



Vsevolod Nestaiko

MARK ONE FOR LYING **(Excerpts)**

Let's Get Acquainted

It's morning.

School started five minutes ago.

The corridors are empty and silent.

Presently the front door creaks. The sounds of pattering footsteps carry loudly at first from the entrance hall, then grow duller as they move down the corridor: some unlucky soul is late for class.

At the end of the corridor, a classroom door opens, and a thin guilty voice squeaks plaintively, "May I come in?"

From inside, the teacher says something reproachfully.

The door shuts.

Again there is no one in sight.

Another school day has started.

It's empty and quiet in the corridors.

Only the school cat, Socrates, covered all over with chalk and ink blots, appears from around the corner and stalks down the very middle of the corridor in a dignified manner. He enjoys the opportunity. Socrates knows only too well that once the bell goes off for recess, he'll have to scramble out of here for all he is worth, then hop and jump about for the whole recess, evading the ardent manifestations of friendship of numerous nature lovers.

Socrates walks on and glances dejectedly at the classroom doors.

All the doors are absolutely alike except for the inscriptions, which range from Grade 1 to Grade 10. Behind the former, lop-eared first-graders trace out circles and lines in copybooks with a serious mien, their tongues lolling out from the effort; behind the latter, mustachioed tenth-graders play hangman with the powdered and made-up girls from their class, while a student-teacher with a schoolboy's appearance and naive eyes covers the entire blackboard with intricate formulas.

But it is neither the former nor the latter we are interested in.

Cautiously, let's follow Socrates on tiptoe to the door with the plate reading Grade 4B. The plate is warped, with a chipped corner, but the inscription is fairly legible.

We approach the door and prick up our ears.

Behind the door, all is silent.

Not a single sound to be heard.

Not a single ripple in the pool of silence, so to speak.

What if there's no one in there?
 What if the classroom is empty?
 We open the door a crack.
 And peer through the chink with one eye.
 There they are all right! Everyone in place!
 Sitting nicely. Faces concentrated, serious. No smiles, no monkeyshines whatsoever. Little angels, not children at all.

What's that? Maybe we've come to the wrong door? You can't write a story about children like these, can you? Why don't we go to another classroom and look for some real, lively pupils?"

But no, wait a minute!

Presently, the teacher Lina Mytrofanivna, who is pacing up and down the classroom, suddenly speaks up:

"Spasokukotsky, stop peeping at Travianko's paper!"

Aha, we've guessed it. They're having a test.

That explains why everything is so ship-shape.

Lina Mytrofanivna sternly knits her brow and looks about the room with eagle eyes to make sure no one is cribbing.

Now where in the world did it ever happen that no one crib bed during test?

There, a piece of blotting paper falls to the floor from the third desk, but no one at the third desk bends over to pick it up. It is retrieved by someone at the fourth desk.

Lina Mytrofanivna starts and says:

"What? What's that?"

"My blotting paper fell on the floor," comes the answer.

pair of eyes blinking innocently over the fourth desk.

Lina Mytrofanivna didn't see what desk the blotting paper fell from, so everything is okay!

"My 4B is simply unbearable!" Lina Mytrofanivna says frequently.

"My 4B is the best," Lina Mytrofanivna says just as frequently.

"My 4B will give me a heart attack one of these days!" Lina Mytrofanivna says.

"My 4B is the only thing that keeps me going," says the very same Lina Mytrofanivna.

So when does she really mean what she says?

After all, who are they—those fourteen boys and ten girls silently bent over their copybooks?

Are they good or bad?

Let us take a closer look at every one of them.

Now, whom shall we start with?

Say, those two boys sitting in the middle row at the desk right in front of Lina Mytrofanivna's table.

Spasokukotsky and Kukuevytsky

Both are small, round-faced, lop-eared, and snub-nosed. The one who's got a brown birthmark on his nose is Spasokukotsky.

The other with the jabbed tooth is Kukuevytsky.

The first is called Lesyk.

The second, Stasyk.

Spasokukotsky loves Puppy candy more than anything in the world.

Kukuevytsky, though, loves Little Squirrel candy more than anything in the world.

If these candies are not available, however, they'll nibble any other kind they can lay their

hands 'on, even if it be hard sugared nut bars, so hard you couldn't break them against a side-walk.

As a matter of history, Lina Mytrofanivna had the boys sit at the first desk right in front of her table from their first day of school, because they were the shortest in the class.

That's how their fates intertwined.

