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Lyrical I

Of Love, Leisure, and Reality checks

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There she walked, unaware that Yakov had a giant snail hidden in his backpack. No ordinary backpack this—with a porthole which Yakov had taken care to curtain off, lest the lady of his heart catch sight of his voice of reason—improper to flash one's snail before a girl, and what's more—there's little proper about possessing such a snail in the first place. The embankment was quiet, armpits sweated with effort, the breeze wafted from the far shore doing nothing to air them out.

—What's it for?—Licia asked.

—What?

—The cat backpack.

—Why cat...

—That's what people carry cats in.

—Not just cats. That's a stereotype, quite common, but still a stereotype.

—What else then? Dogs?

—Documents, books, that sort of things...

—And what do you need those for now?

—What?

—The books.

—What do you mean?

—What are you planning to do with them?

—Me? With the books? I like reading.

—Ah, I see. What do you read?

Holy scriptures, descriptions, prescriptions, manuscripts. The snail in the backpack slept, curled up like a bun. On the bumps that Yakov created with his uneven gait, the bun would bounce slightly and scrape against the hard walls of the backpack. The emergence of turbospiral shells is linked to this form providing maximum strength with equal volume. It's believed that turbospirality is a key factor in forming the asymmetric internal structure of gastropod molluscs. If only she wouldn't wake up and start howling, thought Yakov. Though who would hear her besides him. The flibbertigibbet loves to wake at the most inopportune moment, wiggling her feelers about. What to answer, what to answer!

—Various things, nothing special. Usually nobody's interested.

—Nobody at all? What about me?

—What about you?

—Will you let me read?

—What?

—A book.

—Which one?

—From your backpack.

—Later. We're walking now.

—I can read whilst walking.

—Better later.

—How do you plan to enamour me? Won't even share your literature, uh... What intimacy could we possibly speak of?

Oh, how she howls! How she howls! Not the lady of his heart, but the snail. Not now, but sometimes. At breakfast—begging for food, at lunch—begging for food, at dinner—begging for food, before bed—begging for a stroke. There's a rumble in his ears, like a low-frequency squeal. Does her shell even feel anything? What idiot decided to call a snail's shell "turbo". Oh, how she howls sometimes! There lies Yakov on the sofa, his thumb caressing the lovely faces of

potential ladies of his heart, who replace one another on his mobile's screen, appearing from nowhere, immediately flying off into nothingness. More often to the right, if the eyes, nose, and mouth are in place.

—Mum, mum! The snail's howling again... I don't know what to do... I don't know... I'm going mad!

—Have you fed her, the little snail?

—Mother! What are you on about—of course I fed her!

—How many times a day did you feed her?

—Mother! What are you... Your son isn't some kind of idiot.

—Heaven forbid! How could I have an idiot for a son? Are you an idiot?!

—She eats like there's no tomorrow! And howls! Oh, how she howls! How she howls! Uuuuuuuuu! Like that! Uuu uuu uuu!

—Don't get agitated! Quiet, peaceful, and you leave her alone, that's why she howls. Of course! Anyone would howl. I would howl. Oh, what a wastrel you are... What I've brought upon myself! Where would she be without you, Yasha? You don't want to sit alone yourself, but you leave her alone. But besides that, when will you introduce me to your bride? Where is she, your chosen one? Eh?

To the right, mum, to the right, they're all to the right, always to the right, where else would they be? And I, by some mysterious confluence of circumstances, the roots of which seem to lie somewhere in the fundamental laws of the universe—am on the left. Even now, being in more than real circumstances, Licia was on the right and Yakov was on the left, despite the fact that, since they've met, they both at some point ended up on each other's right, even though from a Euclidean geometry perspective this was absolute hopeless nonsense. Cupid's virtual worlds seemed to work differently—through a point not lying on some line, at least two lines passed lying in the same plane with that line and not intersecting it, and two objects could end up to the right of each other! Yakov, of course, dreamed of a more Euclidean positioning of objects, for example, top-bottom.

—I don't like walking on the left. It would be very strange for me to like walking on the left, seeing as I'm left-handed,—she says and squeezes Yakov's hand in hers, dry, firm, cold, such that goosebumps spreaded from the point of contact across his whole body.—You're right-handed, aren't you?

