

Valery  
SHEVCHUK

The Moon's Cuckoo  
from the Swallow's Nest

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Yulka was small, only five centimeters taller than short Nataka, with squat hips on stumpy legs but with breasts so surprisingly large that they burst out of her clothes. Her face was as round and flat as the moon and a tiny nipple nose rose like a beak from the center of it. Her grey lips were undistinguishable from the rest of her face, and her eyes, topped by a fine furrow of brows, were round, grey and astonished. Her wispy hair, of the same grey color, was clasped back with a rubber band. She appeared one day from one of the villages near Zhytomir, obtained the prescribed documents, and established herself at one of the toxic factories. She lived for a while in a communal dorm and then got a room on the outskirts of town, a room so small that it could hold only a bed, a small table and a chair. The room had two windows but no separate entrance. The landlady who sold it to her said Yulka could walk through her room for now, but as she spoke, she narrowed her eyes so that even a blind man could see this would only be a temporary arrangement. Yulka wasn't dumb; she realized that the former mistress of her room would not tolerate this inconvenience for long, but the landlady wanted to sell, Yulka wanted to buy and that settled the matter. Yulka became the owner of a room in a building on a hillside in which there were nine such cubby-hole dwellings. So far, there were only eight TV antennas on the roof, and each room had a shabby built-on entrance, some with little stairways or porches, all of them fastened to the building like swallows' nests.

"After you settle in some, you can build an entrance through one of the windows," the former owner of Yulka's room said benevolently, narrowing her eyes again. This was almost an ultimatum, but Yulka silently agreed to it because she knew perfectly well that it wouldn't be enough merely to buy the room. If she wanted to live in her own home instead of those horrid communal quarters, eventually she would have to invest time and money in her new place, and this would be no small problem for her. Yulka had already spent all her savings on the room, and it was unlikely that she could put anything away from her earnings at the toxic factory.

And that was why during her free time, she opened the window, pushed up the chair (that she had bought with the bed and table, along with the room from the landlady), and set her exquisite bosoms — that practically burst out of her blouse — on the window-

sill. She sat this way — motionless, dozing or daydreaming — and stared at the willows along the river, or at the portion of the street that was visible from her sill. Or maybe she wasn't looking at anything or anyone, for as she sat, her face became indifferent, like a greying moon that had perched on a windowsill to rest for a while. Yulka was so still and aloof that every man who happened to pass by, inadvertently turned his face toward her. Some merely threw her a glance, others flashed toothy grins, but no one stopped or attempted to talk to her, although everyone's eyes took in her voluptuous breasts. Yulka reacted not at all to these gazes; it was as if she didn't see anyone. Or maybe it just seemed that way, for who can guess what a woman thinks, or what she sees or doesn't see.

[Yulka continues to perch daily on her windowsill. At length, a man named Shurka Kuksa notices her... and her breasts. He becomes instantly determined to have her, both because he is so smitten with her breasts and because he is, for the moment, between lovers. He has recently left his mistress, who had been pressuring him to marry her. And while Shurka Kuksa is a man who can't do without a woman, he is also a man with no interest in marriage.

Shurka Kuksa propositions Yulka. She scorns him at first but when he claims that he's the kind that can do anything, Yulka agrees to consider his advances, but only if he installs a door where her window now is. This strikes Shurka Kuksa as ridiculous. He's never been much of a worker, and, he proudly admits to himself, he is used to getting women at no cost.

Still, Shurka Kuksa is, quite literally, moonstruck. He can't get Yulka off his mind as the light of the moon pours down on him. He decides to go to the Podil\* to look for a door. He thinks he'll take one from a dilapidated building there, but the place has already been stripped, so he ends up stealing a door from the "White House," a communal building (not unlike the Swallow's Nest where Yulka lives) that houses one of Shurka Kuksa's former mistresses. Shurka brings the door to Yulka and, expecting his reward, gropes Yulka's breast. Yulka doesn't react to his touch and refuses him any more access to her until he installs the door.

The next day Yulka leaves the "Nameless backstreet" where she lives and goes to work. Shurka spends the day installing the door. As

he does, he gets nosy questions from the “goat-woman,” the former occupant of Yulka’s room who is now Yulka’s landlady. (Yulka’s landlady looks like a goat, but indeed every woman at the Swallow’s Nest seems to resemble a barnyard animal.) The women of the building watch while he works. Ludka, the local busybody — and a virgin who lives alone — also watches. At the end of the day, Shurka buys some home-brew from the landlady, gets a bit drunk on it, and falls asleep in Yulka’s room. He dreams that all the women from the Swallow’s Nest dance around him naked in their animal likenesses, and sing a lullaby to him in their animal voices. In the dream, Ludka is the only one who is not naked and does not resemble an animal. She comforts Shurka because “he’s stupid and neglected,” and the poor wretch, who has known only misunderstanding and abuse, is moved to tears. Then, in a semi-sleep state, he sees:

*“...the moon’s daughter walking down the Nameless backstreet...a narrow dirt path winding through a barren valley without shrubs, trees or grass. She walked along it slowly on stumpy legs, tired, filled with poisons inhaled at the toxic factory, her face deadened and indifferent, her grey eyes overflowing with those same poisons.”*

It is Yulka, who has returned from work. Shurka asks for his “payment” but Yulka refuses him, because her door needs a lock and because he is drunk. She tells him, emphatically, “I can’t stand drunks.” He leaps at her, pawing her, but she kicks and screams and sends him on his way. The next day, he returns and installs the lock. Yulka makes him dinner and promises him payment if he returns after eleven, the time when the entire Swallow’s Nest rocks with the rhythms of men making love to their wives.

Sober and sprayed with eau de cologne, Shurka returns that night. On the way, he feels some unease about the busybody Ludka, who he assumes is following him. But he continues on to the Swallow’s Nest, where he finds Yulka — hot to the touch — and makes passionate love to her.

Meanwhile, Ludka, who is, indeed, following Shurka, feels a bit apprehensive about spying on him, because earlier in the evening her friend was telling her about extra-terrestrials who steal virgins. She suspects that the “mysterious and strange street character, Rudko,” the man who has been staring at her so intensely as if “some fine thread had already linked them some time earlier,” may, in fact, be an

extra-terrestrial. Her concerns fade away as she follows Shurka, but her sadness returns as she spies on Shurka at the Swallow's Nest. She feels she is the only one who is left out of the love that is taking place all around her. And she raises her arms to the cold, star-studded sky and cries out

*"... to that invisible nothingness which is everything and sees everything and knows everything and controls everything. Let it show itself—that force which has the body of hope and the eyes of love; let it pour its eternal pitcher of radiant milk down on her as well... so that she would not be a lone reed with despair for its seed, so that she too would have purpose in this world."*

Then she sees Rudko, that strange and mysterious man "who sought out the lonely and the pure, and endowed them with a mystery," walking toward her. He stands there, "flooded by the moon's radiance," then leans over her as she lies prone in the cool womb of the earth, strokes her hair, wipes her tears and assures her gently that everything will be fine.

Several days later, and with everyone at the Swallow's Nest watching, some wooden boards are unloaded in front of Yulka's house. Yulka informs her landlady that she's going to install a gas stove and cylinder in her room, since she can't use the landlady's kitchen forever. Yulka claims to have received an allotment of boards from work, but the boards are so old and worn that nobody believes her. They tell her she has to take them out of the yard and Yulka starts to drag the boards up the hill, stacking them below her window. — M.S.]

Meanwhile, Shurka Kuksa decided to wander over to the Nameless backstreet in hopes of reaching an agreement with Yulka about his next night visit, but in the nick of time he noticed that she was dragging boards, so he hid among the willows, telling the smashed bucket that lay there, "She's hot but very expensive. If I'm not careful, I'll become her personal slave."

Shurka Kuksa spoke this out loud, and then lay back on the grass, gazed at the bright sky, listened to the larks, and succumbed to sweet idleness, crowning his pleasure by sucking on the sap of a stem.

Yulka lugged the boards, secretly expecting Shurka to catch her in the act, because she had a feeling that he wouldn't abandon her after their first time together, and when he returned, she could just turn the job over to him, albeit at the price of another one night stand. And

then, Yulka thought, she would make a deal with him about building an addition.