My, oh my! There's no escaping from fate... When you're a full seven years old and they give you five and a half or six years at most in a 'streetcar or trolleybus, how much it makes you suffer, oh how much you want to grow a little bit taller, even if it's only a centimeter. How much you want to be like that Ihor Dmytrukha who sits at the last desk and peppers the blackboard with chewed paper balls he shoots from a glass tube!

Spasokukotsky kept glancing at Kukuevysky and thinking:

Seems he's a bit shorter than I... Look how he leans on his elbows and cranes his neck. Sure, he's shorter. An altogether squirt. And he's probably thinking I'm a squirt. A wet rag who can be walked over. No, I won't have him think that! I won't have it!

During the long recess, as they stood at the Window in the corridor, crunching nut bars and watching the boys from the senior grades clambering up a rope on the sports ground in the schoolyard, Spasokukotsky smacked his lips and said:

"We were at a dacha in the country this summer. I climbed a terribly huge tree. Right to the top to a kite's nest up there. It had some nestlings in it. Beaky birds, you know. But I didn't take any. What did I need them for? Besides, the kite might have pecked my eyes out, and that's the last thing I wanted. I only took a look, touched them with my finger, and climbed down."

Kukuevysky's eyes blinked, and the nut bar got stuck in his throat. He wanted to say something, but couldn't; he just kept bleating like a kid: "Me-ee-h!"

At this point the bell went off, and they had to go back into the classroom.

Spasokukotsky was jubilant: Aha! Got it? That's so you know who you have to deal with, you squirt!

But during the next recess, Kukuevysky blinked his bushy eyebrows, blushed, and said quietly:

"And. . . Once I went to the Dnieper to watch the men ice fishing. The ice was only along the shore, and farther out there was open water. The piece of ice I was standing on broke away and floated, off. Everyone started hollering, but I didn't get scared. I just shouted: 'Hey, save me and hurry, because I've still got to go to the grocery and buy some cream!' A motor launch was sent after me, and they picked me off below Kyiv near Zhukiv Island. But I still bought the cream."

Spasokukotsky gave a grunt and his face grew red. Then he braced himself and said:

"And I... I had... I had to put out a real fire. Aha! At the dacha. A pile of straw caught fire near the cowshed. I didn't lose my head, though; grabbed a pail of slops and... If it hadn't been for me, the cowshed and the house and everything *else* would have burned to the ground.. ."

"And I. . ." Kukuevysky said, modestly dropping his eyes, "I was left at home all by myself, when suddenly a robber rang the door bell. A real robber, mind you. 'Open up!' he says. 'I'm from Kiev Gas Service!' I froze with fright and said, 'No, I won't open up! Every robber in town says he's from Kiev Gas Service, and once he's in, he kills and plunders. So get lost, or I'll take my father's shotgun and fire through the keyhole.' And he says: 'You little jackass!' And I says: 'It takes one to know one!' So he got scared and went away."

Spasokukotsky heaved a sigh, and said on the verge of tears:

"And I... I was run over by a bike once... And once I swallowed my mother's watch, wristband and all..."

Spasokukotsky's mood was utterly spoiled by now.

During the lessons he flicked sullen looks at Kukuevytsky, and thought: Was that squirt telling me the truth or not? Did he really drift on an ice floe and tell that robber off? Everything I said was just plain baloney—about the baby kites and the fire...

Actually, it was he who almost burned the cowshed to the ground. He was playing with matches, and the straw caught fire. He got scared and started squealing like a piglet. His mother came running, grabbed the pail of slops, and put out the fire, after which she gave him a good whack so he plowed into the puddle nose first.

Spasokukotsky's eyes gouged into Kukuevytsky, as he tried to guess whether he was telling the truth or not. But Kukuevytsky looked at him with clear and innocent eyes that didn't betray a thing.

Spasokukotsky decided not to give up.

The next day, it turned out that Spasokukotsky had pulled a little drowning girl out of the river by the very same dacha, went down a draw well to save a kitten, and rode a mettlesome stallion called Electron.

Kukuevytsky, for his part, fought a mad dog, went down a manhole to get the keys his neighbor's little girl had dropped, and, during a military parade, got a lift on an armored carrier.

So now, whenever Spasokukotsky opened the *Star* newspaper for children, he read the headlines with dread, expecting to come across a story about Kukuevytsky's feats. And listening to the "Young Pioneers Morning" radio program he feared to hear the familiar name.

Several days filled with stories about feats and heroics passed in this way.

