

nova · nevedoma



Eastern European Cartoons

Twisted Lullaby I-V

nova-nevedoma.com/twisted-lullaby/



“Consoler of monsters” by Kazimierz Stabrowski

I

I run after the clouds, and they run after me. We run together, neither falling behind. The sun must be hiding behind them, the sun loves to hide, it's quite good at hiding, it hides every night. Night and day are alike now. They're just like little brother and little sister. Like you and me. The clouds are black, thick, heavy, hanging all the way to the ground like an old holey hammock or a thick net. Mosquitoes get stuck in nets, and in clouds, sunbeams get stuck, in clouds, we get stuck. Aren't you cold, little brother? Don't be scared, we're almost there. Your eyes are as blue as the sky, which can't be seen when the sun is hiding, and it's always hiding. I know, even though I can't see it, that the sea is just as blue as your eyes. Fish swim in the sea, wiggling their tails, splashing about. Jellyfish swim in the sea too, they are poisonous and don't splash at all. If you touch them, or if they touch you, your skin will peel off and you'll be left with nothing at all, not even “skin and bones,” but maybe just “only bones.” I don't know what would happen if a jellyfish touched a bone—children's books don't write about such things, and grown-up ones probably don't either, because maybe nothing would be left. It would be super cool to check, but not on yourself; they say you don't show or test on yourself, although really you always end up showing and testing everything on yourself, and learning to fall without it hurting, and learning to walk so you don't fall, and finding a way

through the forest so you don't get lost, and getting lost in a way that you don't fall and it doesn't hurt and you can keep going, because otherwise you'll fall on your knees, scrape your skin, as if the whole earth were covered in jellyfish, and then it hurts to walk, just like that, even when you're not falling, because you've already fallen recently, and your knees are now all scraped up and bruised, and they ache and sting. Your eyes also sting from the smoke, like, probably, from sea salt in seawater, so it feels like you want to cry for no reason, but tears themselves are salty, like seawater, but they don't sting. First something stings, and then they run. Smoke makes your nose sting and your tongue bitter, but your skin feels nothing, absolutely nothing, no stinging, no pain, it just gets a bit darker, but maybe that's just how it seems, or rather, how it "feels," just like with the sun—you can't see it, but you "feel" it setting, rising, going round and round us, throwing its rays on your skin, which makes it tan—magic! And if you tan too much, it'll sting, just like from a jellyfish, as if the rays and the sun itself are also made of jellyfish, like everything else.

When I was really little, I was afraid of the dark, super-duper afraid, so afraid that I wanted to poke my eyes out with plastic scissors, but then I thought that it would probably be even darker and even scarier, so I changed my mind, and it's good that I changed my mind, because I stopped being afraid right away, and now I'm not afraid at all, even the opposite—I like it. From such darkness, nothing can be seen and you can't feel how much of it is left, this darkness. It feels like it will end any minute, the clouds, left alone, will run away, the sun will unhide, and

we'll lie on the ground and get a suntan, but not too much, so we don't burn up completely and turn to ashes, like everything else, and the wind will pick us up and blow us all over the place and all over the earth like fluffy dandelions. Maybe then you and I will grow right where we need to grow, we'll just pop up, climb out of the ground where needed, and where not needed too—everywhere, we'll fill up everything, and we won't need to go anywhere, because we'll already be everywhere we need to be, and where we don't need to be too. The main thing is to step carefully, so you don't fall. From bumpy-bump to bumpy-bump, like this, like a little goat. And you're not heavy at all, even light, and I'm very strong, which makes you even lighter, which makes me even stronger, and you even lighter, and me even stronger, and we both help each other this way. There, where we're going, we won't need to help each other, there'll be loads of other helpers, just like me and you, just like both of us. Others aren't allowed in there, others aren't trusted anymore, others should help themselves until they're completely helped, but they probably won't manage because they always argue with each other, which, there where we're going, is super-duper forbidden or something terrible will happen, like, don't be scared, but if you argue, something awful will happen to you, those people will come and take you far away to these people, you'll live with them, argue with them, it will sting and be dark, and there'll be no sea, no sun, no flying dandelions, so you need to live nicely together, so that nothing stings, so it's bright from the sun and from everything around, and dandelions bloom, and never fade and never fly away just anywhere, but are always where they should be. Then there won't be any black-very-black city