With this one operation, Yulka wanted to catch several rabbits. Rabbit number one: construction of an addition for a gas stove. Rabbit number two: getting this done without any special losses, even though she had nothing in particular to lose. And finally, rabbit number three: Shurka Kuksa wasn't married — Yulka had found this out for certain — so she hoped to use these projects to get a firm hold on him. There was Lord knows how much work still to be done in that Swallow's Nest in which she had invested all her money. If Shurka Kuksa worked on the nest, he'd get used to it, because, in a way, it would be his then, too. So in that respect, Shurka Kuksa had guessed correctly: Yulka did want to make him a live-in slave.

But Shurka was a child of a system that proclaimed: "Better that everyone (except officials) be poor than that half be poor and half be rich," and so he preferred to lie idle on the grass rather than to carry Yulka's boards, even if this meant sacrificing a night's pleasure. He regretted this a little but consoled himself simply; he closed his eyes, letting the sun's rays sweetly caress his eyelids, and in his imagination replayed everything that had happened to him in the Swallow's Nest. It was all sweet and delightful, and he dozed contentedly while Yulka labored. She was boiling mad at him now; the bum had failed to turn up.

As soon as she finished the work, he woke. He continued to rest while Yulka cleaned up, ate, and washed the dishes, her anger cooling. Then, when she had settled in her single window, he sighed, picked himself up and headed toward the Nameless backstreet. Being a man, he couldn't stay away from Yulka when he still had hopes that he might pluck a flower from her field.

When he spotted her round face in the window and those flowing bosoms on the sill, he paused, leaned back against the fence, and called out to her, "Oh! You're back from work already!"

"As you can see!" Yulka snipped curtly.

"I sure put in nice doors for you," Shurka Kuksa said tongue-in-cheek. "Like a picture."

"Doors are doors," Yulka replied straightforwardly, referring to the actual doors and not his silly innuendo.

"What are these boards under your window for?"

"I want to put in an addition," she said, more gently.

"Listen," Shurka Kuksa began directly, "maybe you'll invite me for a visit today too?"

Her round astonished eyes poured gray opalescence over him like cold water.

"Why not," she said. "If you make an addition for me."

Shurka got upset. This was really too much. "Do you know what it costs to have an addition made?"

"I'm not forcing you," Yulka said calmly. "You asked, and I answered."

"To make an addition you have to be a carpenter."

"Well, yes," Yulka said. "You did put in a door."

"Doors are simple. I can't build an addition."

"Suit yourself," Yulka replied and turned away from him to look at the riverscape, or maybe at the moon, which was already visible even though the sky was bright and there was plenty of light all around. The moon, carved in the bright sky, looked a bit astonished, almost like Yulka's eyes, and for some strange reason, Shurka Kuksa felt embarrassed that he didn't know how to build an addition. Still, he was afraid of drowning in the grey mother-of-pearl of Yulka's eyes and in the wide flood of her breasts on the windowsill. It occurred to him that maybe it had all been a dream — that hot coupling of theirs — because apparently nothing had changed in their relationship. She was just as distant with him as before — maybe even more so — and to reestablish their closeness, she now proposed an even higher price. Although he was attracted to her beyond words, he was afraid of getting caught in a new yoke.

"I'll talk to Kolia-the-fisherman," she said indifferently. "I'm sure he could handle the job."

This time, it seemed her words had a double meaning, and Shurka stared directly at Yulka. It was the double meaning that sobered him up, forced him to come to his senses, and maybe even offended him. "Well, fine, talk to him," he said. "Kolia knows how. Bye."

"Bye!" Yulka said indifferently and looked out at the riverscape, as if she had nothing to do with Shurka Kuksa, didn't know him and didn't want to.

So Shurka left, but she remained at the window: her face became

sleepy, like a sallow moon perched there for a rest. She was so still and aloof that every man who walked down the backstreet turned, without fail, in her direction. But she noticed nothing, and had no need to move.

This happened day after day. Sometimes Shurka appeared in the neighborhood, but he never came close, and Kolia-the-fisherman's paths were such that he didn't wander into the Nameless backstreet. Indeed, Kolia's paths were very simple: to and from work, and to and from the river.

There was a devil inside Kolia-the-fisherman as well, black and fleshed out, with real horns and a tail. But this demon had a guardian who was watchful as a goose, who even resembled a goose, and this guardian was Kolia's mother-in-law. His wife, Lubka, was aware of his demon, but she was indifferent to it; there were enough other worries in her life. Whenever the devil awoke in Kolia-the-fisherman, he would either start drinking and throw his wife and mother-in-law out of the house — this was the simpler and less dangerous madness — or else he would embark on amorous adventures, and then his mother-in-law resolutely assumed the task of chasing the devil out of him. She did this by spying on him and then creating a scandal for the slut who responded to his advances. All this, invariably, ended simply. Kolia eventually returned to the bosom of his family, and the demon ended up disgraced, thrashed, and purged, with a torn tail and broken horns. In the end, the devil became so meek and scared that he withdrew into the depths of Kolia-the-fisherman's soul while Kolia once again returned to his customary paths: to and from work, and to and from the river. Although his mother-in-law might be appeased, she didn't let him out of her sight. She appeared on the island frequently to check on Kolia-the-fisherman's whereabouts and doings. If some need carried him away from the area, she knew exactly where he went, when he would return, and with whom he had business.

The mother-in-law was tiny and thin, with a sharp, goose-like face and a slight smile; it was only when she talked about lechers and whores that her voice became rusty and hoarse, her face turned furious, her eyes fumed with a copper flame, and her lips pressed together like two steel plates. This was the kind of moral guardian our Kolia had. All the women in the neighborhood knew it very well, and whenever the demon awoke in him, not one of them gave in to his



advances, so he had to prowl elsewhere, such as at work, where there was a staunch security system in place, set up to keep exactly such mothers-in-law out (for it certainly didn't prevent the theft of so-called "government property," and this too everyone knew, including the security guard who had to make a living somehow).

7.

Kolia-the-fisherman turned into the Nameless backstreet one evening by coincidence and with good intentions. There, in the Swallow's Nest, lived a certain Vadym, husband of a woman who resembled a cat and owned a fantastic, lovely cat with white fluff on its tail and white fur on its chest, a cat whom she loved, in truth, more than her husband and children. And so her husband was uncomfortable at home, and became a fisherman. He had once promised to give Kolia a fishing line, or a float, or some worms, or maybe it was a sinker, or so the devil convinced Kolia, curling up his knuckles like a donut and knocking on his patron's heart. (The ancient Greeks would have described this more poetically; they would have said the little winged god Cupid, or Amor, or Eros, stretched an arrow over his bow and even though his eyes were blinded, the god shot and his arrow found its mark right in Kolia-the-fisherman's heart.) At any rate, that was how Kolia ended up in the Nameless backstreet, and the first thing he saw was an unfamiliar woman, perched in a window with her exquisite bosoms flooding the windowsill. Her face was as round as the moon, a face so calm, indifferent and self-absorbed that, for a moment, Kolia-the-fisherman forgot about Vadym, dropped to his knees, and stared at the fleeting vision.

"Well, hello, Lunar Cuckoo," Kolia-the-fisherman said softly. "Somehow I never noticed you before."

She turned her eyes toward him and drenched him in her cold mother-of-pearl gaze, or maybe she extended some icy feelers toward him and pawed with prickly but gentle fingers.

"Hello," Yulka replied indifferently.

Now Kolia-the-fisherman had no further thoughts of Vadym. Confident that he, better than anyone else, knew how to hoodwink women, he began to sweet talk Yulka. She responded curtly and indifferently, but in such a way that he gave in more and more, not so

much to her charms — save her exquisite breasts, she had none — but to his demon who immediately convinced him that it would be easy to pluck a flower here. Kolia-the-fisherman didn't think about his mother-in-law; she was no longer of any concern to him. Besides, he reasoned, he was on vacation now, so while he couldn't get away with an affair at work, something might happen now. Anyway, to go without a love affair when the demon was awake was impossible, unless he drowned his sorrows in drink and again threw his wife and mother-in-law out of the house. Drinking and driving the women of his house away would have been the easier way to satisfy his demon, but he had already spoken too many sweet words for that, so he let his tongue continue to wag just as Shurka Kuksa's tongue had wagged earlier.

“So, maybe you'll invite me in for a visit?”

“You want a lot,” Yulka said indifferently.

“No, I'm serious.”

She became silent and once more flooded him with her cold mother-of-pearl gaze.

“Maybe I will invite you in,” she said calmly. “Build me an addition out of these boards, and we'll talk. They say you know how to...”

Kolia-the-fisherman was dumbfounded. What was this? Was she making fun of him? To build an addition would take at least a week or two. Was that what she wanted?”

