



Petro Kravchuk
(1942 -)

SATISFACTION

He wanted calm and solitude. But it was lacking here in the street, beyond the threshold of the house in which he had wasted several hours. At the streetcar stop and all along the track at the foot of the hill, the rattle of traffic and the strident grating of steel stood in the air. He looked around and sized up the situation: if he walked over the hill, he would reach his home in a calm and easy manner.

Such old districts with crooked, hilly streets amidst clay ravines and dense growths of ivy had a charm of their own. The town spread across bluffs broken by gullies; it clung to craggy hills, lived in a confused tumult and bustle of its broad motorways, and dozed slumberously in green obscure nooks, where no cars ever appeared.

Oleg had not been on this hill before. At first he made his way with some effort through a stand of young acacia trees, from which a footpath meandered in the dense grass of a treeless slope. The hill resembled two tented hands, its slope crisscrossed by footpaths running down to the ditch of a dried-up brook. He walked along one of the footpaths, gradually leaving behind the streetcar rumble and the jerky, noisy conversation at his friend's party. His spirit seemed to rise above the town, the broad fields flooded by the river, the cranes at the river port, above the slight tremor of the small acacia leaves at the foot of the hill. A warm silence filled the air, and at last quietude enveloped his soul.

Everywhere across the broad and clean slope he saw traces of what looked like an ancient burial site marked by nothing except time-worn grassy humps which strived to reach the level of the green abandon of the grasses, of the tiniest weed, of the palest of flowers in this dense luxuriance. Then he remembered the words:

“As long as time glides on, as long as my existence continues, as long water flows, as long my disappearance will last...”— probably here was the grave of the composer, one of the oldest in this land, whose music, spiritually lofty and at the same time protesting against the humility of prayer, he had heard in a church-museum on the neighboring hill. Nobody could find now the grave of the composer who had uttered these words.

Oleg became convinced that this was a cemetery when he saw several thin crosses on the other side of the hollow closer to the hilltop. The crosses clustered in one place, their uprights bent to the ground. Over them rose roofs, walls, and crudely constructed fences around the houses.

Oleg looked round, his eyes embracing the river. His heart filled with joy at the sight of the clear distant sky, the sunlight over the river and the floodlands, and the whiteness of the highrises stretching to the horizon. He froze, absorbing the sunlight and merging with it. He stood like that for quite some time until his elation was suddenly disturbed by something uncertain and alarming. Oleg

could not understand yet where it was coming from, but it existed and threatened him, as if it were falling on him and approaching relentlessly. Turning again to the hilltop in the direction he was heading, he started from surprise: on each side of the footpath, five or six gray bundles, bobbing up and down in the grass, were rolling his way. He had seen such creatures somewhere near the gully, where they were lying on a patch of dry ground warmed by the spring sun. They didn't belong to anyone and were lying still, never touching him, even when he walked close by. But these were tumbling downhill right at him.

He had read somewhere that wild dogs were more horrible than wolves. As he remembered, a haciendado in a wild savanna (the grass there must have been taller and denser like clusters of reed growing on a plain of dry, cracked ground) once went to search for a stray heifer and ran into a pack of wild dogs. With his back pressed against a bushy grass hump, he beat off the attacking dogs with whatever he could lay his hands on. Oleg even knew the foreign name of that dog pack, but to recall it now was the last thing on his mind.

There were five or six dogs, while he hadn't so much as a good switch in his hands. The green hill slope as well as the momentary serenity and inviting melancholy of the old music in his heart suddenly became unreal and ridiculous at the sight of what was bearing down on him. He just pressed one palm of his hand against another, noticing that his hands were shaking, and stood still — perhaps the best thing he could do at that moment.

After sliding down the grass on their bellies, the dogs stopped in a half-circle a pace away from him. No, they certainly were not wild dogs of the savanna, because otherwise they wouldn't have stopped in their tracks. Two of them — little common mongrels of an ashy red and dirty gray color and of an unidentifiable breed — stood a little off to one side from the rest and yapped, afraid to come closer. The other, bigger dogs — of some sort of breed or even of several breeds — with powerful paws and big mouths, occasionally burst into a loud, ringing bark. The biggest dog, a black brute with a broad forehead, bloodshot eyes, and a curved neck that held his muzzle close to the ground, was the fiercest of them all. The left side of his muzzle was black, while the right side an ashy gray, and this ugly side with a bulging bloodshot eye seemed to be the more savagely ferocious, because it had turned toward Oleg and was closing in on him with a growl.

It was hard to tell what turn Oleg's predicament would have taken, if someone had not shouted from uphill:

"Sonko! Batu! Come back!"

The dogs immediately fell silent and rushed off to the call. Oleg unclenched his palms and passed them across his face with relief.

