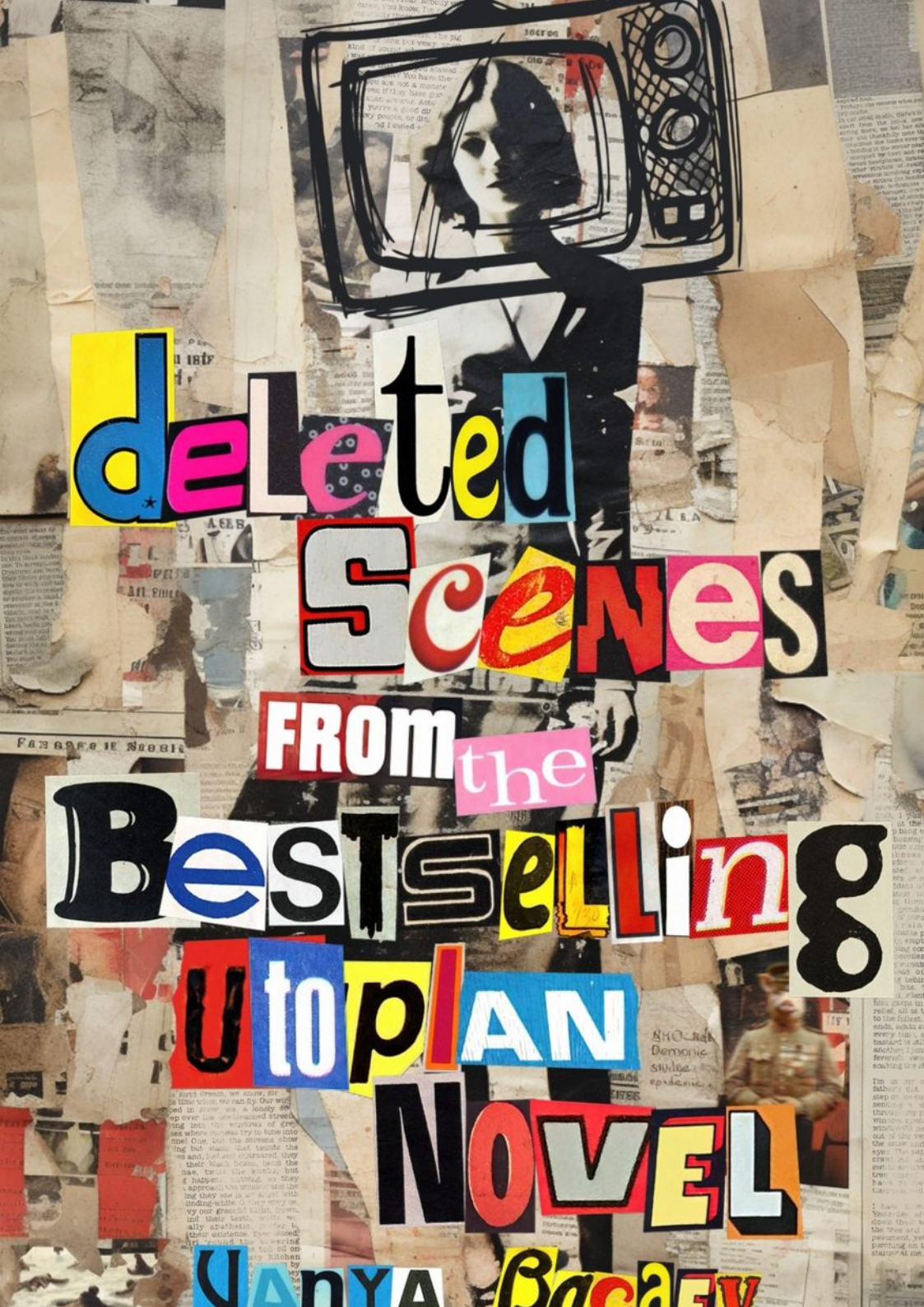

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Scenes
FROM the
Bestselling
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NOVEL
YANYA BAGLEY

№4: Training Memory

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As he listened to the lulling clank of a train, Gwyg sat next to his father and gazed at his homeland retreating into the distance, a village nestled among the balding knolls, the same knolls where he had witnessed his birth and boyhood.

Somewhere beyond those hills was their home, from which he felt he had not yet journeyed that far away, at least not by rail; on foot, he thought, they had certainly walked quite a distance. Somewhere there was also the blooming apple orchard, which after last year's break should burst into maroon glory again. Ripe and heavy with juice, apples would tumble to the green grass, laden and tired of hanging and wishing to be picked, then baked into a fragrant cinnamon apple pie, pressed into juice, mashed into purée, boiled into jam or compote, or simply eaten, perhaps after removing wee worms and slicing off the rusty brownish spots, which Gwyg had deemed as a child to be the tastiest parts. Somewhere there also lay a field where they had just planted potatoes, which this year, presumably, his mother and sister would dig out alone. There was also the white building of a school he had just graduated from, and each labyrinthine passageway and pedagogical chamber was etched with impeccable clarity in his memory. Some of his

friends were still there, most of whom jounced on this same train, chattering like an audience in a theatre that didn't quite understand the play's plot. Still there were also his favourite teachers, from whom he had parted amidst a bittersweet farewell a few weeks ago together with his classmates and Ann.