“And you'll pay me for it, yes?” Kolia-the-fisherman asked.

“You know that already,” Yulka replied without looking at him.

Kolia-the-fisherman wavered. Should he say yes, or no? If he were to build an addition for her, this would be a superb ruse and his mother-in-law would never guess a thing. Then again, Kolia-the-fisherman's love affairs never lasted more than a week once he got what he was after. If the lady in question happened to play by the rules, it might take a little longer to win her favors, but once he had her, the affair was soon over. Such was his makeup. It wouldn't take long to win this one over, and he'd gladly start on the addition, but there was yet another consideration. If he took on an extra job, both his wife and his mother-in-law would be happy, but both of them would be sure to demand that he give them his earnings. And that meant that he himself would have to pay for the addition that he had built. Kolia had five hundred *karbovantsi*\* stashed away. He could tell the women that he got paid seven hundred and was keeping two hun-

dred for himself. After fussing, he imagined, they would consent to this, but perhaps it was too high a price for the pleasure!

While he was mulling this over, Yulka somehow managed to reach an understanding with his demon, and from within, the devil began to work on Kolia-the-fisherman's heart. He grasped Kolia's eyes, one in each palm, and began to fling them at that exquisite flood of bosoms on the windowsill until Kolia-the-fisherman felt that at any minute, he would overflow like a lake. Practical considerations no longer mattered — Kolia would live only once, and the devil convinced him that his savings would soon vanish like smoke anyway. Later, it would not be so much the conquest of a woman that Kolia would remember, but the satisfaction of outsmarting his mother-in-law. That would be worth not only five hundred — but a thousand rubles! This was apparently the demon's clinching argument, for Kolia-the-fisherman suddenly said, "And do you have tin to cover the roof?"

"Don't you have any?" Yulka replied carelessly. She already knew he had agreed.

"The supplies must be yours," said Kolia.

"You'll cover it with tar paper," Yulka said. "I'll get it."

Now Kolia began to squirm a little and gaze somewhere beyond her head. "I'll have to talk over a thing or two. I don't know if I'll be free," he said.

"Go ahead and talk it over. There's no fire," Yulka responded nonchalantly.

Kolia-the-fisherman was an experienced tactician. Working for Yulka, he would be visible not only to the Nameless backstreet but to the entire neighborhood. Thus, the job had to be sanctioned not only by his wife, but even more importantly, by the guardian of his morals. Everything must be out in the open, so the women wouldn't suspect a thing. Only one event need remain secret — and the time for that would be carefully selected. The hour Yulka had meticulously chosen for Shurka Kuksa would not do for Kolia-the-fisherman, for this was the time Kolia was expected to be lying next to his lawful wife, pleasing her as other husbands of the neighborhood pleased their wives at that hour. Even this was under the anxious surveillance of his mother-in-law, because if he put his wife off, his guardian would suspect something was amiss, and would begin to investigate.

And so Kolia-the-fisherman didn't talk to Yulka much longer, but went to see Vadym. There Kolia got the fishing line, or float, or sinker, or worms he was looking for, and when he finally left and walked back across the yard of the Swallow's Nest, he felt almost like a saint, impaled by the stares of eight women. (Kolia-the-fisherman once came across an illustration of such a thing in one of his mother-in-law's religious books.) He was like a saint—Sebastian, shall we say — because all those women had witnessed but not heard his conversation with Yulka, and they were now dying of curiosity about its contents. The wind had only carried their words into a neighbor's orchard, where the only one who could have heard them was an old, scabby dog who was sullenly guarding some practically bare apple trees — and trifles such as this didn't interest the dog at all.

"So Yulka was bargaining with you to make an addition?" the former owner of Yulka's room bleated boldly.

"Oh!" said Kolia-the-fisherman stopped, feigning surprise. "You know everything, auntie. It was about the addition! But I'm not sure if I'll take on the job or not; I have to talk it over with my wife."

"She's not offering much?" the goat-woman asked.

"No, not much," replied Kolia-the-fisherman. "These days, everything's expensive."

"Yeah, sure are hard times now," added another neighbor, the owner of a bulldog, who looked like a bulldog herself.

"I don't know, don't know," said Kolia-the-fisherman. "Maybe I'll take the job on, but probably not. I'd rather go fishing. Then I can bring home a tail or two and don't need to exert myself."

"Ah, men are such laggards these days," said the owner of the bulldog.

"So who wants to break his back, auntie?" said Kolia-the-fisherman and went on his way. He was secretly pleased by the bulldog owner's words. This was exactly the kind of impression he wanted to leave — one of disinterest. Later on, he would tell them that it was his wife and mother-in-law who forced him to take the job. What could be more engaging than your own wife and even your mother-in-law, guardian of your morals, pushing you into the arms of some lunar Cuckoo? He wouldn't be a man if he didn't take advantage of such an opportunity.

And so Kolia-the fisherman calmly returned home. Neither his

mother-in-law nor his son were there. His wife was alone. He teased her for a while, even though she wasn't amorously inclined; she snapped at him and pushed his advances away, but not very strongly. In a while, his mother-in-law returned. Kolia busied himself with his fishing gear. The womenfolk teased him about his activities, and then Kolia casually recalled the thing he had never forgotten.

"By the way," he said, "when I went to see Vadym, there was some new tenant at the Swallow's Nest... She wants an addition built... somehow she found out that I know how..."

"I'm the one who told her," said the mother-in-law.

("Fantastic," Kolia thought. "One-zero, in my favor.")

"She asked me to build an addition. I didn't give her an answer, thinking I would talk it over with you. I'm not very anxious to cut my vacation short, I'd rather spend it sitting in a boat..."

They both stared at him, their eyes flashing.

"A nibble," thought Kolia-the-fisherman and contentedly lit a cigarette.

"How much will she give you?" asked Lubka.

"That's just the point. A mere trifle. Five hundred."

"You bargain with her," the mother-in-law demanded.

"She says she doesn't have any more."

"She's a cocky peasant," the mother-in-law declared. "These upstarts have money."

"I didn't count her money," said Kolia-the-fisherman. "And I don't really want to ruin my vacation. I exert myself enough at work. And if you really want to know, Mama, I'm a cocky upstart too."

The mother-in-law was dumfounded for a minute.

"You're not a peasant anymore," she said. "You've been living in the city for a long time now. The cocky ones are the ones that just moved here from the village. In my opinion, you should take the job... She's such a toad, so homely," she said to her daughter. "Even that sort comes crawling into the city. What is she hoping for? You can smell the cockiness in her."

The fact that she spoke this way about Yulka was good, although it did irk Kolia-the-fisherman a bit. In his eyes, Yulka wasn't as homely as all that.

("So, it's two-zero?" he asked himself.)

"I feel the same way," Lubka put the final seal on his guaridan's

sanction. "Instead of loafing on the river, you'll bring home a kopeck or two. At least it'll pay for your meals..."

This really aggravated Kolia-the-fisherman; sometimes Lubka could be so spiteful.

"And what, don't I have my own home!" he growled.

"You do, of course you do," his mother-in-law said consolingly. "As far as I know, she goes to work too. So is she going to leave you in the house?"

The question was obviously a meddling one, so Kolia-the-fisherman answered it casually. "I've told you that I didn't make any deal with her yet. We just talked about it. I'm not all that anxious to exert myself."

"So you'll exert yourself a little," Lubka said nonchalantly. "You'll lose some of that belly, because on that boat, all you do is get fatter."

Lubka's barb was sharp; lately, Kolia's stomach had begun to bulge while his wife remained thin and supple (and she liked to poke fun at his belly). For some reason, Kolia observed, thin people disliked fat ones. She knew very well that this comment would anger him.

But he decided to let it be. "Go ahead and laugh, laugh..."

8.

And so Kolia-the-fisherman began to build an addition for Yulka. Beforehand, he had a very practical conversation with her, because Kolia liked to have everything clear. Then, on the first day, he dug a ditch for a small foundation and began transporting rocks from the river for it. He turned down Yulka's *borsch* at lunchtime, saying he would have lunch at home, but he agreed to eat her supper, and after supper, he firmly insisted on payment for the day's work. Yulka tried to weasel out of it, as she had done with Shurka, but that didn't work with Kolia, because he threatened to abandon the job (and reminded Yulka just how much she was costing him). So Yulka submitted and obediently went to bed. He worked her over with such pleasure and skill that Yulka groaned under him softly. But she neither embraced him nor kissed him until he reproved her; then she held him but responded to his kisses only lukewarmly. Well, Kolia-the-fisherman thought, this would have to suffice the first time.

