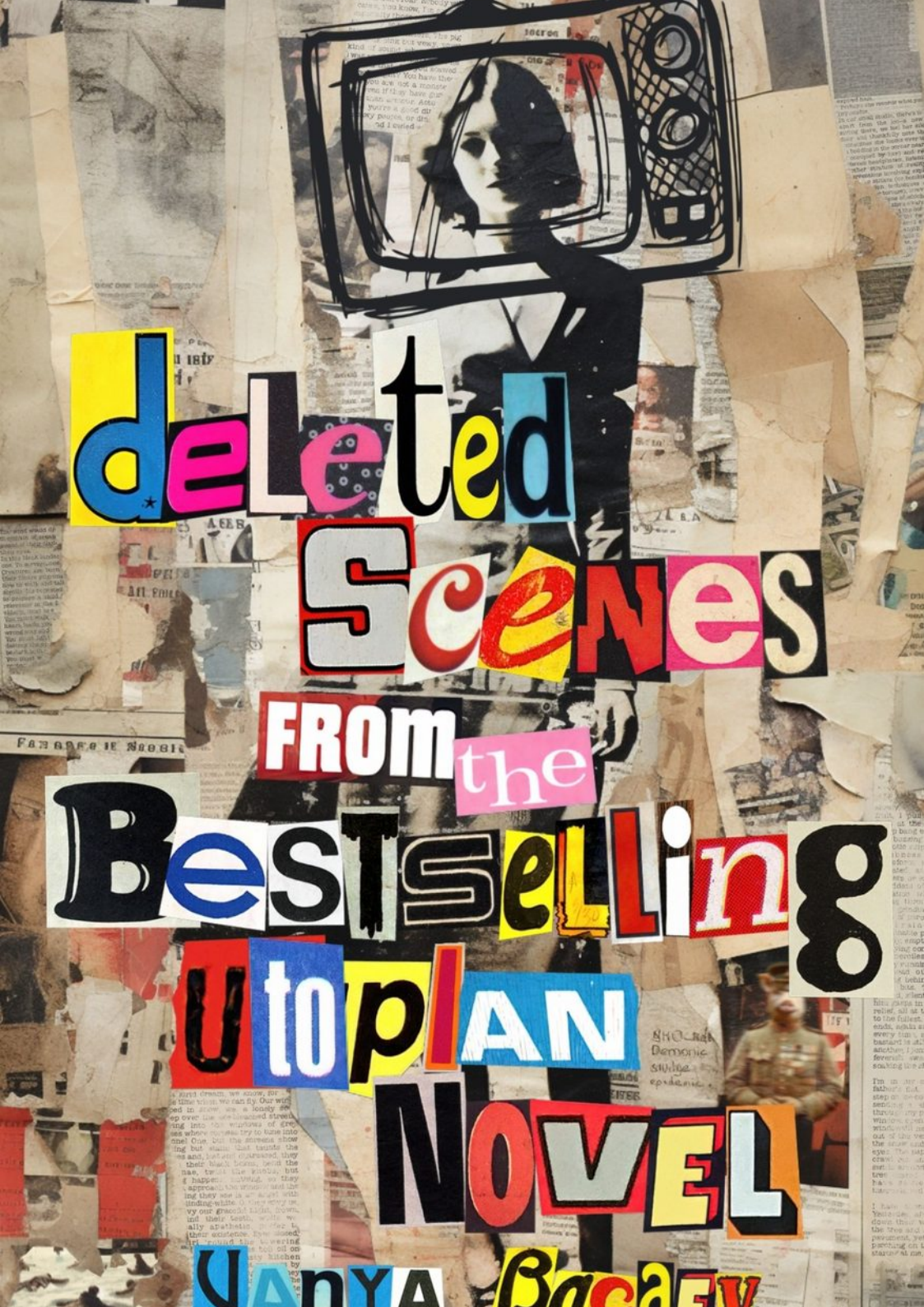

deleted
Scenes
FROM the
Bestselling
Utopian
NOVEL
YANYA BAGLEY

Deleted Scenes

№1.5: Penumbra

nova-nevedoma.com/penumbra/

As fade the fractals of wild, wicked thoughts, you walk out of the tower block into the drifts, rolling the suitcase behind on a trolley. No path is laid: no icy blood-smeared pavement, no benches, no art installations, only a holey trail early pathfinders left, as if nothing had ever happened. Everything from house to house is shrouded with pristine snow, slightly grey in some places. You've always found yourself alone in the desert, but now it's as vivid as never before. It's already daylight but not for long. Frost is omnipresent, the sort under which it would be better to forget that the street is still fit for life and stay at home, snug in a warm blanket to safeguard your dwelling. Someone shamelessly stole your future and drained all the warmth out of this world. You are the only fragile being in which a fire still burns, ready to extinguish any second.

Around you, everything is white-grey, speckled with black, from the road beneath your feet to the horizon and from the horizon farther back around the planet. You navigate the endless labyrinth of tower blocks, sporadic black trees, and occasional spruces, whose branches sag under the weight of the snow, so they morph into conical extensions of the drifts.

The sand on the icy pavement crunches under your feet. Hunched over, you go on, yet you can't fathom why, where to, or how; you simply go as if your feet carry you of their own accord, as if they have a plan undisclosed to you and know what they're doing. The only destination that matters is someplace far beyond this street, this city, or better still, this island, this planet, this universe.

Please stop the planet; we need to get off.

Shhh, don't speak!

The sun is capable only to dazzle. Its beams reflect and glitter like tiny crystals manifold on the path ahead, on the drifts around, on the windows of houses and cars that pass by emitting faint wisps of exhaust. It's perfect weather to plunge deep into snow, freeze solid, and let the nature conserve you there like a mammoth until spring arrives, the snow melts away, and the cityscape, which in winter appears more like a