with a black-very-black street, with a black-very-black house, where very nasty people live who always argue and don't want to live nicely together. They're silly-billies, total silly-billies, they don't understand such easy things, they're to blame for everything, and we have nothing to do with it, we didn't do anything, we were few years old, and still are not many, much fewer, so few that I stopped counting, because what if I forget how many years you and I are, then they will also forget and stop seeing us and won't be able to chase us, to them we'll just become little people of small size, looking at everything from the ground up, so tiny that we can't even be noticed, we'll just disappear and be on our own, nicely together.

II

There once was a little boy who one day stabbed his teacher with scissors, which, even though they were plastic, were sharp and dangerous enough to stab the teacher, which he did. The world wrapped her in jellyfish, she got stung from the inside and outside, warm liquid, that's blood, flowed from her, and then she got quiet and stopped arguing, promising that she would never argue again. Or maybe it wasn't a boy at all, but the teacher herself who went crazy, argued with herself, and stabbed herself with scissors (it happens), and the boy cried, he was also stinging, also from inside and outside, but not from tears, from something else. He was really tiny, weak, not good at living and couldn't stab anyone with scissors, especially plastic ones, which are

usually used to cut coloured paper, to make a collage, for example, a picture of dandelions against a blue sea or blue sky, depending on where they grow—on a hill beyond which is the sea, or below a hill beyond which is still the sea, but you just can't see it. He wanted to spend his whole life making just these kinds of collages, cutting coloured (blue, green, yellow, white) paper with plastic (pink) scissors and sticking pieces together until a picture appeared, which he could show to his big sister, who still were little, and she would say “good job” and suggest making more, more and more, because collages are never enough. But one day something terrible happened, or actually, nothing terrible happened at first, it happened later, after the boy found a blind kitten in the school yard. It was definitely blind, because it couldn't see the boy, just mewed and walked in completely different and weird directions, which led nowhere, not into the boy's arms, not anywhere else, as if the kitten was just lost in the dark. Its eyes were not at all kitty-like, without the opening-closing black door on a yellow background, but looked like two sparkly and rainbow-y pearls, which usually (if you look hard) can be found in shells by the river, in which jellyfish might swim too, but small ones, because the river is quite shallow, and there would just be no room for big jellyfish to swim. The kitten, must not have gone into the river, where other unwanted kittens go, because it couldn't see where to go, but stayed on the shore and dug up shells in the sand with those very pearls, which were exactly like the eyes of the blind kitten. Anyway, the kitten and the pearls found each other, and the boy then found this kitten. He took it in his arms, hid it inside his jacket and carried it to school, because right then he was going from home to school, not the

other way around, on the black-very-black asphalt in the opposite direction to the buzzing cars, because his parents had taught him to walk to school exactly like that, so that these buzzing cars could always be seen, and so they would never sneak up from behind and attack him. It was still really early, but, even so, the teacher, seeing the kitten, began to argue, shout, why did he bring it, that school was no place for kittens, especially blind ones, who would now look after this kitten (to which the boy honestly said that he would himself), who would feed it, give it milk, keep it and with what, not a brass, because he's still a boy, he doesn't have a brass and can't have any, to which the boy replied that he had enough brass that this teacher had never count in her life, but such an answer didn't make the teacher happy, she ordered the boy to get rid of the kitten, take it back to where he had brought it from, and, maybe, take it to the same river where they take other kittens. And what happened next, I don't want to tell you, you already know it anyway.