The transaction didn't take long. The women in the yard knew that Kolia was having supper with Yulka, but there was no way that they could observe how many dishes Yulka served, nor what the dessert was, though the former owner of Yulka's room did press her ear to the keyhole while they were having supper, and Yulka must have suspected the same, because she turned on the radio and thoroughly muffled all sound. The goat-woman did the eavesdropping only partially of her own initiative, for she was a friend of Kolia's mother-in-law, and although Kolia's mother-in-law was contemptuous about Yulka's feminine charms, she wasn't about to neglect her duties as guardian of Kolia's virtue. She had arrived on location early, when Kolia-the-fisherman was still at home sleeping, and asked the goat-woman to keep an eye on him.

Kolia-the-fisherman had a different problem after the vigorous dessert Yulka served him: later that evening, he had to repeat the performance with his wife and that was a bit too much for him. The first night, he was able to excuse himself by claiming exhaustion. (Lubka knew that he had been lugging rocks all day because she had gone to watch him at work). The second evening, he again used the rocks as an excuse, but that day he had mortared the foundation wall, and Lubka knew this too. She didn't go to see it herself, but the mother-in-law did. The problem occurred on the third evening, after he had built the frame for the addition. That day, Yulka was hot and eager, even though he had planned to take a break from her. He walked home in a complete daze from his "dessert," brooding over what would happen when he couldn't repeat the performance with his wife. Then not only his wife but also his mother-in-law would become suspicious. So Kolia-the-fisherman made up his mind to rely on stimulants. But earlier Yulka wouldn't give him a drink, and he hadn't been able to convince her otherwise because she claimed she would rather see him quit the job than drink. She just hated drunks.

"I'd be thoroughly repulsed by you," Yulka had told him bluntly, and so he'd given in,

When Kolia came home, he started to fuss and, as was his habit, act like a spoiled child. He said that if his wife and mother-in-law didn't give him a drink, he wouldn't go back to work the next day and would forgo payment on what he had already done.

"I'm paying myself anyway," he thought.

Besides, he told them, he was tired of exerting himself, and he had had enough. They wouldn't let him rest during his vacation, because all they knew was money, money — and they could choke on it, as far as he was concerned.

To settle the conflict, the mother-in-law had to rush over to the former owner of Yulka's room and buy a bottle of moonshine. While she was at it, she checked on the results of the goat-woman's spying.

"They play the radio," the former owner of Yulka's room reported. Since every woman in the neighborhood played the radio this didn't raise the mother-in-law's suspicions and besides, she still didn't think Kolia-the-fisherman would be tempted by such a cocky peasant. In her opinion, Yulka was just too homely, especially compared to Lubka, who, in her estimate, was a beauty. The mother-in-law told the goat-woman about the problem with her son-in-law, who had suddenly developed whims, and then hurried home with half a liter of fermented sweet homebrew. She portioned out a quarter of it in the kitchen and hid the rest, saving it for her son-in-law's future weak moments.

Nothing aroused Kolia-the-fisherman sexually as much as alcohol, so he gulped down the portion, and because his mother-in-law had gone out again, and his son wasn't back yet from play, Kolia-the-fisherman played out a passionate love scene. Whether it was the whiskey or the scene itself that aroused him, Kolia and his wife locked themselves in the bedroom at a time completely atypical for such things, and they didn't come out even when they heard the mother-in-law returning. When she began to scratch at their door, Lubka sent her away so callously that she grasped the situation instantly.

After his passionate outburst, Kolia-the-fisherman could snore with a clear conscience. Meanwhile, the flushed and enflamed Lubka went out into the kitchen where she had all sorts of work to do. She glanced at her mother with haughty indignation, and the latter huddled on a bench without a word; in truth, they were now both calm and satisfied. Most satisfied of all, however, was Kolia-the-fisherman. He awoke just as Lubka was leaving the room after throwing a robe over his naked body. He waited until she was gone, and then giggled victoriously, gloating that he really knew how to thumb his nose at the both of them.

Afterwards, for some reason Kolia-the-fisherman couldn't fall



asleep: maybe he was still drunk, or maybe he had been satisfied as never before, or maybe it was because his head was filled with strange thoughts — not about his wife with whom he had just enjoyed a love tryst, and not even about his mother-in-law whose goose nose he had just tweaked gloriously, but about the Moon's Cuckoo from the Swallow's Nest. He suddenly realized that what he found most alluring about her was the very "peasantness" of her; either it rekindled memories of his childhood and youth or aromas of his parental home, for Yulka was a peasant through and through — and those were the kind of girls he had wooed as a youth. To him they were the epitome of beauty. All the more so because there was a country fragrance about them — maybe of fields, or hay, or the scented herbs in which they bathed their bodies, or maybe of that primal force that people who live close to the earth possess and plant into their fields, valleys, meadows and gardens. Once, Kolia had visited Kiev, and God knows what led him to a museum there. In front of the place stood several roughly carved stone figures of women. They had flat faces and enormous pendulous breasts, low hips and short squat legs. Remembering the figures, Kolia was stunned to realize that Yulka looked just like those stone women from antiquity.

If it wasn't for the alcohol in him, maybe he wouldn't have had such strange thoughts, but it seemed to him that Yulka was a reincarnation of one of those ancient Scythian women, or maybe it was Scythian blood, undiluted yet by life, that ran in her veins. He remembered how passionate and hot she was today, how impassioned he had been. This never happened with his own wife. He had clearly sensed the fragrance of wormwood on Yulka's body, but no, it wasn't just the scent, for a strange ache arose from Kolia-the-fisherman's chest and spinning head. It seemed, suddenly, as if he were in another life — and he was mowing grass, heaving haystacks into a thresher; he remembered the blazing sun, the scent of straw ground into dust, how it smelled of sunshine. He remembered the lovely eyed, dust-covered girls on the threshers, their hair tied with white ribbons, and overhead, the rapturous sound of a lark. Somewhere near the thresher, he grabbed one of those lovely eyed girls, and she screamed and began pushing him away, but in his hand he felt her trembling, pulsating breast, and he inhaled it all into his lungs — the earthy, rustic spirit of the girl. That was what he had sensed in Yulka today. But this trance

lasted only a minute because Kolia-the-fisherman's intoxication had run away like excess water. He looked around with a satisfied, squinting eye. He was proud of the fact that he was lying not in some slovenly peasant hut, but here, in the city, and that his wife had just left the room, smelling not of herbs but perfume, because before making love she always dabbed some perfume on. He was proud, too, that she had catered to him by letting him drink today, and that he had not humiliated himself, as he might have, for it was no small accomplishment to work over and please two women in one evening. These were the comforting thoughts that lulled him to sleep again and plunged him into a dream, a dream which, more than anything, was about the village, about reincarnated Scythian women with round moon faces; about horses racing into the night, emanating intoxicating fragrances; about cows that trampled morning's golden dew and trumpeted greetings to the large rising light; about the smell of a freshly-baked loaf of bread from the oven soaked in oil and sprinkled with salt; and for that matter, about crunching a fresh cucumber right off the vine in the garden. And there — in that dream — he felt a wistful longing clutching at him. God knows where it came from or why. And then he saw a white phantom with a chalk-white face walk through the house, and the moon in the upper window pane flooded the figure from behind, and something metallic glistened around the phantom's head, and suddenly he was afraid that it might be some evil spirit coming at him, and he jumped up in fear. "What?!"

"It's only me," laughed Lubka. "I put on a cold cream mask for the night."

9.

"You'll need to find something to cover the addition," Kolia-the-fisherman told Yulka when he came to work just as she was getting ready to leave for her job. "Because I'll be finished in two days."

"So you're not going to get it for me?" Yulka asked, smiling somewhat mysteriously.

"That wasn't part of the deal," said Kolia. "You're already costing me plenty."

She didn't say anything and left. When Kolia eyed her from a distance, he thought she was indeed ugly. What did he see in her to

exert himself this much, and to pay his wife a small ransom as well? He must be mad. He thought he'd give himself a rest today; that is, work without payment and convince Yulka to pay out another time, because after last night he felt as if he were made of cotton. He yawned and had a cigarette, but it didn't taste good. He eyed his work critically; it wasn't turning out badly.

"Yes, I'm melancholy!" he concluded. "And when I go mad, I really go mad."

He dreaded starting the job. He felt like a limp piece of straw. Then he realized someone was staring at him. It was the goat-woman.

"Listen, auntie," said Kolia-the-fisherman. "Maybe you could measure out a shot for me."