dusted architectural model, regains some semblance of life again. Near the pavements and under the fences, traces of human existence will sprout: beer cans, small bottles of something stronger, plastic bags, needles, empty cartridges of nitrous oxide, rotten remnants of newspapers and cartons, wrappers from chocolate bars that will never rot or decompose, cigarette butts and empty packs, fresh dog excrement left uncollected, and somewhere amidst all that splendour, your extinct cadaver in fossilised form.

At a bus stop, a few sullen, silent spectres wait, all dressed in monochrome. They puff steam and papirosa smoke, step from foot to

foot, transfer their bags from hand to hand, their gaze transfixed on the hazy horizon. Casting a sideways glance, the spectres greet you with indifference, and you all begin your collective wait for the saviour to come.

Your veins freeze even under many layers of clothing: a shirt, a jumper, a coat, underwear, cotton-insulated trousers, woolly socks, fur boots, red mittens, and a hat plus a scarf, also woolly and also red, whilst your face remains bare and all you wish is a balaclava.

The parched air nips at your flushed cheeks, your teeth chatter like a pneumatic drill; eyelashes, eyebrows—all adorned with rime. Through your cracked lips, plumes of steam billow. Your nose snuffles and runs, each careful breath burning the irritated nostrils with fire. The tips of your fingers and toes grow frostbitten, bereft of blood. They pinch, they tremble, they grow numb, and you rub them against each other, anticipating that moment when they once again feel warmth, when hot-as-lava blood surges through their veins, and you experience a torturous yet tantalising tickle.

Belching out a trail of foul gas, the coughing diesel jalopy arrives at the bus stop and sucks the crowd in like a vacuum. By perfect misfortune, your suitcase gets stuck in the entry door. Cold sweat trickles down your spine, and your body shivers. The embittered spectres judge you as you struggle to drag the suitcase in. Nobody helps you with it, though you must refuse help if it comes, for it's your skeleton in your closet, nobody can help you. With a rumble, you squeeze in, drop a few coins

to the driver, crawl to the back of the almost empty cabin, and sit.