—Right-handed.

—See, and everyone around is left-handed, including me. Don't know a single right-handed person besides you. Would it be comfortable for you to walk on the left side, holding me with your non-dominant hand, knowing that the hand you're holding is also non-dominant. What nonsense...

—Nonsense indeed...

—Who came up with this idea that two people holding hands should both use their non-dominant hands? If you're both left-handed, however you stand, you end up with some kind of muddle, like parts that don't fit together. But us... Look,—she stretched their hands forward.—Perfect match. How do these people do anything together with two non-dominant hands, I do wonder...

—Must be terribly uncomfortable.

—Fie and feh.

—Are your hands always this cold?

—What makes you think they're cold? It's yours that's hot. Are you sweating?

—Me? No. Why would I be sweating?

—Nervous?

—No.

—But you should be. It would be strange not to be nervous. Are you strange?

—Don't know.

—Strange, definitely strange. A non-strange person would know, but

you—you don't know, which is strange in itself, and then there's this backpack. But these are trifles, the main thing is you're right-handed.

—Why is that the main thing?

—Everyone's left-handed, but you're right-handed. I'm left-handed, and you're right-handed. When I saw you were right-handed, I understood everything.

—What did you understand?

—They say in the Southern Hemisphere everyone's right-handed, even the water in the sink spirals the other way and snails' shells.

Something jolted inside. Yakov stopped. As if on alert, blood drained from his face in urgent order. His companion frowned, took his other hand.

—Are you alright?—suddenly he found her eyes before him for the first time, for until then he'd lacked the courage to look at them either from embarrassment, or because it too, like the whole situation, seemed somehow improper, or because he was afraid to see something wrong in them, but to his relief, gazing into the abyss, in the impressive black circles on a nutty, almost golden background, he saw only himself, and his reflection that shrugged at him, and by doing so made the siren screaming in his head wail even louder, so he lowered his gaze, where, by what seemed a logical turn of events, he discovered his companion's breasts protruding from the triangular neckline of her blouse, identical

to those he'd had the pleasure of observing in her profile. He saw no reflection there, but became even more embarrassed and averted his gaze.

Meanwhile, a question was spinning in his head—what next? What to answer? How to twist away from conversations about snails? Snails aren't interesting at all! Why would a girl be interested in snails? If only he could ask his snail now. That's for certain, she would know, she knew everything, never doubted, worked without delay and would surely advise. Unfortunately, his snail's operating principle wasn't telepathic, unlike some other breeds which, through constant telepathic connection created by snails during mating, allowed the construction of a pasilalinic-sympathetic network for instantaneous, wireless communication at a distance, many times faster and more reliable than the backward internet that Yakov had to use every day, albeit with great enthusiasm. His snail possessed, if the author's memory serves, "binary gastrosophism", where after eating and digesting any information, such a snail, having passed it through its unique digestive system—where food is ground by the radula, passes through the oesophagus into the stomach and is processed by liver enzymes—would produce only a single, unappealable conclusion, completely cutting off the very possibility of other interpretations existing. In other words, if, for example, you take a book or article or letter or simply write a question on paper and feed it to her, you could get an unambiguous answer "yes" or "no", truth in the first instance, excluding any other mutually exclusive truths. The nuance was only that what the question is, such is

the answer, therefore, through active use of the snail, Yakov learned to ask perfect questions, such that he himself could never answer, such that their number increased with each day.

—"Is this question true?"—he wrote on paper and with trembling hand extended it to the snail. She raised her feelers, like a dog its tail, felt the paper with her mouth and swallowed it. After a minute or thereabouts the snail secreted slime—light, meaning "yes". Had it been dark, it would have meant "no", at least that's what Yakov thought and his mother agreed with him. Logical, right?

—"Dark—no, light—yes,"—wrote Yakov. The slime came out light.

—Well, mum, what if it's all the opposite?

—Ask, "Is mother always right?".

Wrote, asked, got the answer–light.

—Well, there you see. Why do you always need such obvious things explained?

—Nothing obvious about it.

—Ask your father.

—Father, is it true that mother is always right?