At the far end of the footpath loomed the figure of a merry looking elderly man with a gray tuft of hair and a sweaty face wreathed in a broad smile. He wore a checkered shirt sticking out of blue faded pants that hadn't been touched by a press iron for years. The man was really a merry sort. The dogs were already jumping around him, one of them had put its paws against his chest, the other tried to snatch his sleeve in fun, and still another had grabbed a leg of his pants — the man laughed boisterously until he fell onto the grass. A greater uproar followed. The excited dogs jumped over him as he rolled in the grass, choking on his laughter.

"Hey-y-y, you bums!" he gasped. "Don't you try stripping the hide off your father!"

Oleg gradually regained his composure, straightened his shoulders, and continued to walk uphill. Some distance away from all this noise and bustle there stood old little houses enclosed by God knows what. Here and there, their ragged roofs, green and rusty red, were protected against the rain by patches of zinc-coated tin. This was an oasis of the old town that had survived on the hill. Its residents probably did not long too much to leave this place. It was quiet here, the air was clean, and

the view from the windows was incomparable to anything you could see from a highrise. In front of each porch and further on into "no-man's" land stretched tended vegetable gardens which nobody had allotted and nobody intended to take away. On one side, the plots were fenced by plywood, dry twigs, and rusty tin sheets, and on the other side, they were cut off by a bluff. Oleg had just come level with one such garden: the green shoots of spring onion and asparagus had already pushed high out of the ground, quite a large patch of budding tulips blazed separately in a fusion of green and rose, and several paces higher, a time-blackened house of wood on a brick socle had sunk into the ground.

Oleg must have been taking in the scene for all too long, because the dogs stopped bustling and closed in on him again. The merry man jumped to his feet and immediately became ill-humored.

"Well, what d'ye want here?"

"Nothing, just having a look."

"What is it you haven't seen here? All right, so people live here... there's an old cemetery... What did you expect to find here?"

The mouths of the growling dogs were foaming. Each of them was set to lunge at him. If their master (did the brood really belong to him alone? — it was more likely that he only fed them now and then) had lifted but one finger, they would have jumped at Oleg.

"Get out of here!" the man said.

"Does this place belong to you, or what?" Oleg parried.

"Looks like you want them to tear you to pieces, eh? All right, scram, boy!"

"Listen, who are you to order people where to walk?"

Oleg didn't know who this man was and who he could be under certain circumstances.

"So who are you, after all?" Oleg asked again, a lack of respect in his voice.

The eyes of the gloomy joker narrowed and became cold; he stretched out his neck in a doglike manner and bared his teeth in a grin.

Oleg had said all he had wanted to say. His mood spoiled, he retraced his steps up the footpath. After he had walked some distance, he looked round: the man was rolling in the grass with the dogs, the excited noise of their encouraged bustle reaching the hilltop. As he descended, the scene on the other side of the hill disappeared from his view.

But the dogs caught up with him again, when he was already entering the stand of young acacias. This time, the brute with the black-white muzzle used his jaws without ceremony, after which he jumped aside. Oleg's jeans withstood the outrage, but a sharp pain shot through his leg so acutely it made him squat. The next thing he did was break a heavy stick from an acacia sapling that pricked his hand in many places. "I didn't touch you, doggies, nor did I bite you or jump at you... and I didn't do anything bad to your master," he mumbled, rubbing the pain out of his hurt leg. He was lucky not to have to visit the doctor for any injections, because the dog's fangs didn't rip his skin. Anyway, that was poor solace.

The black brute lunged at Oleg again, and got his deserts. He pressed the tail between his legs (like a beaten dog, as it were) and, yowling, retreated to the hilltop, followed by the timidly yapping rest of the pack Oleg chased ahead of him.

The dogs whined tiredly, their aggressiveness sapped. The joker, too, retreated to a safer distance, hissing from behind his fence, because the incident smelled of trouble: here and there, people looked out of their yards to see what was going on.

Leaning on his stick, Oleg demonstratively limped closely past the gate, looking intently into the yard, which under usual circumstances would have already been qualified as a provocative challenge and now was supposed to emphasize that he wasn't afraid a bit of the rancor hurled at him from

behind the fence.

"You'll be sorry yet..." the man hissed.

"I won't rest content until I find out who you are and what you are, and why you set dogs on people." After limping past the fence, he turned the corner. Walking now down a side street, he looked again at the gloomy wooden house protected against the outside world by ivy and a weird fence, and at the rosy patch of tulips resembling an ancient host assembled to set forth on a campaign with short straight spears of thin stalks topped by sharp rosy buds that were ready to burst into bloom.