III

They ran together over bumpy-bumps, over bumpy-bumps, over little paths, but without going “plop” into a hole, because they carefully went around the holes. Clouds ran after them across the sky, and chasers ran after them across the ground, but they just couldn't catch them properly, because the sky was so low that the clouds completely blocked those running in front from those running behind, and the sun, even though you couldn't see it, still lit up the path for both, but more, of

course, for the first ones, because their shadows fell backwards, in the direction opposite to their running away, leaving the chasers with a bit fewer rays. Somewhere a volcano explosion had happened, or rather, the volcano spat lava, it flowed across the ground in all directions from the volcano, flowed into caves and got hard there, but before that, scared, these very chasers had crawled out of the caves, sat on huge, crocodile-like lizards and rode after the boy and girl over bumpy-bumps, over bumpy-bumps, over little paths, “plop” into a hole, because these lizards rode very messily, always tripping over bumpy-bumps and falling into holes, which made the riders angry and they started arguing with each other and with the lizards and hit them with sticks. The girl and boy didn’t hear or see any of this (they were running far ahead), but they knew for sure that it was happening, like with the sun, which either went down or came up.

And so, on one sunny day, they ran into a doll factory, where dolls weren’t made anymore, because the factory owner had run out of brass to make these dolls and he had nothing to pay the workers of this factory, so they just shrugged their shoulders and went away, leaving their work, not finishing it, leaving the dolls in the factory without owners, without legs and without arms, some even without bodies and heads, and some completely without eyes, because of which these dolls, unlike the workers, couldn’t go anywhere and stayed scattered around this factory on shelves, on the floor, on chairs, piled in corners and falling out of windows, until the girl and boy found them. But the girl and boy couldn’t keep working at the factory, finish all these dolls, or

even take them with them, because they were running and really hurrying to get to that special place and were already very tired (they just couldn't carry that many unfinished dolls, they themselves wouldn't have had enough arms), and they had to leave all the unfinished dolls there, in this ash-covered abandoned factory, through which after days the chasers on lizards would rush and squash the body parts lying everywhere: arms, legs, bodies, heads completely without eyes, not even pearl ones. The lizards, like dogs, would smell out the trail of the girl and boy and run along this trail over bumpy-bumps, over bumpy-bumps, over little paths, "plop" into a hole.

IV

A mean old woman lived in the forest, in the same kind where all such mean old women usually live, as if these forests are grown specially to put all these mean old women in them, just like they plant special areas to grow wolves, foxes, rabbits, bears, and other animals in them. This old woman had a twisted nose, twisted ears, twisted hands, twisted legs, and even twisted eyes, from which came an equally twisted look. She lived in an equally twisted house, built from twisted trees, which grew everywhere in this twisted black-very-black forest.

In the mornings, until about lunchtime, the mean old woman taught life to children who weren't mean, didn't argue with each other, loved kittens, and wanted to live nicely together. So, by chance it happened

that this old woman was a teacher by job. In the morning she would come out to a dark clearing, surrounded by twisted trees, and her twisted look would run around looking for someone she could teach about life. Sometimes the old woman felt that she herself didn't know anything, hadn't seen anything in life, hadn't read books, hadn't made collages, hadn't seen real jellyfish and huge, crocodile-like lizards, which eat unripe, still yellow dandelions, and she didn't want to teach anyone, but she had nowhere else to go, because, as I already said, she didn't know how to do anything else at all and exactly because of this she was mean and twisted, or maybe it was the opposite—she didn't know anything because she was mean and twisted, but if she had woken up in the morning, gone out to the clearing and become nice and untwisted, she would have learned everything right away, but she wouldn't do this for some reason, probably out of habit. When she was little, the old woman also dreamed of all sorts of things like making collages, for example, working at a factory that made unfinished dolls, which was right nearby, just behind the forest where she lived, but then she suddenly found out that this factory had been closed for some unknown reason, and she became mean and twisted.

That's how it sometimes happens, and sometimes it happens that a boy and a girl suddenly find themselves in a forest and, even though they can see where to go, still get lost there, but suddenly find a hut on twisted legs, where that very twisted old woman lives and waits for them to teach them about life.