Spasokukotsky and Kukuevytsky walked around with their heads proudly erect and shoulders squared. The boys seemed to have become taller and sparer in frame.

But one day Kukuevytsky did not show up at school—he must have fallen ill.

Spasokukotsky lived through a boring day of five lessons. He kept thinking of all the details of his fight with a huge viper, which he had an itch to tell his friend (the night before he had read Serhiy Artiushenko's book *The Joke with the Python*). That story would surely make Kukuevytsky buckle under. But Kukuevytsky didn't show up.

Spasokukotsky came home from school in a rotten mood.

He lunched without appetite. During lunch, his mother shot him a strange glance, then another, and finally said with an intent look:

"Now open your mouth!"

Without suspecting anything, Spasokukotsky opened his mouth wide.

"Oh!" his mother exclaimed. "You've got a cavity in your tooth! Caries. My goodness, you must see the dentist right away!"

"What?!" Spasokukotsky's spoon slipped out of his fingers, and, hitting the edge of the plate with a tinkle, plopped into the borshch.

"You must see the dentist right away!" his mother repeated. "Right away!" she went over to the telephone and dialed a number. "Hello! Tell me please when the dentist will be working today. I see. Thank you," she said and replaced the receiver. "Let's go right now. There's a fine specialist from two o'clock on."

"I... I won't! go!" Spasokukotsky said.

"Oh yes you will!" mother said firmly.

"I won't go!" Spasokukotsky said even more firmly.

"Do you want to lose your teeth?! See what you've gotten yourself into with those candies! How many times did I tell you—don't eat so much candy, don't go around crunching sweets all

the time!"

"I won't go!" Spasokukotsky exclaimed desperately in a high key.

"Oh yes you will," his mother said calmly, powdering her nose in front of a mirror.

"I can't go anywhere. I don't feel well," Spasokukotsky said with a wry face. "I've got a stomach ache."

"You don't have anything of the sort," mother said, applying her lipstick.

"Oh! Oh!" Spasokukotsky moaned, leaning to one side, and lowered his cheek into the borshch that had become cold by now.

"You know quite well that this has no effect on me," his mother said, unmoved, touching up her eyelashes with a brush.

That was true. Spasokukotsky's mother was as adamant as they come.

Keeping his cheek in the borshch for a while, Spasokukotsky raised his head, picked shreds of cabbage off his cheek, and heaved a sigh that seemed to start somewhere down in his boots.

"You want me to die!"

"I don't want to see my son toothless, carrying his false teeth around in his bag."

Five minutes later they were on their way to the children's clinic. Mother was holding his hand fast, while he was mechanically moving his feet, not seeing anything in front of him for the tears that clouded his eyes. The only thing he was aware of was his head thumping in time with the clip-clop of his mother's heels.

The smell of medicine carried on the air—they had entered the clinic.

There was no one at the door to the dentist's; his reception hours had just started, 'and they were first on the list, so they were received immediately.

Spasokukotsky crossed the threshold, and a cold chill gripped him inside. By the wall stood a glass cupboard, and on its shelves glistened nickel-plated instruments for pulling teeth out—pliers, tweezers, and things of that sort.

In the middle of the room, next to the dental chair, stood IT—the dentist's drill. Spasokukotsky had heard about that horrible drill from the constantly terrified Talochka when he was still in the kindergarten.

The blue streamlined drill unit, resembling the cunning tower of a submarine, seemed to wink down at him with the yellow eye of its operating lamp.

Spasokukotsky's first urge was to break loose and run for his life. But from behind him came the pungent cosmetics smell of his implacable mother, while in front of him was the doctor, a pleasantly smiling, tall, bald man with a wart on his nose, who smelled of medicine. All his routes of escape were blocked.

"Come, sit here," the doctor said good-naturedly, pointing to the dental chair with a sweeping gesture. "Sit down, please. Judging from your appearance, I can see you're a real man!"

But Spasokukotsky did not fall for the bait. He knew all those doctors' tricks: first there were smiles, but then a syringe was stuck into you, a scalpel cut your flesh, and something else happened so fast you didn't have a chance to blink (Talochka Dudarenko had told him about it many times).

Spasokukotsky didn't budge an inch.

Unexpectedly, his mother took him under his armpits and, wildly as he kept kicking his feet, she picked him up like a child and sat him in the chair.

The doctor stepped on a pedal and the chair moved up, while Spasokukotsky's heart went down into his boots.