His mind was wracked with poignant remorse, a melancholic afterthought that nagged at him relentlessly, for not being able to say goodbye to Ann in person, resorting instead to a paltry phone. Gwyg hated phones; they seemed unnatural to him, a lifeless medium of communication bereft of warmth and tactility. It filled him with unspoken anxiety that the phone might become the only way to keep in touch with his home and kin. Gwyg was sure the invention of the telephone was a callous ploy to delude people into thinking that they no longer needed face-to-face interactions and could simulate communication through a hissing relay travelling through electrical conduits. Hearing a cherished voice transmitted across vast distances did stir a delight, yes, yet it always remained a pale imitation of the genuine, an ersatz approximation. His hatred of phones intensified even more because he had to listen to Ann's distorted dulcet voice at the moments when he yearned to lose himself in the sky-like boundless depth of her eyes and see the reflections of drifting clouds, to hug her, run his fingers through her silken hair, and just stand like that for a few minutes without separating, feeling her eyelashes tickling his cheek.

Emotions came and went, amalgamated, and clogged his train of thought. His feelings chugged along, gathering steam as the landscape

blurred by. Abruptly, Gwyg felt a wrenching nostalgia, which he had never felt before, vivid and luminous, as if memories, like Gwyg, his father, and others on the train now, were being transferred to another part of the brain, to a cerebral factory where they underwent a metamorphosis by a complex alchemical interplay into nostalgic material for subsequent revision. Somehow, Gwyg felt that part of these memories would remain just memories caught in the same temporal trap as the present moment.

A chilling sensation slithered up his spine to his neck, and felt like the quivers of an impending shiver, yet halted midway in its ascent. Gradually, Gwyg began to feel uneasy, like a taut rope stretched thin by the force of distance. He sensed that a piece of himself had been taken away from him, that his body was still there, but a part of him, be it his soul or the proverbial consciousness or something else metaphysical, was still at home with his mother and sister, drinking tea, relishing the crumbly texture of oatmeal cookies studded with tart cranberries, which his mother had baked early in the morning. She must have got up at five or six o'clock for this, or maybe she hadn't slept all night. That morning, she appeared fatigued and somewhat disoriented, her eyes reddened as if she had been cutting onions all night, and she seemed to have aged a few years. Gwyg even thought he saw some grey hair on her head.

A sudden realisation struck Gwyg that if they were to meet next time, they would all be completely different people, and his sister would have grown up and become a big adult girl, and he, Gwyg, would miss that transformation. She would always stay that mischievous monkey whom

he, just a few minutes ago, could pick up with both hands and lift skyward, spin around on a laughing carousel, or put her astride his shoulders and run along the river's edge.

Gwyg's father, also dressed in khaki, sat next to him the whole time and remained silent. Perhaps he had no words left to be spoken, or that part that had been cleaved from everyone on that day and taken away was too agonising to bear. He didn't look sad, tired, or upset—he looked none, thought Gwyg, with empty eyes and a face devoid of emotion as though he were a machine, shut off and left to gather dust. He was never an emotional person; it was difficult to call him sentimental or sensitive to anything. Rather, he reacted stoically, using frowning, headshaking, or expressing passive disapproval with his calm demeanour, but now it was as if he had put on a mask. It was still his face, but someone else was hiding behind its guise. Gwyg couldn't know what was going on in his father's head, whether he was thinking about home or whithersoever they were going and what would happen next. Perhaps his father was thinking about the same things, the same people, his wife and daughter, trying to memorise their faces with forced smiles as they stood on the platform among a hundred others and remember them like this, without tears in their eyes, although with a touch of sadness that would never be washed out of his memory whatever happens.

Gwyg never thought that his first train ride with his father would be like this. Soon they were supposed to go to the city, to the university, where his father, dressed in his best suit, which, as Gwyg's mother said, he had

kept since the wedding and was now slightly tight on his belly, would lead Gwyg to the table of the admission office in the polytechnic faculty. After presenting Gwyg's pile of papers and school diploma with his decent but average scores, he would say that his son wanted to become an engineer. The admission office member would smile, they would hand over all the necessary documents, and the two would go to have their first beer together. Then in the evening, Gwyg would finally meet Ann again.

The horizon's voracious maw devoured their home. At first, hand-waving people turned into small smeared silhouettes, then cars disappeared, then trees and houses melded into a uniform grey-green goop before dissolving entirely, and finally, the church's spire dove beyond the horizon and the village faded away. Amidst the fading landscape, a scraggly and scruffy stray, with a torn ear and a possible limp, chased after them, but then it stopped in the middle of the rails and just continued barking at the passing train until it too merged with the landscape. Later, as they descended into a valley, a river began to run by the side, the same one where Gwyg once learned to swim, and where he went fishing with his father or friends, but then the river sharply turned and the train entered an endless pine tunnel, which, due to the movement, looked more like a poorly assembled shoddy stockade, reminiscent of the ones their ancestors built to protect their settlements.

The wind wafted the scent of resin and pine needles into the coach through an ajar window. The monotonous panorama of pines and the clattering of the train's wheels soothed and entranced Gwyg. As his

thoughts began to drift away and ennui crept in, he feared he would succumb to sleep and miss the whole journey leaving no memory of it behind so he decided to talk.

—Which front exactly are they taking us to?—Gwyg asked.

His father turned his face to him and only shrugged.

Read next part

№5: Fluffislav The Fearsome

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