"Let Yulka give it to you. She's the one who hired you."

Kolia-the-fisherman sat down on a stump. "Yulka won't give me any because she objects to it. Besides, she's not here," he said. "I'll pay you. What do you charge for a glass?"

"For you — a ruble."

"O-ho!" said Kolia. "Expensive. How much goes into one of your glasses?"

"Everything's expensive now," said the goat-woman. "My glass holds a hundred grams."

"Well, then bring it out because I just can't get going."

At that very moment, Yulka was crossing the wooden planks over the washed-out dam, and who should come out from the bushes on the other side but Shurka-Kuksa.

"Hee, hee," he chuckled and grabbed Yulka. "Ah, we meet after all. So you've hired Kolia-the-fisherman?"

"Because you weren't willing," Yulka said indifferently, not reacting to his pawing.

"It was too expensive for me," said Shurka Kuksa. "Maybe you need something that's cheaper?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Yulka spoke calmly. "Two rolls of roofing paper."

"Two whole rolls for that measly addition?" Shurka snapped. "One's enough."

"Then get one," Yulka said placidly.

"Then can I come by and see you?" Shurka grinned like a youth.

"If you're not drunk, we might reach an agreement," said Yulka,

but when he tried to grab her voluptuous breasts again, she pushed him away.

“What about an advance, Yul?” Shurka asked, offended.

“You already took your advance,” she replied and walked warily down the path, as if they were strangers.

“No, wait...” Shurka caught up with her and grabbed her shoulder. “So if I get the roofing paper, then you’ll...with both of us?”

“That’s none of your business,” Yulka jerked her shoulder back. “And I’m not forcing you. If you want, then come, and if not, I won’t cry for you.”

She flooded him with that cold mother-of-pearl look from her strange eyes, and he suddenly realized that it was for her payment that he’d get the roofing paper. He would get it, because he was drawn to her like a magnet, and in his head he felt the familiar swoon. But he was offended that he had been replaced by Kolia-the-fisherman, that she was so indifferent to him, that she demanded payment for her love so coldly and shamelessly, and that he himself was unable to make her fall for him.

“What the devil!” Shurka Kuksa exclaimed to himself. “Am I falling in love with her?”

It made him laugh. How could he possibly fall in love with someone like her? He crossed the wooden bridge and decided to see what Kolia-the-fisherman was doing. He knew where he could get the roll of roofing paper; he had seen some in the shed where Vasia Ravlyk kept his chopped wood. The shed was near a garden, far from the house, and it would be easy to sneak in there. It’d be awkward any other way because he and Vasia Ravlyk were enemies now.

“Maybe that’s exactly why I can take that roll from him — because we are enemies?” Shurka Kuksa thought and relaxed. Whistling to himself, he began to feel good. Really, what was there to worry about? There was a bright sun overhead, he knew how to get the roofing paper, and now that his problems were over, his spirit felt light. Today he’d get everything done, and then he would have Yulka’s hot, burning body again, and afterwards he would be free as a bird again, without debts or obligations to anyone.

He heard the pounding of a hammer in the distance and followed the sound. He wanted to take a look at the fool that for the sake of Yulka’s allurements was building an entire addition. Shurka had

turned down the prize, while this Kolia got hooked. No wonder he was a fisherman.

"Greetings, Kolia," he said when he reached the hill. "Working hard?"

"As you can see," Kolia-the-fisherman replied.

"And is she rewarding you with adequate payment?" Shurka bared his teeth.

Kolia-the-fisherman glanced at him warily. "You know everything?" he asked.

"Hell, Kolia, I put those doors in, so I know. She's one hot broad, no?" He saw Kolia-the-fisherman pale and was delighted.

"It's no concern of mine what went on between the two of you," Kolia-the-fisherman retorted sharply. "She hired me for payment, you understand?"

"Sure, I understand, Kol. A fitting payment."

"If you wag your tongue, you know what I'll do!" Kolia-the-fisherman threatened.

Shurka knew. Once, when there was some business between them, Kolia had clobbered him. "As far as I'm concerned, we're talking like buddies," Shurka said amicably. But a whiff of his breath explained Kolia's hostility.

"Just you remember," Kolia said sharply. "I was hired honestly, and I'm doing honest work. And I don't like your stupid insinuations, you understand?"

Still, Shurka decided to poke a little more fun at him.

"I understand, Kol," he said. "But do you know why I came to you? Because your mother-in-law approached me and started asking if I had noticed anything."

"And you told her about your doors?" Kolia asked spitefully, and Shurka sensed that he was right on target: Kolia felt threatened by him.

"I'm not stupid, Kol," Shurka replied. "She gave me a fitting payment. And with you, maybe it's different! I was just curious."

"Forget your curiosity." Kolia-the-fisherman peered at him with narrowing eyes. "Just don't wag your tongue!"

"There's another reason I came to see you," Shurka ventured. "Maybe you have a roll of roofing paper? This needs to be covered. I'd put a lock on my tongue then."

Kolia grabbed Shurka by the shoulders and lifted him off the ground until his feet dangled. “Don’t you make an idiot out of me,” Kolia hissed. “Or I’ll lock your tongue myself, and I’ll lock it up for good. And I’m not joking.” He pushed Shurka down on all fours.

“All right, I understand,” Shurka said picking himself up. “She’s costing you plenty. She cost me a lot too, and it was worth it.” He grinned. “What should I say if your mother-in-law begins questioning me again?”

“Tell her what you know,” Kolia-the-fisherman said. “That I was hired honestly for honest work.”

Too bad, Shurka thought to himself. It didn’t work. He really didn’t feel like crawling around Vasia Ravlyk’s place for that roll, but the trick just hadn’t worked on Kolia. Still, he thought, I understand everything, and Kolia understands me, too. Perfectly!

They shook hands and parted. But this chat had spoiled Kolia-the-fisherman’s mood. It had seemed like everything was beautifully under control and that he had really tweaked his mother-in-law’s nose, and now this oaf came along, and to top it off, the oaf had already slept with Yulka, because he’d put in her doors. So apparently Kolia was one of many who Yulka shamelessly used to improve her home, and he had thought that she was enftuated with him. Kolia was displeased by all this, and maybe because he was in such a bad mood to begin with, he considered Yulka, for the first time, with sober eyes. Today he had absolutely no interest in her, or in woman-kind at all, for that matter. He needed to give himself a break. Maybe his weakness had passed. He had been in this state for too long! Yet just to drop everything wouldn’t do either because that would create unhealthy suspicion among the women in the yard, and eventually with his wife and mother-in-law. Maybe what he should do, Kolia-the-fisherman concluded, was go fishing. That Shurka had really nauseated him. He was such a gossip. Shurka probably wouldn’t reveal all these secrets directly to Kolia’s mother-in-law, but he wouldn’t be able to resist bragging to his street buddies, and they in turn would tell their own wives, and eventually it would all reach Lubka and his mother-in-law. No doubt about it. Then it wouldn’t be Lubka or the mother-in-law who ended up with tweaked noses, but he, smart-aleck Kolia himself. He who would not only lose all of his savings, but would be disgraced as well. That was why Kolia didn’t

succumb to Shurka's blackmail and decided to scare him instead. It would have a much greater impact on that doddering Romeo. He had already beaten him up once before.

Considering all this, Kolia just didn't have the will to pick up a saw or ax or hammer, so he put away his tools and began to leave the yard when, of course, he ran into one of the women. It was the cat-like one, Vadym's wife. She was walking with a kitten on her breast, and both of them were purring softly.

"You've quit early today," said the cat-woman, or woman with cat.

"Can't work for some reason," Kolia grinned. "I'm heading for the river. Had a dream about a fish today."

"A live one or a dead one?" the cat-woman asked.

"A live one," Kolia-the fisherman replied.

"That's a bad dream," she said. "A dead one is even worse, but a live one isn't good either."

"That's why I can't work."

"You'd better not go to the river, Kol," said the cat-woman, and suddenly Kolia-the-fisherman looked at her with his eyes wide-open; she wasn't all that young anymore, but she was still very attractive.

"So maybe you'll invite me in?" Kolia asked devilishly.

"Oh sure, right away." The woman laughed and left.

"A nibble!" Kolia-the-fisherman thought, excited and pleased, and turned around to watch her firm calves and shapely rear end as she sauntered across the yard.

This improved his mood, and Kolia decided that once he was rested and the dust had settled, he would try dipping his line in this pond. But he couldn't return to work today, and since he didn't expect to get any payment anyway, he bolted through the gate of the Swallow's Nest, where the river glistened brightly before him, like a huge fish, beckoning him with a thousand sparkling eyes.