He recalled his relations with dogs. Though never at odds with them, he didn't keep dogs at his home. In this matter, he shared his grandpa's views. "Dog must live with dog," the old man used to say whenever he saw them playing. In other words, a dog's place — whether in a yard or barn — was in a kennel or on a chain or without it. The old man had lived a difficult life, tending grain crops and the land. He had seen years that were lean or bountiful and quiet, troublous or good, but always filled with concern for the highest purpose of life: the ability and fitness of man to provide for and continue his race. In these everyday cares there was no room for cheap passions and idleness — each had to shoulder his share in continuing life: the ox and the horse and the dog — in the farmyard, in the field, in the kennel.

Oleg trusted more the old man on this point, and had a skeptical or even openly hostile attitude to other views.

Oleg studied at a vocational school of communications. In the evenings, he delivered telegrams for his district post office. Each of the telegrams was of a different kind — routine, mundane, or tragic. When he stopped at the threshold of a home, he did not deliver the telegram right away, but tried to say something unessential, at least a couple of words to prepare the recipient for the shock of grief:

"...Well, you see the thing is..." The recipient would notice that Oleg was hesitating to speak up and didn't look cheerful, being strangely reluctant to part with the telegram. "Is it something bad?" "I'm afraid it is — brace yourself."

There were also funny telegrams, like this one, for instance: "Urgently send one boot." Oleg read all the telegrams so as to know where to go first, what person to visit in case he or she could barely walk, or simply contact the recipient by phone if the telegram message was not urgent — say, a confirmation of something — and deliver it later. Once in a while there were some weird messages. He couldn't understand what such people really cared for, wasting their time on telegrams that were only a headache for others. "Name the doggie Pipa" — that was the request or demand of a telegram he brought once to a well-appointed apartment (judging by its door) in a handsome house. A self-confident, well-to-do looking and arrogant man opened the door and took the telegram. His shortish buxom wife peered from behind his back; three pups fussed around their feet. Before signing for the telegram, the man produced a purse and took a twenty-kopeck coin out of it. Oleg accepted the coin — and then flung it to their feet. His face must have betrayed something, because the shortish woman reacted angrily: "You don't like animals, but we do..."

He did like animals, but...

For two weeks now, Oleg was freely visiting the hill almost every day, and could say for certain that he had conquered it — nobody was pestering him, neither that joker nor his dogs. Why should anyone prevent him from walking this footpath, what right did he have? A sort of mental rebellion attracted him to the hill. He did not give too much thought to what he was trying to prove or what it might end up with generally. The dogs did not touch him now. Oh, he had found a common language with them all right. Apart from the well known stick he picked up at the hill, Oleg always

carried a plastic bag. Before going to the hill, he dropped in to a butcher's shop and spent fifty kopecks on bones, after which he calmly proceeded to his destination, laughing at himself for the charity he intended to stop soon: "Have I been hired to feed you, or what?" He didn't give them anything on the way, although they rushed to meet him. But once he was on the hilltop, he threw everything out of the bag for them to feast on.

Oleg walked defiantly around the house, appearing out of the side street, and the dogs, except for the black brute, playfully jumped up to his chest for joy. But he did not encourage such familiarity, each time reminding them of the stick in his hand. There was one thought preying on his mind all the time. Perhaps it was the reason he was drawn to that hill: If I don't put this man in his place, he'll do something evil one of these days...

"You'll be sorry yet," the man hissed from behind the fence.

Once one of the neighbors asked Oleg:

"Why are you hanging around that house?"

"I just like walking up that hill," Oleg replied, evading the question.

One day he saw the black brute sitting chained to the kennel in the yard. As soon as Oleg appeared on the hilltop, the master let the dog go. The dog barked and bumped his muzzle against his side of the fence half-heartedly. At that, the other dogs jumped over the fence and the black brute's fur went flying. He turned tail and bolted off into the farthest ivy thicket. That day the tulip patch burst into bloom. The master brought his hunting equipment outdoors, seemingly for show. Slowly he took to cleaning his shotgun on a little table in the yard. He broke the barrel, looked through it at the tulip patch. Inside the barrel, the tulips seemed to have burst into a rosy splash. Then he aimed the shotgun in Oleg's direction, looking at him through one, then through the second barrel. Oleg even seemed to have seen the round and piercing eye through the barrel.

"Oh... now everything's clear. That's just when I caught you. Article fifty-four of the criminal code," Oleg said at random, but clearly and convincingly.

"Hey, wait a minute," Oleg suddenly heard behind his back a confused voice that had instantly become hoarse or cold, but Oleg did not stop nor turn round. "Are you serious? I didn't mean it. Are you really serious?"

"Sure," Oleg rejoined, without turning round. This warning seemed enough for Oleg. He felt as if he had conquered an eight-thousand-kilometer-high mountain. A blue mist rose from below, veiling the orchards. The city was preparing for a holiday, pulling down and burning the ramshackle huts in the old district. After the apricots, the cherry trees began to bloom, their petals showering the ground like a snow avalanche. The old and solemn music resounded again in his heart, lifting Oleg above the world.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko