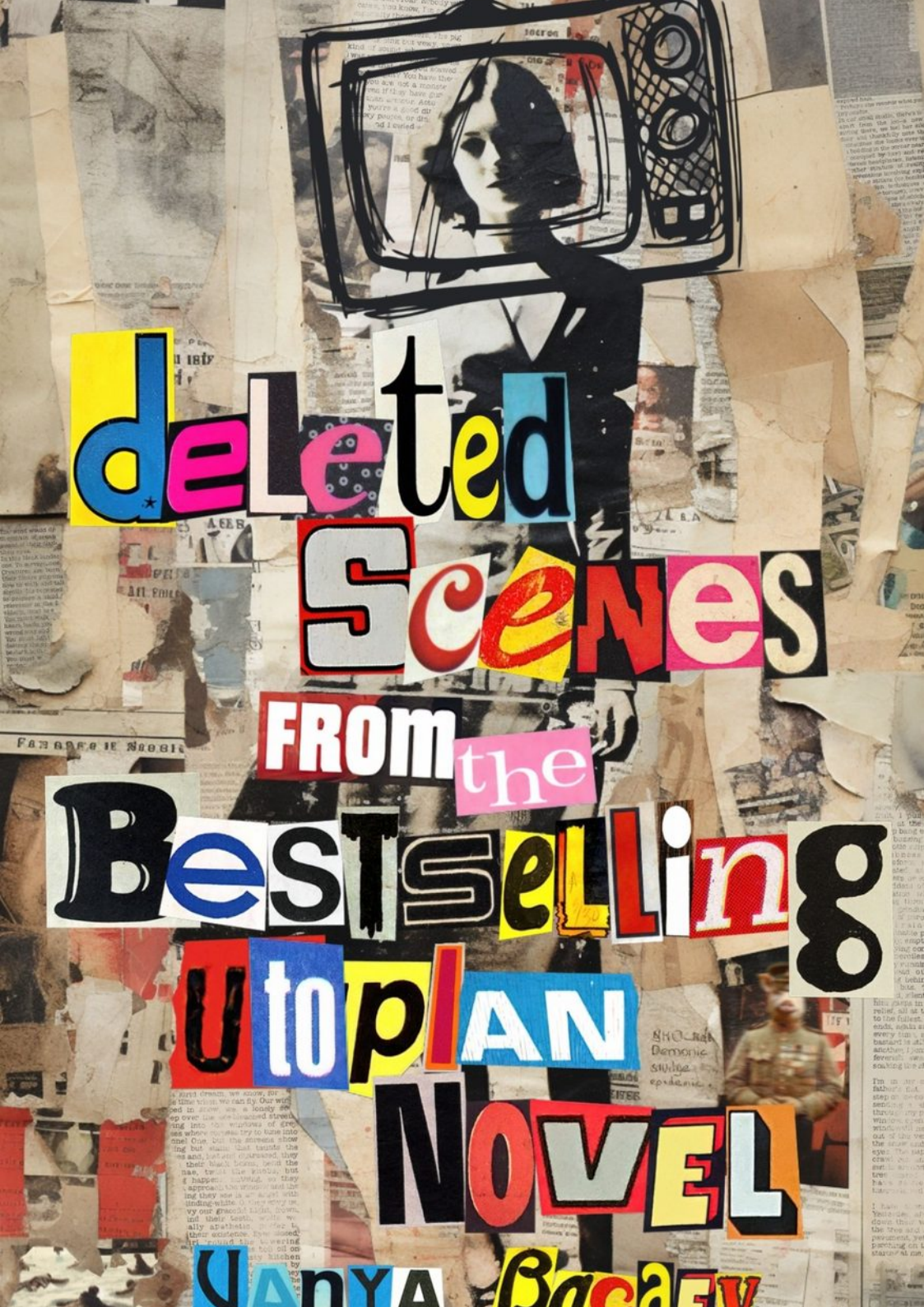

deleted
Scenes
FROM the
Bestselling
Utopian
NOVEL
YANYA BAGLEY

Deleted Scenes

№1.2: Schism

nova-nevedoma.com/schism/

There's that strange feeling that a new, hitherto unknown stratum of reality has peeled off like a scabbed blister from the main life strata, where all, both good and evil, is, for better or worse, sorted out, simple, comprehensible, and ignorable at will.