"We'll now, open your mouth so we can take a look and see what's wrong with you there,"

the doctor said, smiling right over Spasokukotsky's nose.

"Lesyk, come on, you're a good boy. Open your mouth. Be a good boy!" his mother said in an unnaturally kind voice behind his back.

"We-l-l-11," the doctor repeated.

"Uh-wh!" Spasokukotsky clenched his teeth, shaking his head.

"I don't understand. Are you deaf-mute or what?"

"I can't open my mouth," Spasokukotsky said through set teeth. "Spasms, I guess."

"Oh yes, that happens sometimes," the doctor said with a smile, took Spasokukotsky by the cheeks with two fingers, pressed them a little bit, and his mouth opened of its own accord.

With the other hand, the doctor deftly put a round dental mirror on a metal handle to his teeth.

"Bo-o-ow!" Spasokukotsky said and bit the doctor's finger.

"Ouch!" the doctor jerked his hand back. "You might have bitten my finger off, young man. What would I do then?" And suddenly his voice took on a severe ring: "Come now, open your mouth, right now!"

Such a sharp change of tone produced the desired result and Spasokukotsky opened his mouth. The doctor put the dental mirror to his teeth again.

"Oh-h-h!" Spasokukotsky yelled.

"What's the matter? I haven't touched anything yet. I'm only looking."

"It hurts."

"That's impossible."

"It might be impossible with you, but not with me. They're not your teeth, after all! I don't want any more of it. I'm getting down."

"Whoa!" the doctor said. "And where does a smart aleck like you study? What school do you go to, and what class are you in? I'll have to write an article about you to your school newspaper."

"Oh yes, that sounds like a fine idea," Spasokukotsky's mother said from behind and told the dentist the number of the school and the class.

"What?" the doctor exclaimed merrily. "Well, I never. So you're in the same class as my daughter Liuba Prysiazhniuk."

"What!?" Spasokukotsky's jaw dropped from surprise. Indeed, there was a Liuba Prysiazhniuk in his class.

What a mess I've gotten myself into! Spasokukotsky thought. Now everyone will know... even Kukuevytsky. Oh, that's the end of me, the end. I've disgraced myself in the eyes of the whole school. Kukuevytsky will make fun of me till he hiccups with laughter. He'll tell everyone about the fire, the well, the stallion Electron. Oh, what can I do now?

Spasokukotsky was so absorbed in his thoughts he did not notice how the doctor had switched on the drill and it had begun to whir barely audibly. The drill didn't hurt him any. Some minutes later the doctor said jovially:

"Well, that's all! Don't eat anything for two hours."

He pressed the pedal, and the dental chair went down.

"You can go now!"

Spasokukotsky slipped down from the chair, and reeling like after a space flight, he made a few irresolute steps toward his mother. She smiled, extending her arms toward him.

Is that all? he thought, bewildered. And I was so silly as to be afraid! Jerking, yelling and biting! Oh my! Kukuevytsky was fighting a mad dog, floating down the Dnieper on an ice floe, and chasing a robber away from his door... Kukuevytsky was really a hero, but I... Oh what a

disgrace!

He felt so downright miserable, his face puckered and he burst into tears.

"Tut-tut!" the doctor exclaimed, surprised. "What's the matter with you? It's all over. Oh, I see... you probably think I'll tell Liuba about it. Don't worry I won't tell her a thing. You did fine! You behaved like a real man!"

At which "the real man" sniveled and wiped his tears away.

As they were leaving the dentist's office, Spasokukotsky suddenly heard a woman's voice in the corridor:

"See, that boy wasn't afraid at all! See, it's nothing so bad you should cry ^about it... But you..."

Spasokukotsky turned round.

Sitting by the door on a chair beside his mother, was a frightened Kukuevytsky with a tear-stained face.

* * *

A boy wearing a blue sports shirt with a white collar and armbands occupies the last but one desk in the right-hand row by the window. This is Vovka Onyshchenko, one of the best athletes not just in Class 4B, but in the whole school and perhaps in town for that matter. He's got a second adult sports rating in swimming and a first adult rating in diving. Many times he has been the prizewinner at competitions. He's the school's sporting pride, so to speak.

But this year something happened that...

Vovka Onyshchenko

"Si-i-i-lence ple-ee-ease! The lesson's begun."

But silence did not come immediately—for a minute or so there was a banging of desk lids, a shuffle of feet, and talking.

Maria Vasylivna, the math teacher, waited patiently.