10.

Fortunately, Vasia Ravlyk was on the second shift today, so it wouldn't be much of a problem for Shurka Kuksa to get the roofing paper. There was only one thing he had to be alert for: that neighborhood busybody Ludka who might be spying on him. Actually, Ludka had been acting strangely lately: she didn't wind her way down the

street from neighbor to neighbor any more, nor did she sit on the large stone with red-headed Nadka, or short Natalka, or Magadansha, or the taxi-driver; in fact, she didn't appear on the street at all, and Shurka Kuksa was a bit disturbed by this, because you felt safer if she was in sight; if not, you began to suspect that she had discovered some new method for spying, like red-headed Nadka's telescope. He wasn't threatened so much by a telescope at night, as he was by not knowing what to expect from Ludka. He resolved the problem simply: he decided to drop in on Ludka himself, and since they had once been classmates, he felt he had the right to do so. He'd tell her that he had run into one-or-another of their classmates, which, in fact, was actually true. So Shurka walked through the gate that led into a small enclosed garden filled with flowers and knocked on a door with peeling paint. Ludka was at home, having just returned from work, and was surprised by Shurka's visit, but then they chatted merrily about their classmates.

"Why don't we see you in the neighborhood anymore?" he asked. "You're not ill?"

"I'm sick of the neighborhood," Ludka commented indifferently. "I'm doing some sewing here."

True, there was an open manual sewing machine nearby with some fabric tucked under the needle press.

"Yes, we're getting old," Shurka said philosophically.

"Maybe you are, but not me," Ludka quipped cheerfully. "Are you still tweaking bulls' tails?"

"Nope," said Shurka. "I'm going to settle down."

"Are you still beating down Yulka's path?"

"How can you say that, Lud!" Shurka said indignantly. "She hired me to put in some doors. I worked for her for two days and that's all!"

"So what's that hammering there all day long?"

The question flabbergasted Shurka. Wonder of wonders! If Ludka didn't know that it wasn't him, but Kolia-the-fisherman working for the Cuckoo from the Swallow's Nest, then there was definitely something mysterious and unusual going on: Ludka, who knew where everybody's chicken was heading, now wasn't aware of such a simple fact.

"That's Kolia-the-fisherman building an addition for her," Shurka said, and then remembered Kolia's threats. "She hired him, too. Those



peasants have money.”

Ludka's eyes lit up for a moment, then faded.

“So let him build it,” she said indifferently. “What's it to me!”

“Could she be sick?” Shurka thought, leaving Ludka's house. Well, let her be sick a while, at least until he obtained that roll of roofing paper and claimed his payment tonight. What happened tomorrow didn't interest him much. If it's true that every human being has a counterpart in the natural world: an animal, bird or insect, then he was, by nature, a moth. It was no coincidence that ancient people had their own animal or bird totems and had names like Wolf, Fox, Rabbit, Skunk, Eagle, Hawk, Sparrow, Bluejay, Mosquito or Butterfly. Shurka Kuksa was a night creature. He loved to hover in the dark, but whenever he spotted a flame, he dove in headfirst, spun around till he became exhilarated, lost his head and scorched his wings. Then he gradually abandoned these activities until the next time he was drawn to night flights or love fancies, and once again flung himself head first into darkness.

Darkness excited him and filled his lungs; darkness intoxicated him, moonlight aroused him, and the cricket's song inspired him. Darkness made him bold and foolhardy, and everything he did that was forbidden occurred with its blessing. Shurka became a harmless child of darkness. The damage he did was more playful than malicious.

And so he headed into a thick patch of potatoes, or what scholars call earth pears or artichokes, and crouched there listening to the shouts of drunks and the buzzing of mosquitoes who were also night creatures and didn't bite their relative much — his blood was more poisonous than nourishing to them. Shurka settled down in the potato bushes — first of all, to make sure that Ludka really had no intentions of going out to spy, and second, to await that moment when the building's residents — and there were a hundred or more living there — would finally stop going to the toilet. As soon as darkness fell, they shuffled out like sleepwalkers, one after another, monotonously and quietly. They opened doors with their own hooks (there were three outhouses near Vasia Ravlyk's garden), hid inside, stayed for a while, and then came out. Others followed suit, and the final one was another child of darkness, the pharmacy lady, who was fat, plain and angry with herself and the entire world. She was saturated through

and through with medicinal smells and so slow in her movements that she resembled a turtle. It was the turtle that finished off the evening parade, because she needed to hide in the wooden outhouse a little longer than the others. Maybe that was where she read fortunes on the stars that peered in through the cracks. Sometimes, after she left, someone who had been out partying might run into the outhouse. And then, at last, came that mystical silence that occurs when everyone falls asleep: when families, after drinking tea, fall into wide or narrow beds, when worms, snails and porcupines crawl out of their hiding places, when cats gracefully leave their homes with imaginary bows around their necks and tiptoe on the dewy grass like grand dames or ballerinas.

That was when Shurka Kuksa leapt across the road and climbed through an opening into Vasia Ravlyk's garden. It was completely quiet. True, something invisible rustled as if it were whispering or sighing, and for some reason, the sound frightened Shurka Kuksa. No wonder he hadn't wanted to come here. He crept along the path cautiously, and without a sound, he entered the shed, found the roll of roofing paper, and threw it over his shoulder. When he emerged, he saw that bright moonlight flooded Vasia Ravlyk's garden and that shadows were interlaced with a delicate glimmering light that made the entire orchard glow magically. Shurka Kuksa felt his hair stand on end, because there, under the apple tree where Ravlyk's mistress, a real she-devil, had hung herself several years ago, he now saw a bright, transparent figure woven out of moonbeams. The image had a cat's head and was dressed in a white gown and white high-heeled slippers, and it stood there swaying faintly, fading and reappearing.

Just then, somewhere beyond the fence, several rockers on motorcycles roared by, and it seemed that the frail, transparent figure woven out of moonbeams was momentarily shattered by the roar. Shurka seized the opportunity to bolt across the orchard and through the opening in the fence without losing the roll of paper, which now felt like it was glued to his back. It seemed to him that the apparition's bright hands reached out for him, ready to strangle him, mashing him and that roll together into a sticky black mass. A spasm tightened his throat, and he fell on his hands and knees to crawl through the fence. Then he picked himself up, and ran as fast possible to where the mournful Moon's Cuckoo from the Swallow's Nest sat in her window.

Maybe she was sad because Kolia-the-fisherman had abandoned both her and the construction today. Maybe he wouldn't come back. Maybe he had had sufficient satisfaction. Then she would have to contend with sitting in the window again, and if someone assumed that was exactly what she wanted, they obviously didn't understand a woman's psyche at all. Not one of those brutal boars who wanted to jump into the hay with her knew a single thing about her; they understood nothing, especially not her most precious secret which was, after all, her secret. This was the source of her sadness and pain: she was trying not to wither in this world like a blade of grass, but instead to burst into bloom, into a flower that would attract bees to its nectar, because if her nectar wasn't gathered, it would be transformed into poison. This desire within her was more than mere bodily pleasure. It grew inside like winterweed that weaves in on itself as it spreads out or like a grapevine shoot that fastens itself with hair whiskers to a wall and climbs up, up to some unknown height in order to affix itself on a more promising balcony or trellis, so that later it might catch sunshine on the surface of its leaves and, in time, experience the birth of a great mystery within. That was why she built and primed her nest; she wasn't a cuckoo bird that heedlessly dropped its eggs into another's nest, even though, like the cuckoo, she took advantage of another's labor. She abhorred this but had no other choice because, just like the cuckoo, she didn't know how to build her own nest and needed help with it. She was all alone in the world, having flown in from somewhere else, with no family or dear ones; all cuckoos live without families and dear ones. She became sad and sorrowful in moonlight, and her face glowed whenever she lit up the night with pale hopes. And her only attraction were those voluptuous breasts that flooded the windowsill, like milk, because they long yearned to swell and fill with milk in order to bathe and rejuvenate this God-forsaken world. And so all she could do was to be submissive, to sit and quietly wait, because she had no other way to care for herself.

Something made a noise in the backstreet, and Yulka shuddered. The gate quietly opened, and some monstrosity with an elongated black head began to push its way into the yard. The monstrosity shook its whole head like a tuft and climbed up toward her, the Moon's Cuckoo from the Swallow's Nest.

