finger lingers around

the cover of the spyhole, ensuring it doesn't close.

The man wraps himself tightly in his own arms, shielding his stomach and face with his legs.

—Bloody immortal, are you? No respect for the police!

What's exciting about torturing an unarmed, motionless man, curled up in pain and fear into a foetus, pleading for a chance to be in his mother's womb again, where no one can reach him? But the man's resistance only seems to rouse the demons further, making them more engaged in the operation. As a cat plays with a mouse, observes it, waits for it to move, touches it gently with its paw, the demons wait for something to ignite their inflamed centres of violence, at least a little trigger, a click that would tell them they can lift the batons into the air again and continue the game. The chief, meanwhile, is satisfied. He languishes, watching as if the whole event has been performed just for him.

Trembling, his face bruised, the man huddles in a corner, moaning and sniffling, and tries to fuse through the wall, but the bellringer snatches and hauls him to the staircase rail, sharply wrests his left arm upwards until something crunches, and the man shrieks.

—So, "angel"? Answer me, can you fucking fly?

—I didn't do a thing...—the man mumbles, sobbing.

—Quit your gabbing! Answer me!

The demon bends the man's upper torso over the rail and smashes his spine with the baton, causing him to lose balance, but he immediately grabs hold of the rail, coughs, and spits blood.

We wonder, isn't it astonishing how our neighbour, whose name we don't know despite surely having brushed past him in the lift a few times, is so resilient and still alive? We would have passed out long ago, or would have taken the opportunity right at that moment to hurl our body down the shaft to relieve it of the demons.

Yes, no doubt, you'd do exactly that!

The third door on the landing creaks and a sleepy, grey-haired lady in a long nightdress materialises, more baffled than terrified. Upon seeing her, the demons freeze like mannequins and only continue to pant and wheeze under their balaclavas like pigs after a marathon. Our neighbour, still bent over the rail, looks mournfully at the old lady. A thin, red line of blood and saliva seeps from his split lip.

—What on earth are you doing, boys...—whispers the old lady, covering her mouth with both hands.

As she recoils, one of them steps towards her and raises his fist menacingly.

—At your age... you'd better mind your own business, ma'am,—he hisses, slamming the door shut in front of her face, and leans on it, his hulking frame obscuring the spyhole.

The bellringer drags the man off the rail and forces him face down on the floor. Looming over him, he growls:

—Look...

The man lies motionless, holding his breath, his face pressed against the floor.

—Look, I said!—shouts the bellringer. He grabs the man's head and flashes the baton, waving it.—I'm gonna flay your arse into bloody ribbons with this fucking thing and then baptise you in piss, get it?

He snarls and starts pushing the baton between the man's buttocks through his trousers.

At that moment, his two comrades exit the man's flat, their hands bereft of bounty, their heads shaking in disappointment.

—Nothing! Not a single fucking thing! We fucking turned the fucking dump upside down and found fucking nothing,—squeaks one, stuttering curses.

—No illegal posters, guv, no brushes or pencils. No "prohibited literature". Not even drugs. Bloody nothing.

—You know why, you dickheads?

They stare at the chief, bewildered.

—Because I said "fifteen" and not fucking "fifty", you stupid cunts. I

wondered if you would fucking deduce that! Get the fuck out of here!

—But guv...

—Leave the lad alone, I said!

That twist plunges the bellringer into a state of primal fury. He starts shaking, clenches his fists and growls like a rabid hyena whose meal has been snatched away. If we were a dog or a wolf, we would have heard the pounding pulse of the demon's heart, felt how his entire body reeked with rage radiating from every crevice, encasing him in a shimmering crimson aura.

One of the demons checks the spyhole of the old lady's flat but sees nothing, because, to his misfortune, that's not how spyholes work. He tries summoning the lift, but it remains stubbornly non-functional. Frustrated, he jabs at the button, yet nothing happens again.

—Fucking tin can!

The bellringer strikes our quivering neighbour with his baton one more time, spits on his back, then follows the others to the stairs. The chief, on his way there, bends over the man's swollen face, clicks his tongue multiple times, shakes his head, and says:

—And you, stay put, lie low and rest. It ain't no good insulting police officers. Remember.

An icy chill creeps up our spine. We exhale, choke down the invisible

rock scraping against our parched throat, and quickly seal the spyhole.

Read next part

№1.2: Schism

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