Ignorable on demand.

Our neighbour will manage, or the old lady will help him, for she, with her kind, caring, and motherly heart, would do a better job of it than us. We aren't being apathetic, are we?

Oh, of course, you're not.

The demons might come for us, too.

You've done nothing wrong, or nothing right, or nothing at all.

If we do nothing and keep our mouths and doors shut, nobody will find us lurking in our flat 53, will they? It's us alone: flesh and phantasm, atom and abstraction, microcosm and macrocosm—a universe unto ourselves. We can ignore everything else, can't we?

You can't see anything with your metaphorical cataracts. Your blindness is your bliss.

And the phone, the phone too, we mustn't pick up a handset.

Don't leave your room.

We should sleep, all day, all night. We need a coma.

You can't sleep within a dream, can you? Even if now it's a part of—

Nothing. Nothing is happening; minutes pass, hours, days, nobody comes, nobody knocks, nobody calls. It's just a ghost of us in an empty, cold flat alone with our thoughts, haunted by them. The vision of the outside world has gone nil. The sun is a parody of intermission in the unremitting winter nights. It is, in fact, not a star but a mere gas lantern with a lamplighter who is neither a night owl nor a morning lark, but a drunkard. A dense and damp fog, palpable if you open the window and try to feel it with your fingers, veils everything beyond a few metres, and the world becomes white, as if we, on our thirteenth floor, live in a concrete box somewhere in cloudy cuckoo land, and all we have left to do is to gaze into the white wall and let our brain do a photomontage of images, a kaleidoscope, a labyrinth of what-ifs, with or without permission from our free will. Books are impotent word-coffins—the number of our thoughts flashing simultaneously eclipses anything that the author could condense into their creation, failing to compete with our mind. Thank you, author, we have enough of our own thoughts to think. We like thinking thoughts. They are perfectly thinkable. In fact,

each of our thoughts is an author itself, an autonomous agent that keeps seething inside our mind, writing stories, so all we have left to do is to surrender, succumb, stare into the emptiness on the other side of the window and let each story unfold. Oh, they end terribly; the best thing that can happen in them is nothing, and the best we can hope for is no resolution. Otherwise, there's always somebody beaten or dead, or not some- but everybody. It's much better when the story fractures, breaks off and diverges, as if the author is knackered from writing it and switches to a new one, more interesting, where, however, more interesting means more dismal, spawning numerous branches of inhumanity, which, no matter how we try to stifle them, evade and resurge in strange and unexpected places, like blackberry bushes taking over our granny's garden every summer anew. Not sure we want to tell any of these stories. Not sure we want to tell any story at all. It's better to tell something absurd, create a literary cage, the content of which cannot exist under any possible conditions anywhere and nowhere. Some stories must not see reality, for they may emerge into it, merge with it and make it far worse than it already is.

No, you can't make it worse than—

Death to the pigs.

Oh, this is surely an audacious one.

A lurid dream there was of a country where all law and military enforcement agencies metamorphosed into pig-faced, hoofed demons. Their tusks and horns grew as their anger and violence surged to the

point where they could no longer stand on their hind legs like human beings and had to stand on all fours to move at all. Then, when the sharp offshoots could no longer extend due to the physical constraints of the subsequent enlargement, their bodies themselves began to swell, while the brain shrank, redirecting all the energy necessary into further demonification.

Oh, dear.