"It's me!" Shurka Kuksa whispered coarsely, all out of breath. "I

brought you the roofing paper. You didn't expect it so soon, did you?"

"Why not?" Yulka replied calmly. "We made a deal."

11.

Whenever his mother-in-law suspected something, Kolia-the-fisherman knew it immediately, because she would open her eyes wide and bore them right into him as if she were casting a spell or enlightening him with the rays of reason. She did have something of a witch in her, undoubtedly, because those looks left Kolia's body unpleasantly agitated, restless, with the feeling that he'd be caught any minute, and all of his secrets would be revealed. Something had to be done immediately. He must throw his mother-in-law off his tracks, otherwise she was sure to sniff him out. So he decided, as they say, to stray from the straight and narrow. The next day he didn't go to work at Yulka's, but headed for the field of weeds and was warmly welcomed by the drunkards there, especially since he had sent one of them to the former owner of Yulka's room and had paid him for that mission in full. He knew very well that his mother-in-law would note this right away. She would be baffled for a while, and then would realize that her sense of impending threat was indeed accurate, but that she had been misguided about the direction from which the threat was coming.

Lubka had left for work already, so the mother-in-law couldn't send her straight into the weeds to drag her husband home. Meanwhile, Kolia-the-fisherman was drinking with the drunks, babbling along with them as they shouted incoherently, just as his mother-in-law circled the weeds, not daring to go in after him because she knew Kolia would summarily chase her out and might even strike her. Only his wife could pull him out of there lawfully, and his mother-in-law, as Kolia might say, could just butt out!

Finally, she could stand it no more and ran to the public phone on the street to call her daughter, hoping she could get away from work somehow to put things in order. But the receiver had been ripped out for the umpteenth time and just lay there on top of the instrument. To make the call, she would have to go all the way up Prosynovska Hill, and she had no intentions of doing that as she wasn't about to let her wayward son-in-law out of her sight. She wasn't troubled so much

that he might get drunk and lose at cards, as she was concerned that he might betray Lubka. She had been having suspicions about him lately but, as it turned out, Kolia-the-fisherman had veered in a totally different direction. He had strayed by succumbing to drunkenness, not uncommon for him and not a pleasant situation, but not as bad as becoming a real scoundrel and jumping into the hay with someone. This wouldn't be a mere "straying from the straight and narrow," but utter debauchery — a word Kolia's mother-in-law pronounced with such contempt, even hate, that her lips and eyelids trembled. So she was somewhat appeased by Kolia's lesser misbehavior today, though she still headed uphill to call her daughter at work. Kolia had a serious talking-to in store for him that evening.

Meanwhile, Kolia partied with his fly-by-night buddies. They began to play cards, and since Kolia vehemently declared that he had spent all his money on the booze and that he never played on credit, the drunkards were charitable and agreed to play for knuckles instead. When Kolia and his partner were losing, the others knuckled them on the head, guffawing hilariously with gaping, almost toothless mouths and with tongues that looked like white shovels in their throats. Whenever Kolia and his partner won, they in turn knuckled their opponents and exploded with the same Homeric laughter. Eyes bulging and mouths gaping, they slapped their thighs gleefully, and sometimes embraced, slobbering over each other. Finally, Kolia-the fisherman declared categorically: "That's it, fellows! I've had enough!"

And he suddenly took off with unexpected speed for a drunk (Perhaps Kolia wasn't very drunk, for he drank not out of want but for the sake of the comic drama he had set up.) He headed to where he figured his mother-in-law would be hiding. His calculations turned out to be amazingly accurate, because, all of a sudden, she jumped out at him like a spring, and Kolia-the fisherman bellowed: "The snake! Grab her, grab that sneaking filth! In a minute, I'm going to break every bone in her body."

She was already running from him as fast as she could, and if a bystander had clocked the speed at which she tore through weeds and gardens and down the path, surely they would report that she had set a record for old folks, though Kolia-the-fisherman had absolutely no intentions of chasing her, nor of breaking her bones, for there was no

need of it. He merely smirked with self-satisfaction, knowing full well that his mother-in-law wouldn't slow down, even for a second, to look around. He knew that she would bolt into the house and lock herself in, expecting him to burst through the door any minute — and this is what she did. Kolia had no plans to return home until that evening; now he could freely visit one of his mistresses. But mistresses have a habit of not letting in someone with whom they are no longer having an affair, and there was no point in going to Yulka's because she wasn't home. Besides, he hadn't done any work for her today, so he hadn't earned any payment. So Kolia untied his boat — the oars were fastened to it on a chain — and rowed out onto the beautiful, bright, sunlit river, and since he had his fishing gear, he stopped near the shore, peeled off his shirt, and began fishing for eel among the rocks and rushes. He was lucky and snagged a sunfish, several large garfish and a bunch of eels. Then he hooked up with three other fishermen who were getting ready to cook some stew but hadn't caught much themselves. They greeted Kolia-the-fisherman with enthusiasm. One of them sneaked into a garden to dig up some potatoes and scallions; the second pulled out an apothecary flask with salt, pepper and crumbled bay leaves and claimed that this earned him a share of the stew. The third was a mushroom man, so he headed into the bushes and soon returned with one meadow mushroom, two boletes, and four puffballs, and they cooked up such a stew, you could smell it a kilometer away and it made the mouth of anyone who happened to pass within that radius salivate with hunger. But they wouldn't share the stew with the devil himself; each of them carried a spoon on him and never parted with it. They gulped the stew down right from the pot, enhancing the taste with a bottle that one of them just happened to have. All of them had “an unhappy family life” and sought diversion and consolation however they knew best.

Meanwhile, Kolia's mother-in-law sat trembling at home by the door, latched from the inside. She had a rolling pin in her right hand and a poker in the left, and waited in vain with a trepid heart for Kolia to burst through the door. It didn't occur to her that in this brief time, she had grown a goose beak and that her ears had grown like elephant weeds, thanks to her son-in-law, and, more importantly, that all she needed to do was to mount that rolling pin or poker, and with a roar of engines, she'd rise with the speed of light into the bright sky.

Kolia's mother-in-law was too naive to see herself in possession of such extraordinary talents. She failed to glance into the mirror. Indeed, she had not looked at her reflection for some time now. Kolia's mother-in-law could only think one thought at a time, and that thought was about how she would wallop her son-in-law with the rolling pin or poker when he came bursting through the door. And thus, we can say, because of self-imposed limitations, yet one more witch's talent vanished from this world.

In the evening, when Kolia-the-fisherman finally came home, there was a storm: thunder and lightning, two mighty black clouds shaped like women, with fistfuls of lightning bolts. The storm raged against a not-very-big, completely worn out, sober, practically powerless man who sat on a stool, with one eye closed and the other half-opened.

"Now wait a minute, you she-devils," he said calmly. "Let me at least get a word in..."

But they wouldn't let him say one word: one screamed and the other cackled, and when women are in such a state, is it possible to get in one wise and thoughtful word edgewise? So he sat quietly, dozing, occasionally listening to their piercing shouts. Would they mention what he thought they might? That for which he was acting out this entire comedy? Obviously, Kolia-the-fisherman had a talent for directing. But he had also discovered an important rule: when a director wants his actors to play brilliantly, they must not know that they are acting. They must be convinced that this is a real experience. Both Kolia's wife and mother-in-law played brilliantly, without realizing that they were acting out the parts of angry Furies. Kolia-the-fisherman was fair and openly acknowledged their brilliant anger. That was why he sat humbly on the stool with one eye closed and the other half-opened, so that with at least half-an-eye, he might delight in the entertainment they provided.

"Stop nagging him already, Mother. The Devil's drunkard is asleep," Lubka finally said.

He was indeed sleeping and gazing at the Moon's Cuckoo from the Swallow's Nest, with her round Scythian face, with her bosoms pouring over the windowsill. He was drawn to her once again because he was rested now, and all he needed was for these women to send him back to her.

Now a hand as hard as a poker shook his shoulder; half of his left eye opened. "Yeah, make the bed," he said. "I want to sleep."

"Don't you go bumming tomorrow. You go straight to work, got it?"

The left eye opened wider.

"Yeah, all right," said Kolia-the-fisherman. "You're right... To put in the addition... absolutely! Now can I finally get some rest? Make the bed, I want to sleep."

"I'll check, when you're gone, I'll check up on you," his mother-in-law squealed like a frightened mouse. "It's a disgrace on our family, such a worker! She may decide not to pay you. And everything that you've done so far will be worth a pile of dirt. Is that what you want?"