—Absolutely certain, it couldn't be otherwise, even if they said it on television or wrote it in your internets, I'd reckon I was dreaming.

—“Should I believe my parents?”

—“Yes.” (Hereafter we’ll simply use “yes” and “no” to denote the snail’s answers.)

—“Is the Moon real?”

—“Yes.”

—“Did father deliberately retrain me to be right-handed?”

—“Yes.”

—“Is it true that girls down there are different?”

—“Yes.”

—“Do people avoid me because of my strangeness?”

—“No.”

—“Is my snail smarter than me?”

—“Yes.”

—“Is the Earth flat?”

—“No.”

—“Is it true they inject AIDS into bananas using syringes?”

—“No.”

—“Are all chance meetings actually arranged?”

—“Yes.”

—“Do people really not notice that I wear my socks inside out?”

—“Yes.”

—“Am I handsome?”

—“Yes.”

—“Did I really choose this career or just slide into it because I was afraid to try something else?”

—“Yes.”

—“Did everyone at the party notice how I acted like an idiot?”

—“No.”

—“Should I get braces?”

—“Yes.”

—“Am I wasting my life pretending to be someone I’m not?”

—“Yes.”

—“Is her interest in me pity?”

—“No.”

—“Does mum love me?”

—“Yes.”

—“Lenin lived?”

—“Yes.”

—“Lenin lives?”

—“Yes”

—“Lenin will live?”

—“No.”

—“Will I ever become who I wanted to be as a child?”

—“No.”

—“Is my insecurity noticeable to others?”

—“No.”

—“Does everyone get a boner on public transport?”

—“Yes.”

—“Do I push people away with my suspiciousness?”

—“Yes.”

—"Is my paranoia about others' attention a defence mechanism?"

—"Yes."

—"Was I teased at school more than I remember?"

—"No."

—"Do people who show interest in me always have hidden motives?"

—"No."

—"Is everyone as randy as I am?"

—"Yes."

—"Is my entire 'self' built on conflict avoidance?"

—"Yes."

—"If my 'self' is the set of all my 'selves' (including all my roles, states, thoughts, feelings, memories and manifestations), should this set include the very all-encompassing 'self' that is this set, and if yes - doesn't this inclusion create a new meta-self aware of this inclusion, which in turn must also be included, creating an infinite recursion, and if no - isn't this all-encompassing self also one of my 'selves' which, by definition, must be included in the set of all my 'selves'?"

—"Yes."

—"Is my willy smaller than average?"

—"No."

—"Does God exist?"

"Haha, lol, lmao," the snail could have answered, but simply digested the question completely and gave no answer at all. No, the snail wasn't a coward or an agnostic, neither was it against her natural instructions that prohibited going into so-called "problematic" areas, where answers could cause harm to someone— no, just ask properly, for fuck's sake, and you'll get a proper answer.

—No comment, as they say,—Yakov raised his eyes to his companion and feigned a smile, his gaze once again sliding over her décolletage.

Licia's hitherto radiant face seemed to cloud with bewilderment, her eyebrows slowly undulated, eyes frowned, lips compressed, a barely noticeable cluster of wrinkles erupted on her forehead. She, being almost the same height as Yakov, pulled him towards her, trying to straighten his spine curving into an arc and see his face ("Is he lying or not? And if he is lying, so what? First date is like a job interview. Satisfy all the stated requirements? Nope, impossible. Maybe he's having a stroke? Maybe his blood sugar dropped? Blood drained from his brain to somewhere lower? Mmmm... Poor thing's nervous. Well, not a problem, I'm nervous too, though I don't show it. No point flashing your nervousness—improper. Need to walk with a stone face, maybe smile a little, prattle on endlessly so others won't think you're nervous about anything. Because when you're saying something, the thoughts in your head seem to go quiet. But what difference does it make? As if

people around understand a thing—they just pass these words through themselves like through a sieve and hear something completely different, what they want to hear").

—You know, I'm very curious,—Licia said softly.—Everything interests me. Yes, really everything interests me. Pathologically curious, even crazy in the head, I'd say. Like a cat. I poke my nose everywhere, whether invited or not.

—Yes? That's good.