Boy-boy, says the old woman in a twisted voice, you have such blue

eyes, just like the sky, just like the sea, and you look just like a doll, even if quite a finished one. Boy-boy, says the old woman (and she's not only all twisted, but also wears a red dress with a red hood, covering all her face, except for big, black pearl-like eyes), do you want me to feed you and your sister a yummy dinner? And the boy says nothing, he's scared, only his sister speaks for him, who is older and stronger, who understands everything right away—the old woman is very mean and very twisted, you can't have dinner with her, you need to run, but they can't run, because the old woman has already sat them at the table, put out this promised yummy dinner on plates, handed out spoons and fancy bibs and closed the door to the hut.

We don't want to.

What do you mean you don't want to?

We want to go, but we don't want to eat, old woman, we should be running now, it's late, chasers are following us.

You're not going anywhere until you eat.

We don't want to.

What kind of word is that "don't want to"? There's no such word.

But such a word definitely existed, the girl knew it for sure, and the boy knew it too, even though he was frightened and seemed to have forgotten everything. There was no way out, they had to run, thought the girl, grabbed a knife from the table and ordered the old woman to

open the door, or else she would have to stab the old woman, even though she really didn't want to argue, and really wanted to live nicely together, but in one of her hands was already a knife, which was not at all plastic, and in the other hand was the hand of her little brother, which she squeezed as hard as she could. The mean old woman had to agree, because she didn't want warm liquid, that's blood, to flow from her and for her to be wrapped in stinging jellyfish, because the girl, even though she was small, was strong and looked scary, so scary that the old woman had to let both the girl and the boy go.

At nights, before sleep, she still believed that the factory for finishing unfinished dolls would someday open, but kept on being mean and twisted just in case it didn't.

V

Either the holes were around the bumpy-bumps, or the bumpy-bumps were in the middle of the holes, and they looked like craters, as if someone had cried for a very long time with stinging tears, which ate away the earth, like skin from the touch of jellyfish, and that's how bumpy-bumps with holes were made, over which the girl and boy ran.

She always said something, and he always kept quiet about something. If Goddie were a child, like him, her little brother, then he would definitely think that they were blind kittens, running in a confusing and weird direction, and would definitely take them in his arms and carry

them to school, where he would have to meet with a mean and twisted teacher and argue with her. If Goddie were a child, he would completely forget that he was goddie, and spend all day making unfinished collages with sky, sun, and grass, but at one wonderful moment he would run out of yellow paper and would have to make dandelions already ripe, completely white, and the sun also ripe and white, so bright that you could see it even through black-very-black clouds. He would spend all his days making just these kinds of collages and nothing more, no magic, nothing else like that. After a while, he would forget how to make it, magic, because he was too busy with collages and looking for yellow paper, which there was never enough of, because everyone in the class wanted yellow, unripe dandelions, and nobody wanted white and ripe ones, which fly around everywhere. Yellow dandelions are heavy, the wind doesn't blow them away, but white ones are super light, weigh nothing, like jellyfish, and the wind carries them away, scatters them around the world, to all its corners, whether it's a field full of bumpy-bumps, or a twisted forest, full of twisted trees and mean old women, and everything around starts to sting. If Goddie were a child, he wouldn't let his kittens get hurt, would chase away the lizards that eat dandelions, and would save his, even if mean, teacher from plastic scissors, because he would be both Goddie and a child at the same time. But for some reason, not a single child in the world was Goddie, and not a single Goddie in the world was a child. Everyone around was grown-up, looking from somewhere above and for some reason couldn't see anything, even not being blind kittens, and lived in twisted huts in black-very-black twisted forests. And the girl kept running with

her little brother and thinking, why are you always quiet? Stop being quiet, I'm completely bored with running.

Read next part

The Doomsday Button

<https://nova-nevedoma.com/the-doomsday-button/>

nova·nevédoma

*A literary locus and solo samizdat press
for original fictions and translations.*

nova-nevedoma.com



scan to subscribe

Find us on Substack



blog.nova-nevedoma.com