"A pile of shit," Kolia-the-fisherman corrected her somberly.

"Phooey, what a filthy mouth," his mother-in-law replied.

Then he awoke completely, raised himself up, and looked at them. He was totally sober and alert: "So you think I should go to work tomorrow?" he asked, as if he hadn't thought it through yet.

"You're a bit fuddlebrained today," said Lubka. "And what have we been squabbling about all evening?"

Kolia-the-fisherman rejoiced. His eyes closed again, but this time it was so these two actresses, who played the Furies so brilliantly, wouldn't see how delighted he was, because he had been waiting for these very words all evening.

"As far as I could tell, you weren't saying anything, you were just screaming," Kolia declared amiably and headed for his bed because now he really was falling asleep.

"Yes," he told himself, "You really can fool women, after all; they're not all that perceptive."

12.

And so Yulka's addition was built. Without going into a lot of details, let's say that doors appeared as well. In time, the interior was plastered, a gas stove and cylinder were installed, and the doors that led to the former resident of Yulka's room were closed off with bricks.

Two weeks, or perhaps a month, went by. Autumn swept the earth, and that was when Yulka finally realized that the seeds which had been sown so generously in her by those bamboozlers Shurka



Kuksa and Kolia-the-fisherman were barren for they did not ripen inside her. Both of them had disappeared from the Nameless backstreet and didn't come around any more. The winds probably carried them into other backstreets of this world. Yulka forgot about them because there was nothing to remember. About all they left behind was a sadness which, in time, grew inside her in place of the embryo she had anticipated, and the sadness became like an enormous tree with partially yellowed leaves. As autumn swept through the earth, that invisible tree of sadness grew inside her, rustling its yellow leaves, and sometimes shedding teardrops. When Yulka couldn't stand it any longer, she sat in the window again, spread her exquisite bosoms over the sill, and looked out at God's world with empty round eyes that were no longer astonished.

Of all the protagonists in this story, only Ludka was content, because she alone had been transformed by the sacrament of the earth, and she knew this for certain even though no one in the neighborhood was aware of it yet. They merely wondered why she had become so quiet and unsocial, always a stay-at-home during her free time. Some of the busybodies sniffed out something unusual, but lacking clear evidence resigned themselves to wait, sure that a cat could not be kept in the bag forever. It would come out by itself, which it did, soon enough. Then everyone was content, and Ludka's life flowed calmly in happy anticipation, while her belly filled out and she attended joyfully to the growth inside her. There was still plenty of time ahead, so Ludka spent hours at her sewing machine, which would only occasionally fall silent as she stared out the window, lost in thought, not really seeing anything there.

Yulka sat in her own window and listened as her invisible tree of sadness rustled its yellowed leaves. Sometimes she thought that her nest wasn't completely in order yet, but she couldn't figure out what was lacking. The nights were moonlit again, but by a new moon, not yet full. And looking out at that new moon, she decided she didn't need much to finish her nest. She could build herself a coop and raise some chickens or ducks; chickens would be better. Even the neighbor women had stopped raising ducks, because dogs or drunkards or rascals kept strangling them near the river. And then she thought that

maybe she could build some steps up the hill to her addition because in winter the walk would be slippery. But she considered all of this without much enthusiasm. She was tired from her endless nest-building, all the more because of her disillusionment with her helpers: muddleheads who crawled to her, carried out some task for her (can't deny the truth), but were barren like rotten trees or nuthusks. That was why Yulka was fed up and filled with contempt for those fickle cuckolds. Now, whenever someone new paused in the Nameless backstreet, she sharply turned them away. Even the women from the Swallow's Nest, as well as those beyond it, began gossiping unkindly about her, saying that she was a so-and-so. But no one knew — maybe nobody wanted to know — that she was not a so-and-so, and that inside her a tree of sadness was alive and growing, and that at night she was inundated by moonlight and sleep escaped her, and she sat by the window not to lure some old boar, but to pray to the moon and sky and earth, because they were beginning to fade around her slowly, just as she herself was gradually fading because the moon and earth and herbs had not heeded her aspirations. She sat in the window and whispered halting words to the moon, perhaps persuading him that she was not of the cuckoo family, or even if she were, that she was an outcast, and did not yearn for a cuckoo's fate, but for an ordinary human one, and that if that didn't happen, she'd wither in her window like a plant without water. She surprised herself with the stream of ancient, profound and moving words that poured from her, and she didn't understand them completely because they came not from her but from a mysterious place inside her which she obeyed unequivocally. And that mysterious source had apparently betrayed her (or so it seemed) because it brought her no real happiness after all. She cried during such moments, and her tears flowed into the night, burning and washing her face. And then something obscure awakened within her again, and in the very depths of her essence, she heard a soft whisper, so soft she couldn't make out the words, although she knew exactly what the message was. It told her that everything which existed in this world was meant to be, and everything that happened was meant to happen, and what didn't occur wasn't meant to occur; this was not her own will, nor the will of her mysterious essence, but the will of the Moon and Stars, and she should remain compliant, resign herself and wait, and listen to that mysterious voice within. Then perhaps she might be

blessed in this life, because defiance and disillusionment were only a betrayal of herself. She didn't follow this reasoning to the end but felt the essence of these whispered words and that was enough, for those who can feel this don't need great understanding, and they are not yet doomed in this world.

And on one such visionary night, when the leaves on the trees had turned yellow in torrents and dropped their last seeds to the ground; when tiny beetles weaved cocoons from which they would one day emerge with wings; when crickets became silent and migrating birds obeyed the beguiling call to long and distant flight, Yulka couldn't sleep, so she got up, opened the window, and sat again without knowing why she was doing so.

Then, in the depths of the Nameless backstreet, she saw a man. He moved soundlessly, inundated with moonlight, his golden head glowing. Yulka froze in her window, afraid to breathe. Suddenly, everything in her came alive, every vein in her body quivered like a melody, but it lasted only a second. In the minutes that followed, she was calm again but didn't take her eyes off the man with the golden head. He walked up to the fence that surrounded the yard of the Swallow's Nest and paused. Yulka was startled for a moment and nervously strained to hear if the rest of the Swallow's Nest was sleeping. It was an hour when the Nest was usually sound asleep: a deep sleep in which problems and worries, friendships and animosities, falsehood and virtue, compassion and malice all were forgotten. The Nest slept as if someone had cast a spell of forgetfulness over it so that what was happening could happen. Sound asleep were the people, dogs, cats, chickens, beavers, goats, birds, porcupines and crickets — everything that was alive and real.

The man opened the gate and walked into the yard. Yulka, mesmerized, sat in the window and waited. The man, flooded with moonlight, or perhaps radiating it, paused again, and a stillness fell over everything. Then he stirred and headed up the hill, straight for Yulka's window.

"Good evening," he said softly. "You need some steps made here... And everyone here has a coop, but you don't. Do you need a worker?" He stood there smiling gently, his golden head gleaming in the moonlight.

Yulka was silent.

“Why are you silent?” he asked more tenderly.

“I’m not silent,” Yulka said. “The doors are open.”

“I know,” he replied and looked around. “It’s a strange night, isn’t it?”

“It is,” said Yulka and lowered her head.

“So you don’t need workers?” he asked again.

“No,” Yulka replied.

Then he walked up to the window and stroked her head. Yulka wept. Maybe because no one had stroked her head in such a long time, except her mother who was incredibly far away, and her distant, long-forgotten father.

“Don’t cry,” the man said softly and gently. “Everything will be fine. Everything will be just the way you want it. That’s why I came.”

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*Notes:*

Podil — The lower section of Kiev, an ancient settlement along the “right bank” of the Dnipro (Russian: Dniepr) River. The right bank is generally higher in elevation, with many of its streets leading down to the Podil district, an area that was traditionally inhabited by silversmiths, blacksmiths, and other craftsmen.

*karbovantsi* — Ukrainian currency; sing. *karbovanets*

# *From Three Worlds*

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NOTES: Words or phrases marked with an asterisk (\*) have explanatory notes, which are found at the end of the stories. For the sake of clarity, "A Crowning Experience" by Kostiantyn Moskalets has footnotes.

We employ "Kiev" in this publication as the spelling of the capital city of Ukraine, since it is the one familiar to most readers. However, it should be noted that the present official spelling is "Kyiv," which is based upon transliteration from the Ukrainian language. This usage has become established in the years following the independence of Ukraine in 1991.

In the poetry, an asterisk at the bottom of a page indicates that there is no stanza break. By contrast, an asterisk at the bottom of a page of prose indicates a section break.

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