The apotheosis of their transformation was a cloven-hoofed behemoth two to three metres long, one and a half metres high, a couple of tonnes in weight, with huge black horns akin to mammoth tusks, but jagged in texture. The skin of such a creature would eventually turn red as if it had been stripped off altogether, revealing bare flesh. The creature would walk slowly, heavily, crumpling the floor beneath it, panting, snorting, and emitting a plume of pollution like an exhausted car muffler with a dirty or clogged air filter. This breed, *Homo Demonicus*, was cultivated by a professor in a laboratory, who, for some reason, looked like our late father. He had the same moustache, tobacco-stained and yellowed, an almost bald head, and ponderous, tortoise-rimmed spectacles that resembled two loupes. He wore a beige, once white, lab coat and carried a bulky, black ledger with pages falling out of it in random places. This was at least how we remember him, when he worked at the university, with the only exception—he didn't wear a lab coat then, because why would a historian work in a lab and need a lab coat?

One has to be well-versed in history to produce a breed of absolute cruelty.

The laboratory was located deep in the undercity, in one of the abandoned metro lines, and looked like an endless prison corridor, a gallery of the damned, flanked by hollowed cells with bars behind which shackled bodies dwelled. Every morning, the professor made his rounds, driving through the eerie expanse in a crumbling, creaking draisine controlled by service personnel, a medium-sized demon with an overcooked broccoli for a brain. The draisine would stop at each cell, and the professor would pant as he hopped off, open the lattice with a key, and take a bottle-looking syringe of thick and muddy red sludge from the pocket of his beige lab coat to inject it into the subject, intravenously, summoning a fugue of tormented tones in D# minor. After a few such visits, the subject's skin turned red, its pupils narrowed goatly, its nasal structure morphed into a grotesque pig snout. Soft horns and fangs began to grow, and so on exponentially until [...]

Odd. They've started chatting to each other.

They who?

The thoughts, teeming.

Whose thoughts?

Ours. Can't you hear? They're oozing from the cracks of our collective consciousness.

Oh, are they? Lovely.

Yes, and they are exchanging opinions.

This is nonsense. Stop it. Who cares about your thoughts?

They themselves seem to care about themselves and that's enough.

Uh-huh...

From ætherial matter, silhouettes of thoughts mould. Their distant voices become louder and clearer. They, in unknown quantity and quality, all blurry—nay faceless—sit around the long table, no end of it seen. One after another, thoughts slam shots of strong spirits and engage in a civilised discourse:

—One wonders how much humanity remains in those demons after the metamorphosis. What is humanity anyway? He-he.

—That's a loaded term.

—It is indeed!

—Loaded with what?

—With cannonballs!

—With blueberries!

—With meanings!

—With nonsense!

—"The zenith of civilisation *(the thought makes air quotes)*. On the journey to which we've discovered the concepts of sadism, genocide, slavery, countless types of torture and murder using a diverse list of tools and devices, as if a stone or a stick weren't enough for that!

—You forgot the batons. Big black ones.

—Hands will do!

—Nothing's better than a mindflay psyop, gentlemen. Ahem... and ladies.

—What about kindness, cooperation, creativity, culture, literature, technology, art, and science?

—As if it all holds any weight at this juncture.

—Kindness to the killers, cooperation with the demons, creativity in developing torture devices, culture of obedience, banned literature, military technology, art of war, and science of wilful ignorance.

—As much as flowers breaking through the cement. "In the midst of maelstrom, beauty blossoms," as one wise fellow said.

—Or rather destroyed. He-he.

—Who said that?

Sepulchral silence. The first thought refills the shots and, following an unknowingly elongated intermission, continues:

—One wonders if they have a plan for beatings and torture, if they need to curry favour to receive more stars on shoulder straps, a flat, a car, a pension at thirty-five, or if it is all, as they say, personal initiative, the call of nature, adrenaline rush, an urge to prove to the world that they are worth something as they seek revenge on the world for their earlier treatment, for their childhood bullying, for someone stealing their first love. Or perhaps it's fear, the banal fear of losing the job you've dreamed of since a young age, telling your grandfather that when you grow up, you'd become a policeman and protect him from bandits, a fear that later morphed into a dread of going to prison for not complying with the orders of those same bandits, or different ones, because you know that people like yourself will be watching you, and you know what they are.

—Perhaps they just believe in what they do and deem it "good", you know. If they aren't psychopaths, they must think they are doing a good thing, good job, all that, for a greater good.

—Blind pigs! Blind followers of the Tsar! He-he.