The bus is as quiet as a catafalque. The clocks on the other side of the cabin show 88:88. Time has relegated itself to an abstract concept with free interpretation; it's not something that happens to you anymore; no, now *you* happen to time if you wish. Everything's so sluggish and slow, and things that do manage to happen out of non-existence stay with you forever, piling up, clutching together until the whole world turns into one colossal, clumsy chimerical construct. The monotonous movement and the arrhythmic murmuring of the engine place you into a trance, and you begin to ask yourself questions you'd never ponder and visualise things you'd never conceive. You visualise how a bleak reflection of your face smears over the window and assumes surreal and grotesque forms, and visualise how that mug would blur across the pavement in the same way the demon's face blurred and turned into a crimson puddle of blood, brain, and snow. You visualise again and again how the television flies from your window and hits the demon's head. You visualise your phoenixian fall and rise. You visualise your tears plummeting into the toilet bowl before you flush its contents. You visualise the old lady, her flowered shawl, her grey hair, her mellow, wrinkled face, and her ringed, veined, mottled hands with a hacksaw brought to you. You visualise what the hacksaw did to the demon, its every movement to and fro, every gusher of blood, every cracking bone, every scream wouldn't've happened if the demon was alive. You visualise the demon in its present state, inside the suitcase, resting, meditating on what happened to him—snap and done, once and

forever.

Where do demons go after they die?

Silence, please. There's nowhere else to go because you are all already where you are supposed to be, together.

Your fellow passengers' faces would make good gargoyles. You can't guess their emotions, and any attempts at mind-reading fail, for there's nothing to guess and nothing to read. It might be because of the news, might be because of the way of life, might be a sum of both. When time turns to ice, so do the reasons for being happy. Your bus mates had always been like that: austere, serious, strained, concentrated, constrained. That slowness dwells within them, in how they blink, in how they move, in how they think, in how they breathe, at times recharging their lungs with stinking, oxygen-poor air, giving themselves a second to relax before they hinder their breath again. You are no different. Such is your demeanour, stoic and reserved.

Does it have something to do with our inherent northernness?

There's no such thing.

With our harsh history?

It has nothing to do with that either.

But—

Shut the fuck up.

But—

You are not in charge anymore.

Bend over the suitcase. Sniff it. Nothing. Unzip it a little at the top and look inside—still there, wrapped in plastic bags.

—Don't worry, it'll pass,—a voice appears from nowhere.

You flinch and slowly turn your head to the old man sitting nearby. He's ruddy, bearded and moustached, sparse damp hairs clinging to his forehead. On his lap, he holds a fur ushanka hat. The snow on it has melted, and it looks like a freshly washed cat with the folded ear flaps as thighs. You gulp and look at him again.

—Sorry?

—It'll pass, all I'm saying.

—Will it?

—Don't worry. I was in the same position last month. He wasn't that big, I must say,—he lets out a nervous chuckle.—But the grief was big enough...

—What are you talking about?

—First they die, and you can't keep them out of your head, but then...

The old man sighs deeply and pauses.

—Then what?

—Then they just become good memories, don't they?... Was it a boy or a girl? How old? You don't have to answer.

—We don't know how old he was.

—Right... Well... You see, people don't give them enough credit. You, for example, you're sad now, I can tell, but before that happened, were you expressing enough appreciation for him? Just think about it, they are the only beings on earth that love us more than they love themselves. Don't they deserve your gratitude and appreciation? A hint of it, at least.

—Do they?

—Oh, they do!

Your hands shake, you gulp again, and utter:

—We don't think they do.

—I'd say even more than any human. We owe them, owe them a lot, aye. Take human speech, for instance—it all started with giving commands, and guess who gave commands to whom?... Yes, that's right.

Your eyes are blank. The skin on your skull under your red hat creeps to

your nape.

—If I could be half the person mine was, I'd be twice as human as I am, you know?

Mute, you keep staring at the old man.

—I'm telling you, youth. Nice suitcase you've got. It's tough to get a proper coffin of that size these days. Expensive as an aeroplane. High demand, they say. I don't think we even make special coffins for them. What a shame, isn't it?

—Special... coffins?

—Coffins, yes. I've always thought we should have cemeteries and bury them properly at least, and I'm not talking about having funerals, processions and all, because people would find it a bit odd, wouldn't they? But just a small ritual, a proper coffin, a place somewhere in the woods, in nature, where they belong.

You look at him and slowly zip the suitcase back up.