At long last there was silence.

"Whoever hasn't done his homework, raise his hand."

The class did not stir. No one raised his hand.

"Good. So now I start asking questions."

Her finger slowly slid down the blue column of names in her register, while her eyes looked intently around the classroom from over the glasses.

Vovka ducked, pressing his chest against the desk as he hid his head behind the back of Vitasyk Diachenko sitting in front of him. His body tensed like before a jump, one thought alone hammering in his head: Won't it really blow over! Won't it really blow over! Won't it...

"Onyshchenko!"

This is the end, he thought.

Vovka heaved a sigh, got up slowly, and dropped his head like someone doomed. He didn't say a word—"there wasn't much to say anyway. The teacher understood him without any words.

"Take your seat. You get the lowest mark with a marginal note 'for lying'."

Then Liuba Prysiazhniuk was called out and recited her homework assignment in a lively manner.

Vovka didn't listen. With his chin propped on a fist, he scowled at Maria Vasylivna. There

was such an impotent fury and despair in his eyes as only a defeated fighter could have had looking at his conqueror.

Oh my, what a mess she's gotten me into with that bad mark, he thought. What a mess!

Everything's finished. Everything!

Serhiy Petrovych won't let me enter any competitions now for anything in the world.

Not for anything in the world!

His coach, Serhiy Petrovich, was a man of iron.

Needless to say, this was law at the children and teenagers' sports school Vovka attended: anyone with bad marks was barred from the competitions.

Oh, how Vovka had been waiting for them!

It was a city meet in diving. The first three prizewinners would go to Leipzig for an international competition of twinned cities (Kyiv-Leipzig).

Leipzig... international competition... Can you imagine that?

Vovka's chances of snatching a prize were quite good. Petrovych said so himself:

"If you can improve on your entry into the water, your somersault pike might fetch you nine points."

Serhiy Petrovych himself had said that! And now...

Well, of course, Vovka was to blame... No denying it. All right, so he didn't do his homework.

But how could he, when there had been a hockey game on television yesterday. Bigtime hockey! The USSR against Canada. A game with the Canadian pros! For heaven's sake, how could he possibly have done his homework on such a day. Before that, he had been at a training session. Two days earlier he had gone to the movies to see two series of *Phantomas*. Didn't he have a right to go to the movies either? Everyone had seen *Phantomas* but him! So when was he supposed to do his homework? At night, or what? Serhiy Petrovych had said himself that over-exhaustion could lead to loss of form.

Also, Vovka was dead sure he wouldn't be called out, because Maria Vasylivna had called him to the blackboard not so long ago. And he had gotten a Three with a plus. With a plus, mind you. That's a fine mark. She might as well not have troubled him today. But no—she had called him out. Out of sheer spite. How was he supposed to feel toward her after that?

And what kind of teacher was she after all?

An old crackpot, that's what she was. Horrors, and what marks she handed out! They seemed more like jokes, not marks. No teacher in the world gave marks like hers. What a system to invent! Say, the lowest mark One was not enough for her, the "1" would be enclosed in a circle and have a marginal note "for lying" when you didn't admit right away that you hadn't learned the lesson. Mark Two Approaching Three (written 2—3) meant that you had tried to learn your lessons, but nothing had come of it. Dear me, and what about the pluses and minuses! Three with two minuses. Four with three minuses. Five with a plus. Or simply a plus without any mark—that's when you had given a good answer to some question not mentioned in the homework.

An old-fashioned system of marks. What was the principal putting up with!

At the beginning of every lesson there was that invariable "Si-i-i-lence pl-ee-ease!"

Pronouncing the phrase, she drawled the words and funnily curled her wrinkled old lips.

For heaven's sake, what sort of a teacher was that!

A bad joke! An antic to make you howl!

On her table lay a bag, an old worn leather bag, on the flap of which was a white

parallelogram-like metal plaque with a monogram so worn and scratched you couldn't make out what it read. That bag was incredibly old, probably twice as old as Vovka. And she was still carrying it around. Such trash! As if she couldn't buy herself a new one. It was simply disgusting to look at.

For some reason Vovka recalled how he had chanced upon Maria Vasylivna one summer day in the Botanical Gardens. She sat on a bench with a little blond girl of about five.

The girl was fretful, puckered up her mouth, and refused to eat bread with butter.

"Nastia dear, eat a little bit at least. I beg you," Maria Vasylivna persuaded her gently.