—It's all... *(the speaker hiccups)* because of "the red sludge". Oo-oo...

—Maybe soon, imminently, their helmets will have holes to fit their gnarled goat's horns, still little and soft, only yet to jut. Soon, very soon, their pupils will become goatly, cowardly vertical.

—Could it be the reason why they wear balaclavas and helmets? To hide who they are?

—Maybe there are no faces there anymore. Maybe they aren't human beings at all, but swinish demons ashamed to look people in the eye.

Is it a dark fantasy novel or what?

—The greatest tragedy is that no matter what we say here, no matter how much we try to squeeze out a metaphor or a nice word, neither that metaphor nor that word will ever be heard by the person they are denouncing; not because they can't read—they very much can—but because they don't care about our indignation, our pain and discontent. They don't care about humanity, morality, ethics, faith, hope, or love.

—They do care about love. At least subconsciously, they crave it even more than power.

—They have morals but for us they are "immoral". He-he. Same with the faith and all those fancy things.

—Oh, well...

—Their sole desire is to turn us all into bloodthirsty demons with "Thou shalt kill" engraved on our subcortex!

—In capital letters. Without punctuation!

—How on Earth would you punctuate that?

—Why would “angels” want more demons in the world?

—Should we descend to their level, spew blood on everything our species has achieved and revert to barbarism, all the while desiring that barbarism to end? One wise fellow said that one cannot teach pity, intelligence, logic and awareness for decades and centuries with impunity.

—Who said that?

—It is possible to get used to the sight of blood, tears, suffering, and death—like butchers or doctors; but how is it possible, having reached the truth after epochs of killing and destruction, to simply relinquish it? It is absurd!

—As another wise fellow said, “It’s not absurd! It’s far worse—it’s a tradition!”

The thoughts laugh and clink shots.

—What for?

—Who the fuck said that?

—“What for” what?

—What do you propose? Sit back on a sofa, chill, and watch them beat, torture, and imprison our friends and neighbours?

—I propose we do everything within and beyond our power, but still

remain human in all this!

—How's that?

—Tongue and ears! We can talk and listen! Can you hear it? I'm TALKING. We can communicate our ideas, engage in dialogue; argue, damn it! Not just with them—at least start with each other!

—Well, we're doing that now. Where is this all going, eh?

—Why beat and shiv the undesirable? Strangle, torture, stab, drown, rape with batons? Is that what you call *Homo sapiens*?

—I'm not saying anything. It's your rant. But it seems to me that we failed to devise more efficient methods of communication.

—But how...

—Demons can only be defeated by other demons; all the angels could do was segregate the demons and let them breed, for whatever reason.

—I'm confused.

—I know the reason, but I won't tell you lot! Too dark!

—It's obvious: so they themselves could live their naive, angelic lives, all white and innocent. As one wise fellow said, "If you want to get through a door, knock".

—Who? Please...

—_The angels locked themselves in hell, la la-la la-la. Oi!_

—I'm not going to knock. Haven't you understood? Haven't I made it clear?

—The thing is, if you don't knock them down first, they will knock down you. You should be one step ahead and knock "preventively".

—Knock-knock. Who's there?

—Those are their methods. You're using their own linguistic legerdemain. This is what we're fighting against, isn't it?!

—Oh, are we fighting something? Sometimes I forget.

—It's so easy to forget, ladies and gentleman.

—Such a subtle guerrilla fight! He-he.

—We have three choices: fight, flee, or hang yourself. In the end, the only ones left are those who can fight and sell ropes.

—And soap! And soa... oops.

—That's what I'm talking about—we're going backwards! Into the barbaric abyss!

—There's no binary direction, it is helical, mind you.

—Alright, quiet please. A thought experiment: let's say a man corners you, his fists flailing. What would you do?

—What if the man has a knife?

—Kick the bucket!

—You can negotiate, you can offer him some terms. Why would he want blood on his hands? Is that what he wants, rather than, say, going home to his family, having a drink, watching the telly together?

—Did you ask him?

—About what?