—Don't mind my rant, I understand. I just wanted to say you're a good person for doing this, and don't listen to what they say to you—you've got a kind heart, you're doing the right thing. Grieving over a dog is as normal as grieving over a human being.

—A dog?

—A dog, yeah.

—Right.

You rub your eyes and face with your mittened palms.

—It's hot in here, isn't it?

—A bit warm.

—You're not very talkative, are you?

—No, sorry, we're not.

—Who's we?

—We, well...

—No, you don't have to tell me. I get it. Some bonds are very strong.

You nod back, attempt to smile, and say nothing.

Now lean your face against the cold window and watch the drifting drabness and its denizens: how cars pass, how the bus stops and starts again, how people wordlessly hop on and off, how the streets are all the same, and how they lead you through this impregnable order of permanence.

The bus stops once again, and the old man stands up.

—Don't miss the lights, aye?—you hear his voice again and watch as he

puts the washed cat on his head.

Say “uh-huh” and nothing else.

—Uh-huh.

The bus approaches Colossus Square, where fuming automobiles run in circles and sequences of fuming humants move from one edge to another. They cross the roundabout when lights turn green and wait in accumulating nervous clusters. Where the square meets the sea lies the broken Colossus, a giant statue with wings made of wires and strings, crashed into limbs and pieces during the Great Coup. Thousands perished during its construction, their bones now resting under the road and pedestrian lane, gradually tamped deeper into the ground by the humants and automobiles above. Now, the fallen giant’s remntants remain in the bay to remind everyone of the bygone greatness and to lure the occasional gawker—a rare species of tourist.

The bus passes the Colossus’s cracked, crowned head that stands on the pedestal before its ruined feet. The head stares at you with indifference and a hint of calcified supremacy. Someone has painted it with red eyes and a red mouth so it appears as if blood is leaking from between its cracked lips—cracked from the cold, of course. Up from the frozen sea juts its fist with a piece of torch, forever trying to sink yet bereft of such possibility. Somewhere below the thick layer of ice, mingling with rocks and seaweed, the rest of the Colossus rests unburied; time, if it ever unfreezes, would polish these remnants into simple rocks, and the future generation, should they happen at all, will only see his winged

shadow covering the city and the whole island, permanently—like in that lurid dream where maniac humants weighed the colossus down and killed him to seize his crown, oversized for them.

Meanwhile, on the square, the Colossus underground station disgorges its humant cargo. They turn into a thick, gurgling, protoplasmic mass, start flooding the square, and disperse and merge with the rest of the crowd. The bus stops at the station, waiting for the mass to reach it. They rush in from the cold, they push without forming a queue, they behave like hungry animals. Some sit beside you, grunting and silently cursing because of the space your suitcase takes up. The bus driver turns on the radio; hissing and intermittently losing signal, it starts broadcasting:

—**static noise** ... the banging voice of peace... **static noise** ...our proud natio... **static noise** ...Slobodna Zembla has been liberated... **static noise** ... a righteous and heroic opera... **static noise** ...ar. The enemy forces that had occupied and terrorised the city for years... **static noise** ... defeated and driven away... **static noise** ... vaporised and vanished... **static noise** ...lute our brave soldiers and our beloved Tsar... **static noise** ... courage and wis... **static noise** ... national interests and security... **static noise** ...cautionary measures... **static noise** ... take iodine pills... **static noise**

Cheerful pop music, creating a discordant avant-garde dirge with the static noise, starts playing.

We can't bear it anymore.

Cover your ears with your mittened hands and close your eyes shut, push your palms against your ears, squeeze the eyelids as if they are doors to a bunker, so nothing can penetrate and scratch your senses. Deprive yourself of the outer world.

Reality is irritating.

The canvas, from beige, turns into deep stygian dark, and your decaying consciousness, spasming in convulsions, starts playing with the silhouettes of objects, their debris and memories, colours and light, forms and shapes, abstract patterns and random noise. The reality, whatever is left of it, hums and pulsates aqueously. For a fraction of a moment, your existence numbs, silence swallows the sound, and then, like a deafening clap in an empty room, your heart reverberates its first beat:

Boo-oo-mmm!

Boo-oo-mmm-m!