Nastia turned her head away and waved her little chubby hands, saying:

"Oh, leave me alone, Granny! I told you I won't, and that's that. Leave me alone! Don't pester me."

On the whole, Maria Vasylivna differed in no way from the numerous grandmothers who whiled away the whole day with their grandchildren in the Botanical Gardens—some with their needlework, others with an old tattered book, yet all of them invariably with a little bag, out of which stuck a milk bottle and wrapped up sandwiches.

Like any other fretful grandchild, the blond Nastia exercised unlimited power over Maria Vasylivna. It was hard to believe that this was the very same Maria Vasylivna who mercilessly entered the Ones "for lying" and other unbelievably weird marks in her register.

At the thought of it today, the bad mark seemed all the more humiliating and degrading to Vovka.

Oh how he disliked Maria Vasylivna. He hated her more than anybody else in the world!

Vovka Onyshchenko didn't take part in the competition. Serhiy Petrovich really was a man of iron. However much Vovka—his sense of pride destroyed by now—tried to justify himself and prove that it had happened by accident, that he wasn't to blame, and even vowed on the verge of tears, "That's the last time it happens," nothing helped.

Moreover, when the class found out that Vovka had been barred from taking part in the competition, everyone pounced on him with indignation.

"Have you gone nuts or what to get a bad mark right before a competition?" Makaronina yelled. "Of all the things to do!"

"Is it really that hard to solve a stupid math problem!" Nadia Travianko echoed her.

"It's not only yourself you let down. You've let down the whole team!" Valera Halushynsky gasped.

"We put all our hopes on you!" Tania Verba said, almost in tears. "We thought we'd have a champ in our class. But you. . ."

"You runt!" Ihor Dmytrukha told Vovka straight to his face. "You don't even realize how you let Serhiy Petrovych down! He might have gotten a Merited Coach title for you. You runt!" Igor Dmytrukha was an acknowledged authority on sports affairs.

Vovka took all the reproaches bitterly.

Because of the reproaches, humiliations, and his pleas, which were all in vain, Vovka's heart was going to pieces—he was a very proud boy. And proud people are inclined to blame everyone but themselves for their humiliations. Vovka put the blame on Maria Vasylivna. It's all because of her, he thought with impotent despair.

So Vovka decided to seek revenge.

He prepared his lessons diligently and waited. He waited for Maria Vasylivna to call him out any day now so he'd give a brilliant answer, get a Five with two pluses, and then say:

"You see, I knew the answer perfectly well the last time you asked me, but I had a bad

headache that day and couldn't answer. You didn't even ask what was the matter with me; you just went and gave me a One 'for lying' right away. I didn't say anything just as a matter of principle. Now you can see for yourself that I know everything. And you had to... How could you! You've ruined not only my life but that of my coach Serhiy Petrovych as well. Because of you he wasn't awarded the Merited Coach title. So now you can be glad about it!" After which he intended to walk out of the classroom with a proud mien. At long last Maria Vasylivna would realize that she had been unjust and cruel. But it would be too late.

That was the noble and beautiful revenge Vovka had planned.

For some reason, however, Maria Vasylivna kept forgetting to call him to the blackboard. Besides, she was often ill that year and did not show up for lessons. So Vovka's unuttered noble words resounded forlornly in his heart for no one to hear and for no purpose to serve.

March came. The ground was still covered with snow; quite often during the night, the frost covered the window-panes with fantastic patterns, but the air was already fresh and heady in an unwintery way—the moldy smell of last year's leaves and of the bare budding twigs flowed from the parks and gardens into the Kiev streets. Whenever there were fine cloudless days, black patches of damp sod showed from under the snow on the sunlit ground. The patches steamed as if they were breathing the March air.

Then came the 8th of March—International Women's Day.

Traditionally, in school the women were given presents and congratulated the day before because the school was closed on the 8th.

For a whole month Vovka had been making a present for his mother—a first-aid kit bag with numerous compartments and boxes for medicine (his mother was a physician working with an ambulance service). But in the morning of the 7th he could not give her his gift, because she was asleep after a night on duty.

So Vovka simply couldn't find a moment's peace during any of his classes, for he was itching to run home and give his mother the present with all due ceremony. He was afraid that when she woke up, she'd think he hadn't any present for her at all.

Oh how long classes lasted that day! To add to his misery, Maria Vasylivna's was the last. It simply seemed unbearable to Vovka.

That Maria Vasylivna might call him to the blackboard was the last thing on his mind that day.