—Uh-huh. But it's not good. Well... It is but it's not. Oh, it'll come back to bite me one day. I need an answer to everything, understand? Without an answer I get aroused, like sexually. I'd do everything: climb the walls, bite my elbows, claws, peel off my skin, start grinding my teeth. Look how worn down they are,—she said, smiling with all thirty-two.

—I wouldn't say so.

—You'd need a "before and after" photo. You'd see everything. You know, I love to bite, I need healthy, sharp teeth for biting. When I was little, I dreamed of becoming a shark. Not the one you're thinking of now but a cookie-cutter, small, with a round mouth, very sharp teeth. That's what I want. But, silly me, wore them all down. Ah...

—Sharpen them.

—With what?

—Don’t know. A sharpener?

—A sharpener?

—For sharpening teeth.

—I’ll end up with no teeth at all that way. Thought about getting diamond implants, but it’s rather expensive.

—Yes?

—Uh-huh. Very expensive. Diamonds aren’t cheap, you know, but they’re very durable. Let’s go eat. Steak, I want steak, want to bite. Oh, how my teeth are itching!

The restaurant on the embankment was so empty they even seated them by the window and promised a discount as some of their first customers. While Licia went to powder her nose, Yakov navigated through the jungle of the menu, consisting of eighty-four types of meat brought to City T from around the world, starting with beef, ending with the currently fashionable laboratory-grown mammoth meat. The waiter lurked somewhere to the side, trying not to draw undue attention whilst remaining visible, and meanwhile smiled somewhat sinisterly, as if plotting something. Probably thinking which steak to suggest, and the more expensive, the better, wants to fleece us, or me, Yakov reasoned, bastard. Meanwhile, the smile on the face of the waiter, half-hidden around the corner, stretched wider and wider, almost reaching his ears, while his eyebrows became almost vertical, gathering a huge lump of

skin on the bridge of his nose. If only I could ask the snail what to choose, which steak do I want? Don't want anything, actually not hungry at all, but must choose something, because it would be strange if she eats and I don't—improper. Or doesn't it matter? Snail-snail, is it normal not to eat in the presence of a girl on the first date and just watch how she eats, drink water, watch how she cuts the steak, how the sauce runs down her lips? Well say something, at least howl in response, snail-snail, presto chango, hocus pocus, open sesame. The main thing is to keep her mouth occupied, so she stays quiet. Oh, how much she talks! How much she talks! Doesn't shut up. But how well and pleasantly she talks, if only one didn't have to answer. I don't know! I know nothing!

Licia returned, plopped onto the chair, dove into the menu, immediately chose something, seemingly without thinking at all, just whispering "oh, I want this", and straightened up in her chair, smiled, folded her hands waiting for the waiter.

—Le steak de mammouth, well-done,—she blurted out to the waiter who hadn't even managed to open his mouth.

—Excellent choice-s. And you, young man?—asked the waiter.

—I'll have the same.

—Also well-done?

—No, no, absolutely not. Medium-rare.

Boot sole, thought Yakov, boot sole, she's eating laboratory boot sole!

—Splendid-s!—the waiter hissed through his teeth.—And what would you-s like to drink-s?

—Let's have wine, a bottle,—said Licia.

—Let's indeed! Excellent choice-s.

—And water.

—What water would you-s prefer-s? Plain, with bubbles-s? We have a phenomenal-s selection of water-s, young people-s. Local spring? Alpine? Scottish? We have a barrel of fresh drilling straight from Peru—excellent-s water-s, young people-s.

—Can I have tap water?—asked Yakov.

—Not recommended-s.

—Then let's have fresh drilling, why not.

—Excellent choice-s. Two le steak de mammouth, well-done and medium rare, a bottle of some random wine and a bottle of Peruvian fresh drilling water… All correct-s?

—Correct-s,—answered Yakov.

The corners of the waiter's mouth joined at the back of his head and he hurried to withdraw, so quickly that Yakov thought there hadn't been

any waiter at all.

Licia was silent and smiled with closed mouth, her eyes shone, and her face seemed to express bliss (seemed, yes). The silence grew louder, causing thoughts to flash in Yakov's head. Snail-snail, is it normal to be quiet? Snail-snail, why is she smiling, what does it mean? No, not like that... Is that true that if she's smiling, she likes me? Snail-snail, can you even bite a well-done steak? Is it normal if she likes that? Is it true that mammoth meat might be infected with an ancient virus? Licia meanwhile seemed not to give a toss about the awkwardness of the situation. She only occasionally moistened her lips with her tongue.

—Well, tell me something,—she said, exhaling.

—Me?

—Well not the waiter. What an ugly mug he is, just look,—she added in a whisper and nodded towards the waiter.—That mouth... Horrible. Good thing you're not ugly.

—Not ugly?

—Nope. Not at all.

Dry in the throat, oh how dry. Yakov gathered saliva in his mouth and swallowed.

—Really?

—Of course. Would I lie to you? I'm generally a very direct and honest person. So how are you in bed?

—Me?

—Well not the waiter, ugh. I wonder what he can do with his mouth, though.

Horror, thought Yakov, what horror. Snail-snail, am I good in bed? Armpits were sweating, thankfully the air conditioning somewhat reduced the heat of passion.

—Me? Not bad.

—Not bad?

—Not bad. Standard. No deviations.

—How's that? For example?

—What?

—Well I'm curious.

—Eh? I mean without deviations.

—Ah... "without". Don't worry, that's fixable. Tell me a secret. Yes, a secret. Yes, any secret. About yourself, about anything. Just one secret, no more no less.

Yakov's eyes took on a form of pity, such as a freezing puppy usually

has. He looked into her eyes, averted his gaze to the water that appeared from nowhere on the table, took a greedy gulp, and with a suspicious look leaned across the table towards Licia. She leaned in response, preparing her ear for whispers, enhancing, so to speak, the effect of the ear shell with her palm.

—Lenin won't live...

Licia gasped, which formed a vacuum around the table.

—What's that supposed to mean?—she hissed, leaning towards Yakov.—How come?

—Just so...

—Is it true?

—Verified, yes.

—Can't be.

—Unfortunately...

—How do you know?

—That's... that's another secret. Can't say. Secret,—he shook his head.

She looked at him for a long time, scratching one cheek with her left hand, placing the right on her neck, then said:

—You know what else I love about you?

Yakov shook his head.

—Everything interests me...

With a clink, two wine glasses materialised on the table, Licia, interrupting herself, immediately sucked down half.

—My curiosity... it...—Licia pondered, then whispered.—It's like a drug, but an odd one. The one I don't want to take, only want to want to take.

—How's that?

—In our world, however strange it might be, you can learn everything—about the present, about the past, about what exists, about what's made up, about the neighbour across the road, about a bug on a distant planet. Much of it is untrue, of course, but you can learn it, and for me, given my curiosity, life becomes unbearable. At some point you realise you can't live without all those answers, and your brain keeps asking and asking, howling and howling, oh, how it howls, you can't imagine. It's very exhausting when you can get an answer to any question, in some sense even deadly so.

—Yes?

—You can drown in information for days, not eat, not sleep, until you drop dead, yes. So, I decided for myself to be more careful with it. I said to myself that I know enough already and would prefer the universe to shut up.

—Is that so...

—You, though...

—What about me?

—You're like a spy, staying silent, not giving away any of your secrets, not sharing literature as if... I don't know. At first I thought, well, what nonsense, what kind of person is this, how can one be like that and still turn up for a date?

—Yes? You really thought that?

—But then I decided it's even better! You know, if you were mute, I'd like you even more. I'd sit and ask you all sorts, and you wouldn't answer me, just make eyes like a proper spy, nod or shake your head. And I'd be beside myself, shaking like in withdrawal, everything would itch inside me like a numb limb that you want to scratch and scratch and scratch and scratch for hours,—she rolled her eyes from imaginary pleasure, which she seemed to experience for real.—Gives me goosebumps.

Yakov had almost forgotten about the snail, and it suddenly started to howl. Uuuuuuu uuu uuuu, and this long "u" (more similar perhaps to the Turkic "ü") caught him by surprise like an electric shock so he nearly knocked over his glass with his hand. Licia startled, leaned towards him, took his hand.

—Are you alright?