—Does the blood on his hands bother him, and does he want to have a chat with you about his *modus vivendi*? During the day, he goes to work, presses buttons, fires missiles at peaceful cities, and in the evening, he goes home, kisses his child on the forehead, they all have dinner together and go to bed. And he takes out a knife because he's utterly fed up with you, inordinately irritated, or fucking annoyed, in simple terms, and not because he questions your ethics. You run around shouting about how terrible he is, how he is a disgusting, cruel animal that treats you so badly and doesn't let you breathe, while he sits there, reddening, riling, sharpening his knife...

—We should have started talking to each other earlier!

—We should have started killing each other earlier!

—It's never too late, dear friends. Such a noble pursuit!

—... And he doesn't want to listen to you; he doesn't, and he never has. Why should he care about you? Who are you to him? He's your leader, your leech, your lord, and your liege—all those things. He does everything for you (so he thinks), and you still want something, some kind of freedoms, rights, that humanist bullshit...

—We aren't humanists here!

—To continue with our first question, what is humanity anyway?

—... He does not think in these categories; they are nonsense for him, a sheer absurdity in the same way as you are an ungrateful wretch who shows no respect and wishes only harm, yells, and whines, using, by the way, quite invective words. He's scared of you, and then, when the fear has nowhere to go, he becomes infuriated.

—Well, we should teach him!

—We should have taught him earlier!

—"Fear to Fury Dynamics 101".

—We should have... punched him in the face, for one, before he sharpened his knife; that's what we should've done. And now... here we are. It's a zero-sum game. Admit it and make a choice.

—I will not wield a weapon; I won't kill!

—I don't want to kill either. But with weapons, it's more persuasive.

—I saw bullfinches the other day, cute little apples.

—As one wise fellow said, "The vileness of the methods translates into the vileness of the results."

—Let me translate it for you.

—Who?!

—Even if we kill all the killers, only killers will remain!

—Huh! So, let's hear your plan, eh? Pray tell.

—A million people on the streets, a million shouting, "We can't take this anymore!", a million showing by example what peace is like—that's what's impressive, that's what's loud.

—The truth is that all who have gathered from that million are us, thoughts of just one person.

—And imagine how many thoughts like us are out there!

—Many, perhaps, but the thing is, we remain in people's hea—

At that moment, the door to the room where thoughts have been residing blasts off its hinges and falls into the corridor. It is knocked out with a single, but well-practised **knock-knock**. The thoughts shudder, one of them drops a bottle; it shatters, the pieces of glass scatter around, and the strong spirit spills out onto the floor. A squad of armoured demons charges into the room, bellowing out commands in

Demonesque and waving their guns around.

—To the floor! Everybody on the floor!

—I said, get down!

—Hands behind your back!

One of the demons fires a warning shot, and heavy snowflakes of plaster fall down and cover the cowering thoughts.

—You fucking move, and the next one goes through your skull!

The thoughts are paralysed, mortified. They have been hunted down, cornered, suppressed.

—Lie down! Don't move!

The cow says "moo", the goat says "maa", the horse says "neigh", and the pig says:

—You have the right to remain silent. You are being charged with propaganda for pacifism!

Thus lie our thoughts, kissing the floor, unable to be thought no more.

One doesn't want to impute insanity to the demons; it's certain they are in control, at least now, even if they are only following orders. A swollen sense of self-importance has metastasised throughout their bodies, and a cascade of maladies has appeared: inflammation of impunity; collapse of

the moral compass; chronic itching of the anger organ; uncontrollable violent disorder; atrophy of kindness; acute lack of empathy; weakened immunity to inhumane orders; critical thinking deficit syndrome; hypertrophy of the ego; tunnel vision of righteousness; paralysis of conscience; autoimmune rejection of mercy; sepsis of the soul. Of course, it must be an occupational deformity, something they acquire in the course of their work, losing sensitivity to violence, blood, and gore, like butchers or doctors. *Or historians.* But what if only ones like them get the job?

The white canvas morphs into a grey room with a flickering and crackling yellow fluorescent lamp hanging above a big stainless steel desk. There sit face-to-face two faceless thoughts: an interviewer with a woman's silhouette and an interviewee with a man's silhouette.

—Tell us about your strengths,—asks the woman.

The faceless man scratches his head.

—Well... that's erm...—he stammers.—I don't know how to put it.

—Whatever it is, just say it. That will determine whether or not we hire you for the job.

Silence. The man cracks his knuckles and then looks the faceless woman straight in the eyes.

—I can fuck someone's face up,—he whispers.

She licks her lips and whispers back:

—Just a face? Hm...

Crickets. The lamp crackles like lightning through the clear sky.

—Well, not only a face, of course.

—Something else, perhaps?

She leans closer to the interviewee.

—Well, anything, it doesn't matter. Whatever you ask.

—For example? We need you to be very precise. It's important for the evaluation of your professional capabilities.

—Erm...—he hesitates.—Kidneys, I can fuck someone's kidneys up.

—Huh... And that's it?—she says and leans back, disappointed.—Have you even tortured anyone?

A shadow flushes on the interviewee's face. He says nothing, his eyes on the table.

—Well... may... maybe.

Pause. The interviewer taps her nails on the metal table.

—Do you beat your wife?

—Well... I don't know how to put it.

She squirms in her chair.

—Just say it. As I said, we need to build a psychological profile of you, to assess your skills and understand if you're a good fit for the job.

—I do...—says the man and gulps loudly.—In my house, I have a basement. So... And... Sometimes, I... erm... torture cats there. Every Tuesday, in fact.

She gulps, and a lonely brow arches on her face.

—Oh... quite commendable. Why not on Mondays?

—It's kittens, to be precise,—says the man nervously.—Little squeaky ones. Black.

An orgasmic spasm goes through the interviewer's body, and her chair shrieks.

—Wondrous! Just wondrous! Exactly what we're looking for, young man. Congratulations, you're hired!

Two visions on the canvas never merge: one eye perceives, the other eye distorts, a diptych of reality and truth. They seem to be the same, yet superimposed, vertigo they birth, a nausea that persists behind closed lids, in dream realm where our moored head floats like a boat fixed in place. On the telly, in the newspapers, and on the radio, there's a utopia

on the brink of bursting into the blindingly bright future, while outside the window, there's emptiness, darkness, vibrating void. Next door, torture's rhythms, screams of pain and crimson sludge, an aura; nearby, a snow angel earns a one-way passage to katorga. Of war they whisper, peace they scream aloud till throats run raw. Dirt, slush, frost, bursting pipes and capillaries, blood on the staircase in the entrance hall; all walls are cracked, but through them, flowers seek the light. Utopian weed blooms in the mind's rifts, but withers, plagued, once skull is left behind. As it turns out, one needs not lay a stone to build utopia; one can convince the rest they live in one already.

In the smoky room, the highest echelons of thought lounge on mahogany chairs at a round table, also mahogany, and share strong spirits, of an expensive kind, sipping them from gold-encrusted cat skulls.

—Well, listen, dear sir, does war have a place in utopias?

—It does not, of course.

—Then what are you trying to peddle to us? War in utopias? Sir, you ought to take some pills, clear your head,—the thought remarks, twisting at the temple.—He-he.

—Valid point! What are you trying to peddle to us? As the engineers of this whole mess, we pay the utmost attention to such details. He-he-he.

—Hold on a minute, dear sirs...—the thought interjects and clears its

throat.—You're neglecting the most basic knowledge: in any utopia, if one digs deep enough, one is bound to find a candied piece of shite.

The room is abuzz.

—Oh, come on, so candid of you!—exclaims the thought and theatrically waves its hands.

The other thought attempts to calm the room down.

—Dear sirs, watch yourselves, please. Not at the table!

—"Excrements", if that's how you prefer it, dear sir. Doesn't change the essence of it, though, does it?

—There's no war, dear sir, is there?

—What do you mean, there's no war?

—That's the trick, indeed. He-he. Pure *magique*.

—Listen to me,—says the thought and switches to a whisper.—It's only "pretend". Poof!