Why did she have to drag the lesson out so? Who needed all that anyway now? She might at least have let them go home early. It was the eve of a holiday, and she was a woman, after all. She might as well go home and celebrate.

Maria Vasylivna, however, didn't seem to understand all that. She went on with the lesson right up to the bell. When it rang, she was just finishing her explanation. The pupils began to bustle about, banging the desk lids as they reached for their bags. But no one dared get up—Maria Vasylivna was still standing at the table.

It was difficult to understand why she was tarrying—she had never before lingered in the classroom after the bell.

Maria Vasylivna took off her glasses, moved her hand across her tired eyes, and a strange flickering smile swept across her face. Then quietly, but audible enough for the whole class to hear, she said as if to herself:

"Well, that's the end of my last lesson... Goodbye, children. ..."

At long last! Vovka jumped up from behind his desk with a jerk and rushed out of the classroom. Once in the corridor, he stopped abruptly. What was the matter? Besides him, no one

else had left the room. Indeed, Maria Vasylivna was still speaking inside. For a fleeting moment Vovka wavered—what he had done wasn't exactly nice. But he waved off his blunder with the thought: Oh well, she's probably telling everyone to remember to congratulate their mothers. As if we needed telling! I wouldn't go back to the classroom for that reason alone—and he ran off home.

His mother was truly glad to get Vovka's present. She was so moved tears welled up in her eyes. It was all because Vovka had built that kit with his own hands. And although father's present—a stylish dress—was much more lavish and expensive, it lost a lot compared with Vovka's present. Father envied Vovka, or so it seemed, and jubilant as Vovka was, he felt sorry for his father. He showed his nobleness by praising his father's present, but mother said that Vovka's was still the best.

Vovka was in a wonderful mood, feeling like a hero. It was a pleasant feeling he wanted to last. After mother and father had praised him to the skies and took to their own affairs at long last, Vovka went to his neighbors. As might have been expected, they knew everything already and also started to praise him. Truth to tell, their praise was more restrained than that of his parents, while the neighbor's daughter Niura, a fourteen-year-old girl, didn't so much as utter a sound. She was fussing in front of a mirror, about to go out somewhere. Niura's attitude was not to Vovka's liking.

"What are you getting all prettied up for, beauty?" he asked in a mocking tone.

"What do you mean what for?" Niura squeaked, touching up her eyebrows. "I'm going to school. For a gala meeting dedicated to the 8th of March."

Pshaw!—a gala meeting, big deal! Niura annoyed him today

"Listen, Vovka," she said turning round, "why did you make a secret about Maria Vasylivna going on retirement? At today's meeting she'll be seen off on retirement with ceremony."

"What?" Vovka's jaw dropped from surprise.

"Hey, didn't you know about it?"

"No... But why... What's so unusual about it... Big deal..

Now it was Niura's turn to pshaw and accord him with a chilling reply:

"What an idiot you are! A fine attitude to have. It's your teacher that's retiring, after all..."

Vovka mumbled something incoherent and rushed out of the room.

Ihor Dmytrukha wasn't home. Vitasyk Diachenko had gone to the movies. Shuryk Babenko's aunt had come over to his house and taken him to her place in the Kurenivka district. Valera Halushynsky had left for the tailor's with his mother. As ill luck would have it, no one was in. Even Tania Verba—whom Vovka dropped in to see, although he never went to see girls—had gone to the library.

Vovka's head spun in bewilderment. How could it have happened? How could he have misunderstood her words "Well that's the end of my last lesson" and rushed out of the class room without waiting to hear what she would say next. Shi had said it, she had. She was bidding them farewell. And ii looked as if Vovka had left intentionally. Maria Vasylivna had said goodbye to everyone in the class except him.

Oh well, what's done is done! By the way, the fateful One "for lying" was probably null and void now. The new teacher wasn't likely to pay any attention to those weird marks.

But still! His behavior hadn't been the best for all that. Why couldn't he have waited another minute or so... and then left with the rest. As it happened, everyone was in agreement while he alone was swimming against the stream. Suddenly Vovka felt lonesome. He felt that way whenever he was late for school or cut class or when the teacher sent him out of the room for

misbehavior. At such moments he felt that everyone was busy doing something proper and useful which was already beyond his reach. An alarming and even frightening sensation.

Vovka cautiously slipped through the door of the school, and glancing back thievishly now and again, he went up the stall to the auditorium on the second floor. He knew that only the upper classes were invited to such gala meetings. He also knew that should he be seen, he would be sent home—rules were rules, you know. And yet, Vovka had to go to school that day. Some irresistible force drew him like, they say, a criminal is drawn to the place of his crime.