Boo-oo-mmm-mm!

Boo-oo-mmm-mmm!

So it hums and rumbles through your head, through your whole body. You can feel the blood, thick red sludge pumping in your ears, the rhythmic drumming growing into relentless crescendo. Your blood pressure spikes, and a thin film of sweat clings to your skin. The seat under you vibrates in tune with the buzzing in your head. *It smells, it*

still smells, that reality. The world still has an odour, a taste: old seats that have absorbed the scents of thousands of people, dirt and grime, the sweet metallic scent of rust, diesel and rubber, sulphur, someone's boiled egg, you, your stale clothes. Don't breathe, don't you dare breathe.

We can't, no, our body needs oxygen.

There's not much oxygen anyway.

Are we having a stroke?

You are the stroke that this world's having.

The darkness dances and erupts with black blobs until it becomes all. From the newly established void, a headless man, his clothes covered in blood and pieces of grey matter, appears and, dragging a telly on a wire like a reluctant dog, limps towards you, his every step sounding like a hammer striking an anvil. Perhaps he wants to talk to you, perhaps he wants you to apologise, perhaps he wishes to take you with him to wherever he is now, and thus, his figure growing, he extends his free hand to you and <...>

Stop murmuring. People will stare at you, weirdo. Close your mouth. Squeeze your eyes and ears harder. Think of something nice.

There's nothing nice left.

Nothing?

Nothing at all. We are a key of the mistuned grand piano, played by someone who has never touched an instrument and thinks that playing one is as easy as chopping wood.

Meeting oncoming cars, the bus rattles down a wide avenue with bald birches and bushes planted along its perimeter and identical ten-storey grey buildings planted behind them. Ahead is the sun. It had enough time to see what its beloved critters have done to Earth today, so now, blushing with shame and regret, it quietly rolls down to the horizon in front of the bus. Inside the vehicle, there's only you and a few—

**gulp* Demons. Two of them sit nearby and talk.*

Move the suitcase closer to you, put your hand on the handle.

Their skin is dark pink and studded with burst capillaries, their eyes are muddy and red, their fingers are sausages, their—

Don't look at them, and they won't look at you. You can ignore each other; that's easy.

But they are already leering at us. We know what is about to happen. They will ask us why we are staring at them, and we will say that we are not staring at all and just move our eyes here and there, minding our own business; nothing is wrong with that, and the suitcase, we will say to them, contains nothing at all but our deceased dog and the dog only, but such an answer will not satisfy them and will make them deeply convinced that

we are plotting something, something evil and malevolent, something that implies a risk to national security, so then they will ask us where we got this suitcase, whether we stole it from someone, and we will answer them, saying, no, this is our own suitcase with our very own very dead dog, ours and no one else's; we haven't stolen the suitcase nor the dog, both were passed down to us by our dear late father. The demons will stare at us, seeing how wretched we are, smelling of fear, fluttering like a moth around a flame, and they won't believe us, and even if they do believe, it won't matter to them. They will sense the odour of dread in the air, the uncertainty in our words, in our shaking head, in our darting gaze, in our twitching hands unable to find a place for themselves, in all our vulnerability which will betray us utterly, irrevocably. Then they, glancing at each other, smirking, will stand up, approach us, grab our suitcase and start opening it, and we, covering it with our whole body, will try to protect it from the demons, clinging to it like a kitten to its mother's nipple. We will fall to the dirty bus floor where rubbish, dirt, sand, and melted snow will smear our entire coat, our red mittens, our face, our hair. The demons will grab us by the scruff and drag us away from the suitcase. One of them will open it and discover our secret. That demon won't recognise its comrade but will be horrified, will shudder, swear, curse both the contents of the suitcase and us. The rest of the demons, loosening their grip on us, will also look into the suitcase and will also be horrified, will shudder, swear, curse both the contents of the suitcase and us. They will exchange glances and shout something to the driver, something loud and threatening, pointing out the urgent need to make an immediate stop, right in the middle of the avenue, somewhere on the side,

at the kerb if possible. While one of them takes the suitcase, another one will pull out a black canvas bag from the pocket, throw it over our head, grab us by the arms and shove us out of the bus and into the frost where, on the icy surface covered with snow and sand, we together will wait under the setting sun until a patrol car comes for us and takes us to the precinct with injuries somehow still compatible with life. There in the precinct, they will drag us into the toilet, remove the bag and plunge us headfirst in yellow liquid with floating excrements. Meanwhile, they will shout at and spit on us, coercing a declaration of love to the Tsar.

Wake up. You are still on the bus. It was but a lurid dream.

We would rather not wake up. We don't know what reality we will wake up into. What if it's the wrong one?

A wrong one? What are you talking about? There has only been one to pick from, the one that you have desperately been trying to ignore. Try now.

We would rather not try anything. Trying is torture. We are but a child in a twisted lullaby.

Then wake yourself up, wake up! It cannot get worse.

It always can.

Shut up and open your <...>

The physiognomy of the sky changes. It is tempered, not red from heat, or from blood, or as if someone up there has had an aneurysm burst, but searing white-hot, outlined with orange-red, the gradient draining somewhere beyond the horizon. The sky in all its evening grandeur laughs at you with insanity, desperation, and panic. The crimson sun, meanwhile, has almost touched the line of the horizon. It blurs and merges with its contour, and from there, from behind a veil of haze, a red sludge begins to seep out and flood the world. The sun has ceased to heat, and the air has become cosmically cold.

At last, the bus turns from the avenue onto a small one-way road, leaves behind the suburban area and enters an old, half-demolished village, where lopsided one-storey wooden houses emit vertical plumes of smoke from their brick, soot-covered chimneys. On some houses, windows are barred with rusty, crudely welded metal grilles. On others, there are shutters, some fresh, some even painted with patterns, some as old as the village, tilted or hanging on a single nail.

As the bus passes through the village, crimson dusk descends, lights are lit in the windows, and remaining people vanish from the streets. Somewhere far away, a dog barks, and somewhere nearby, a cat cries to be let in. In a minute, the village abruptly transforms into ruins. Derelict dwellings and log huts, once started and never finished, stand in the middle of wastelands and next to lone trees. The second village mirrors the first, and so then the third and the fourth. In each of them, the bus stops, discharges a few people, and moves on. The cabin empties until you are left sitting alone. The clock doesn't show 88:88 anymore, the

clock is turned off. The driver yells, “Terminating here!” and stops, having opened the doors, steps out to smoke, leaving the engine running.

You drag yourself onto the street, pull out the suitcase, place it on your folding trolley, look at the driver, avert your gaze, and trudge away.

The moon smoulders like an ember in the sky. The stars resemble bullet holes in a black sheet nailed over someone’s window. Sweat on your body starts to cool in the biting evening air. The steam coming out of you begins to freeze on your scarf. Shacks become sparse, no lights inside them. The ice-riddled asphalt under your feet disappears. Ahead, a bare forest looms. Its expanse is fenced with banks of old snow piled up from the road, acting as a fortress wall protecting the forest from intrusion by unwanted and uninvited guests.

Guests like us.

You step onto a trampled path, but the wheels of the trolley refuse to budge, mired in the snow like a plough in sodden spring earth. Remove the suitcase from the trolley and haul it behind you. Your body warms up and down the spine, right above the solar plexus; perspiration emerges and trickles down in small rivulets. The trees around loom taller and denser, the village light fades behind, silence and darkness envelop you like a shroud as the feeble wind stirs the tree crowns, bare and frostbitten, and rattles their branches from time to time.

We should have brought a torch.

You should trust your instincts. Walk between the trees, the path will lead you.

But there is no path anymore.

Your face starts to tingle. Mucus oozes from your nose. You sniff. The frigid air invades, searing your nostrils, nasopharynx, and throat with icy fire. Somewhere in the distance, a dog howls. Your body fails to warm the entire cascade of sweat enveloping it. The wind doesn't just moan; it keens, echoing the distant dog's howl. Your mittened fingers gripping the suitcase handle stiffen and grow numb. The same happens in your toes, cheeks, and the tip of your nose.

Stop. Clench your fists. Open them. Repeat. Again with your toes. Rub your face vigorously with the mittens, as if to ignite it. Again, albeit fleetingly, blood starts to flow to your frost-nipped extremities. The mucus freezes in your nostrils, and when you sniff and your nose twitches, the hairs inside tense up with pain. You try to breathe through your mouth, but after a while, your lips begin to chap and sting, and the glacial air infiltrates the lungs, too.

The wind assails and retreats. The snow rises and lashes. Your body stumbles and sinks. Frozen particles of fine snow rise and lash your face like a whip, slip under your scarf and collar, and an earthbound lightning bolt of tremor courses through your body. You stumble, take a step off to the side, and, breaking the thin icy crust, your leg plunges knee-deep into a snowdrift. Your boot is now brimming with snow. Drop the suitcase and climb out. Your other leg makes a hapless step

and sinks, too.

Now both boots are full of it. Inside, it melts. The crunch of snow under your boots becomes a squelch as melted snow seeps into your socks. Your feet feel the piercing cold.

Frozen are your fingers, numb are your toes, and stiff is your resolve.

You walk. You stumble. You fall. You rise again.

We are scared.

I am scared too.

Really? You can't be scared.

Yes, really. More than ever.

Do you think this is the end?

Don't weep. Stop, now is not the time.

We can't, we can't. There's no better time than now.

Don't weep, lest your tears crystallise, sealing your eyes shut. There's still something to see. Feel your way along the path, any semblance of solid ground, with utmost caution. No sudden movements. Keep your feet still. First, probe for stable footing; only then, proceed, crouching to free yourself from the snowdrift's icy grip. Snow has infiltrated your sleeves and boots anew. Now shake it off, take your suitcase, survey

your surroundings, and press on. Suffering beacons justice closer. Traverse the path, stand resolute. Trousers, gloves, socks—all sodden. The pulsating, ticklish warmth futilely attempts to radiate from your heart throughout your body, gradually waning.

Unexpectedly, the trees seem to thin, the horizon reappearing as if by magic. Despite the oppressive frost, you quicken your pace as much as your leaden limbs allow. You drag the accursed suitcase behind, shielding your face from the sparse yet merciless gusts until you reach the precipice, colliding with a snow-blanketed bench beside a dilapidated gazebo.

Below, the frozen river valley glimmers in the moonlight. Across the chasm, atop the opposing cliff, a village flickers dimly, wisps of smoke curling from chimneys. On the horizon, a faint radiance emerges: first greenish, then azure, then violet, shimmering with gradient hues. Transfixed, mouth agape, oblivious to the wind's assault on your bleeding, frosted lips, you watch as the luminescence intensifies, expanding and drifting towards you, draping the entire sky in a colossal, undulating curtain. There, as on an obsidian altar, a fire dances, painting with light: verdant arches, cerulean spirals, and amethyst streaks akin to feathery clouds. As it nears, the cold fades from consciousness, along with your rigid limbs, the suitcase, its contents, the past days, months, seasons, years—perhaps your entire existence. When the radiance envelops you, you reach out towards the ethereal light.

It coils around your hand like a serpent, constricts, and yanks. A hoarse

scream rends the air as you and the suitcase plummet down the cliff, tumbling, your mouth filling with snow. Your nostrils, eyes, every orifice in your body and clothing also clog with it until the dizzying descent ceases, the world, having turned upside down multiple times, finally comes to a halt.

You find yourself supine on the frozen river's surface. Imprinting your silhouette into the thin veneer of snow, you gaze skyward. Beside you lies the opened suitcase, its macabre contents scattered. You blink, expel the frigid water, swallow some, and gulp air greedily, wracked by coughs. Your sodden garments stiffen and harden in tandem with your numb limbs. Your crimson hat is lost, wet hair now plastered to your face. You've lost sensation in your fingers and toes as if they've ceased to exist, signalling to the rest of your body that it's time to start fading away too. Tears seep from the corners of your eyes, freezing instantly.

What now?

It seems this is the end.

What? Now?

Yes, it's about time. This is the conclusion.

We... we... what... What should we do?

I don't know... Perhaps, let's make a snow angel, shall we?

Read next part

№2: Monsters

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