It makes a magician's gesture, the war disappears, and a cloud of its remnants flies away.

—_Magique_!

—Pretend? Oh...

—Pretend, exactly,—the thought sips from its skull-cup and continues.—It's merely a pre-emptive counter-military peacekeeping operation or a small local conflict somewhere out there on a neighbouring island, if you prefer that. What kind of war is it?

—Ahhh...

—Sounds strangely "unwarly", pardon me.

—Ohhh... I see.

—This semantic wordplay of yours sometimes renders me ecstatic,—says the thought and fakes shivers.

—And it is intended, incidentally, to end the war (and all wars, by the way) and thus to complete the assembly of utopia in our Novo Tsarstvo.

—Just like that.

—Sometimes it's easy to forget about what it's all for.

—This is another important semantic feature of our Novo Tsarstvo. You see, we don't start wars; we end them. Poof!

—More like "bang!".

—Indeed, dear sir, our Novo Tsarstvo is brimming with all sorts of such features.

The thoughts chuckle collectively.

—Peculiarities!

—What an amusing wordplay!

—Indeed, we have plenty of wonders to chew on.

—Chew on whatever you like, as any true utopia should be, shouldn't it?

—Uh-huh!

—So, we must drink to that, don't you reckon?

—Oh, indeed!

—Well, now we're talking!

—A toast! Someone?

—A good toast, we need a good toast!

One of the thoughts stands up. Silence. The thought clears its throat and begins:

—We're lucky to live in a country where at times one cannot help but marvel.

—Huzzah!

—Huzzah!!

—Huzzzzzah!

The thought that huzzahed first throws the cat skull on the floor; it shatters into jagged fragments that scatter around the room. Hundreds of other thoughts, whether they have participated in the dialogue or remained silent, empty their cups in one go and smash them too, asynchronously. The noise of cracking bones turns into a roar of a water cascade that rings and hums in our ears, intensifying until <...>

With the accompaniment of deafening tinnitus, the white starkness around us begins to move, rippling and shimmering like the surface of snow amidst a field touched and soothed by the wind, and upon it, as if it's an inkblot test, faceless figures surface and commence a dialogue:

—Imagine that the world exists simultaneously in several permutations and they arise from spontaneous and diverging developments.

—Uh-huh.

—Suppose, for example, if one stays at home instead of going to the shop, this too can trigger a chain of events such that, in one version, it could change the world. Imagine, when en route to the shop, you might fall in love with someone, start a family, raise children, and the children could become brutal dictators who would devastate the planet by exchanging a volley of nuclear warheads, but if you had stayed at home, this would not have happened.

—Makes total sense.

—No, it fockin' doesn't! It doesn't! Bullshit! Bullshit! Total crap! Shut up! Shut up!

—That's a little bit saccharine… Just a tiny bit too much, if I may.

—By your logic, they also can become benevolent rulers who propel the arts and sciences, leading us all to the promised utopia, couldn't they?

—That's precisely true, but my point is, the set of such probabilities and outcomes is infinite, and nothing is impossible within its boundless realm. In one of the strata where we live, for example, Novo Tsarstvo, formed from the ruins of the erstwhile Velika Imperia, there are endless special military operations, asymmetric warfare, national unity under a strong leader, patriotism awareness campaigns, information security and media regulation, education reforms and mental hygiene, economic challenges, discipline enforcement and order maintenance, privacy protection and security monitoring, social harmony, and other political and semantic features of our noble regime, as if someone had cranked it up to the limit.

—Or artistic expression, emotional engagement, stability, and well-being!

—This is exactly where I'm getting at. At the same time, somewhere, there is a reality that is just like ours, but where those things are called by their names. Such as "war" is called "war", or, on the contrary, perhaps

it has never even existed as a concept! Somewhere there is one reality where what they show on TV and tell in the newspapers is Truth, not even in the sense that our leaders are lying (how could we even assume that?), but in the sense that the fantasies of our leaders may also be real in one of the infinite variations of our reality.

—Woah! A banger, that one. A certified banger. We should frame it, that one, shouldn't we?