—Me? Yes, no, don't know. I'll, um, pop to the gentleman's room.

—Where?

—To the loo. I'll be quick,—took his backpack and strode straight ahead, but not where he should have, for the toilet was in the other direction, which the smiling-with-all-his-thirty-two-(or-more)-teeth waiter helpfully pointed out.

—Leaving already-s? Toilet's over there-s.

He turned around, met Licia's gaze, nervously nodded to her.

—I'll be quick.

The gents room, to his great fortune, had a changing table, which Yakov unfolded, placed his backpack on it and pulled out a shell the size of a good melon with a snail's face sticking out of it with wiggling feelers and what seemed like smacking mouth, resembling at that moment the mouth of a leech. The snail crawled out of its house and stared at Yakov, who was frantically searching his pockets for a pen and paper, managed to find the former, clicked it several times, grabbed a toilet paper and prepared to write. The question didn't form, rather even resisted formation! Uuuuuu uuuu! What to ask? What to ask? Do I like her? Obvious, right? Or not? Or not obvious? Uuuu uuu uuuuu uuu uuuuuuu uu! She's playing with me, definitely playing, thinks I'm a strange mute who can't string two words together, just yesing and whating and howing. Uuuuuu uuu uuu uuuuuuuu uuu uuuuuuu uuu!

What then? Will it rain this evening? What difference does it make! Will a box of condoms be enough? What? What to ask? Uuuuu uuuuuu uuuu uuu uuuu uu uuuuuu uuu uuu uuu u! Faster-faster, write the question! She's waiting, you idiot, what an idiot you are! Uuuuuuuu uuuu!

While Licia sent sauced pieces of steak into her mouth and chewed them (oh how she chewed them), Yakov sat silently beside her with an empty glass and poked at the mammoth with his fork. The gently-red oozing cut gave him no peace. His fears were confirmed and he couldn't simply ignore them. He shifted his gaze to Licia and began observing her until she noticed it and froze with a full mouth, looking around.

—Eh?—she swalloed the steak.—Why aren't you eating?

—Just not hungry.

—Eat anyway.

—Don't want to.

—Through the don't want. You'll need strength soon.

Yakov plunged his fork deep into the meat and screeched metal against the plate, making his ear twist and the skin on his neck, nape and back shrivel.

—Want me to tell you a secret?

Licia frowned and perked up.

—Go on, tell.

—Not a secret, more just an interesting fact.

—Well?

—Well, in mammoth meat, you know, there might live an ancient virus.

—Is that the secret?

—Just learned recently, verified information.

—Pfff, I already know that.

—Yes?

—Why do you think I asked for well-done?

Embarrassment pounced on Yakov as if he'd said something completely improper. Did he do anything improper at all? Since she knows everything anyway maybe just ask her? ("What's he thinking about? What's in his head? Is there anything more interesting than one's own mind, other than the mind of the opposite sex? You want to see everything but at the same time you want to avert your gaze. No, not from an attack of modesty or impropriety, but because the secret might suddenly collapse, the curtain fall. Will you see something wrong there, some mind-bending Truth or repulsive horror? Doesn't matter—there will be no more curtain, no possibility to speculate, no arousing

mystery. Ugh...").

Here they were again on the embankment. It smelled of silt, fish, river, humid evening, humid reveries, phantasmagoria of distant city lights. Licia's hand was finally warm. Here they were in the lift, the careless attitude of the building's inhabitants towards public property cut their noses and eyes, Licia shrugged ironically, Yakov shrugged in response. Here they were on the sofa, the backpacked snail howling in the hall, windows in the living room curtained from the blinding sunset. Dark, what they were doing there couldn't be seen.

He desperately wanted to touch her cheek, for some reason specifically her cheek, he couldn't explain why and kept asking himself, drilling his brain with this question. Is touching a cheek normal? Snail-snail, why specifically the cheek? Can I touch her shoulder? Her collarbone? He reached his hand towards her face, but she brushed it away, as one brushes away the ticklish touch of a feather.

—Hand here,—sounded a soft half-whispering voice.

—Where?—sounded a rougher voice, slightly trembling.

—Right here.

—Here?

—Yes, here.

Why here? Why not there? Or not somewhere else? Here? Is it normal,

snail? He was being scanned, processed with intent, as one processes a bush with pesticide spray against insect pests—all of him, from head to toe. He was a life model, and the artist or sculptress opposite was about to draw him or sculpt him or perhaps sculpt something from him. What's she looking for in me? What's so special? Just a regular person, nothing unusual. Work, read books, hang about, do nothing. Snail-snail, are we people? Is she a woman, am I a man? Or is it all different, all another way, in another geometric plane. Is she a ray, am I a chuckle? Is she a cloud, am I purple? What? No, what nonsense, you can't ask such questions.

—Those who fear their genitals won't be offered a place in heaven.

—Who said that?

—Our dear Lord, who else?

—He said that? For real?

—He did, didn't you know? Hmm...

—I knew. Of course, I knew. Just wanted to check.

—Right, we'll start with him then,—she says breathily.—Does God exist?

—Errr...

In his head were only "uuu" and "uuu", growing. It's started, it's begun!

Not now!

—Quiet, don't answer...—whispered the voice again, clothes rustled.—Now here. Stroke.

—But... I...

Uuuuuuuuuu...

—Are you afraid of your genitals? Of my genitals?

—Uh...

Uuuuuuu...

—I said quiet. Stroke. Oh...

—...

Uuuuuuuuuu...

—Do you like me? But shhh. Right here.

—...

—Think this is all someone's dream? Mine, yours or hers?

—Whose?

Uuuuuu!

—Shh! You got everything with you? Nod. Stop! No, don't nod. I said

let's have no answers. I want only to ask so no one dares answer. Answers wear me out. Mmm...

Uuuuuuuuu!

—What did you dream of before you learned it was shameful?

—...

—When did you realise everyone around lies? Get undressed.

—Already?

—It's late already.

—Late in time or...?

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!

—Shh! Unbutton.

—I...—Uuuuuuuuuuu!—I need to step out.

And in his ears and between his ears it buzzed, between the convolutions it was as if a brass orchestra was warming up. Yakov slipped away from the living room, snatched his backpack, hid in the bathroom, turned on the light, discovered his squinting self in the reflection.

—I'll be quick!—he shouted.

Is everything alright? One muscle smaller than the other. One shoulder higher than the other. Left or right? Pen, pen, need a pen. He quietly, trying not to make noise with the zip, opened his backpack and put it on the cabinet before the bath. From inside the snail was already looking at him, her head protruding from the shell and moving her feelers, her maw agape. Uuuuuuu, she howled, oh, how she howled! Uuuuuunbearable! And still, she's a woman, but is he a man, in the sense of a proper bloke, a real macho? His accursed appendage blazed with greedy animal desire, begged to be set free. Let me out, it screamed at him, let me out! Is it really time, snail? Really time? Maybe later? Not proper, right? On the first date. Can't, can't, in Non-Euclidean geometry she's a woman, I'm a stone with thoughts that she doesn't even want to hear. Yes, snail? Or no? Well say something. There was no pen, no paper either, there were only questions, some of them rhetorical but Yakov couldn't separate them from the whole set. What indeed is a rhetorical question? A question that has no answer? A question that one isn't supposed to answer, improper, uuuuuuuunbefitting a cultured person to answer? Is there a difference between the presence of an answer and the impossibility of voicing it? Uuuuu uuu uuuu UUU UUU UUUUUUU! He looked at his appendage, at his reflection, at the snail, at the the silhouette of Licia appearing when he closed his eyes. Who am I, snail? A man, not a man? Tell me! Tell me! And Yakov imagined how he would take the snail from the backpack, how with trembling hands he would unholster the appendage and stick it right into the snail's mouth, pushing deeper, right to the end, so it would be certain, so it would be sure, so it would be true, and she, gastropod with

binary gastrosophism, would bite off his appendage in an instant. Chomp—and it's gone! Yakov would supress his scream, writhe in agony, blood gushing from his groin. The snail would digest the organ, and after a minute light slime would come out of it. Yes, must be yes. But no, what nonsense, such an ending to the story would be rather strange. Tell me, would Yakov in his right mind and body do such a thing? Yes or no?

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