—In another one, however, everything is even worse—there is an evil professor who bred a particular breed of *Homo demonicus*, and half of the populace "evolved" into it, and everything flashed red, including the sky, and the sky started laughing. In another one, where everything is the polar opposite, where our archipelago never existed, hence no Velika Imperia, and no Novo Tsarstvo, where the world's geography is completely different, where all the people are happy, lives a person who could somehow be reading our mind right now.

—Bullshit! Outright poop tornado.

The thought starts banging on the table. **Bang-bang-bang** it goes, louder and louder, until some of the thoughts put their hands over their ears.

—Don't freak us out! Please! Don't do that!

—One wishes to know which reality is which. Ha-ha!

—Bullshit! Bullshit!—screams one of the thoughts covering its ears.

They pause, and around them, in a few strokes, the ink paints a dark room, the far wall of which is adorned with a barred window transmitting the dim light illuminating the thoughts' silhouettes.

—Don't you think there's something a little... odd... as if from the Evil One?

—There's definitely a world where the Evil One himself waters the flowers in the morning and plays with the kittens in the afternoon, whether it's in his basement or not, and all is well between them, no harm done.

—It's a pity that that reality isn't ours.

—Absolutely a pity.

—The realities have collided, mixed together, as if at one moment something in the universal mechanism rumbled and clicked, one little cog went off, and many separate strata began to coexist in one. The environment remained the same, but an inflamed fissure, one shared by all, emerged in people's minds. The tectonic plates of consciousness have ripped open, and there is nothing and no one to fill the gaping hole between them.

—Just build a bridge.

—Who can build such a bridge?

—Builders. Bridge builders.

—Where have you seen such builders?

—Architects? There are universities that produce such people.

—Produce?

—Yes. The whole production pipeline.

—Some people have the extraordinary ability to see many realities; some even manage not only to see them but to switch between them, while most people are destined to live in only one.

—Is this a fantasy novel to you?

—Others think that it is possible to make a pact with these realities to ignore one another to the exclusion of any outburst of mutual interest. Consider us, for example; we have accustomed ourselves to ignoring the television reality, or rather we have accustomed ourselves to thinking so, and we were quite sure that she would also ignore us in return. Seemingly, all should be fine; no one bothers anyone, everyone lives in their own stratum, but then you suddenly notice that someone has fucked you over, hard and completely unscrupulously, mayhaps even with a baton, and at some point, the television reality comes to your door and—

Knock-knock

We approach the door, embrace its cold handle with our trembling, dry palm.

—Greetings, I am the television reality,—says the gentle and friendly high-pitched voice.

There she is, in official, militaristic, dark grey attire: a shirt, a skirt, both tweed, heeled shoes, black, polished; in her hands, a leather folder packed with documents; instead of her head, a miniature TV with two telescopic antennae, a slightly cracked screen, and nothing broadcast on it.

We say:

—I don't want to speak about our Lord.

She replies:

—From now on, I'm going to live with you.

—What? Who are you?

—I am the television reality, silly, but you may address me as TVR. It's quite a delight to finally meet you!

She wiggles her antennae.

—Well, I don't feel like it. Go away. You're unwelcome here.

—I must say, your deafness rather amuses me. There appears to be a misunderstanding, silly.

—And what is it?

—Now I live with you.

She smiles, and her antennae grow.

—Very funny,—we reply, shaking our head.

She stops talking and examines the surroundings.

—It's a bit chilly out here on the landing. Blood on the floor. The lift, too, is on the blink. Why don't we drop the pretence, and you can invite me in, love?

We shake our head even more.

—I'm not inviting you anywhere. Please. Leave.

We try to close the door, but the TVR inserts her elegant foot into the gap.

—It wasn't a request.

—Leave. Or I'm calling the police. That's an intrusion. Illegal, that.

—Oh, do not trouble yourself, love. The decision has been made at the highest echelons.

She points upwards with her index finger.

—Where?

—Such is the order of things.

—It's absurd.

—Oh, silly, I am fully aware. Please, open the door; don't be so dramatic.

Read next part

№1.3: Embrasure

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