When Vovka opened the door of the auditorium, loud applause came from inside—a report or speech must have ended. Through the slightly open door he saw part of the stage with all the important people seated at a table. In the middle was Maria Vasylivna. The farewell speeches must have begun, because everyone was applauding and looking her way, while she did not applaud. She had an excited and somewhat confused look similar to the one she had whenever there was a hullabaloo in the classroom. It seemed she would get up now and pronounce her traditional “Si-i-lence ple-ee-ease!” But she didn’t do that. Instead, Pavlo Pavlovych, the PT instructor who was also sitting there at the table, got up and instantly it grew so quiet in the auditorium Vovka panned up his breath for fear he might be overheard. Pavlo Pavlovych said:

“Dear Maria Vasylivna. . . You know quite well that I’m no good at making speeches, because you often upbraided me for it when I was still Pavlyk the Snail and your pupil in this very school. You were our class mistress then, remember. But today I simply have to speak. Today you are leaving our staff, you who are so dear to my former teacher, my colleague and now me. . . Oh dear me, I’m no good at making speeches. . . But you see, it’s because of you that I became a teacher. . . I wanted to be just like you... I was simply an athlete, you know... . And I don’t know... Oh, what am I saying... That’s not what I wanted to say... My dear Maria Vasylivna... Thank you for everything you’ve done for me, for us, for everyone you taught. There are hundreds and thousands of your former pupils everywhere now... You will always be welcome at our school. You are not leaving our family, you’re simply, simply...”

Pavlo Pavlovych turned brick-red all of a sudden, blinked his eyes, then walked around the table to Maria Vasylivna, bent down, and kissed her hand. For a minute or so he stood there bent over her hand as she stroked his head with her other hand and whispered something in his ear. Her eyes were moist and she blinked incessantly.

Deep silence reigned in the auditorium. Vovka stood rooted to the spot behind the door. It seemed to him that everyone in the auditorium knew he was standing there, and knew how he disliked Maria Vasylivna and even what a “noble” revenge he had planned. Now his “noble” revenge built on dishonesty and lies seemed so pitiful and nasty to him.

He wanted to run away and hide, but he couldn’t stir an inch.

The auditorium burst out in applause again, and then a girl from the tenth class came on stage. She spoke in ‘a ringing, solemn voice like someone reciting poetry in an amateur concert at school. In all his excitement, Vovka dimly understood what she was saying: something about International Women’s Day, women teachers in general and Maria Vasylivna in particular. But there was one phrase that got imprinted on his mind: “Your *Ones for lying* taught us to be honest and truthful.” The phrase was a bit funny, yet it struck home. One “for lying”.

Why, that was his last mark with Maria Vasylivna. Moreover, it was the last One “for lying” Maria Vasylivna was to hand out: after Vovka no one else received such a mark. And Vovka never managed to have it taken off the books. It would stay with him forever.

He’d have Fives and Fours, but he would never correct that One “for lying”, because now other teachers would be giving him his marks. Now Maria Vasylivna would never give him

either Twos Approaching Threes, Fours with two minuses or Fives with a plus—nothing of that kind, never. Suddenly Vovka realized for the first time all the hopelessness and irreversibility behind that short word—never, and was seized with despair.

But isn't standing behind this door right now and listening secretly like a thief—isn't that also false and dishonest? he thought. Will I really be cheating and doing mean and dishonest things all my life? Will that One "for lying" really stay with me forever?

Maybe because Vovka was lost in thought and because just then the auditorium burst into applause again, he didn't hear footsteps behind his back. It was only after someone nudged him that he swung round. Behind him stood four pupils from the seventh class: three girls and a boy—Kostia Los, whom Vovka knew well since he was a devoted athlete and the school's champion in gymnastics. They held two baskets with flowers in their hands.

"Why are you sticking around here?" a slender blond girl hissed at Vovka.

"That's Vovka Onyshchenko. From Class 4B. The diver," Kostia said in a whisper. "Maria Vasylivna's their teacher. He's probably here on behalf of his class but got here late, and now the ninny's afraid to go in. Well, let's go, old man. But make it quick, because someone else might fling a speech and it wouldn't be nice to interrupt then."

Kostia gave him a dexterous shove with his knee, and Vovka found himself in the auditorium. It happened so unexpectedly and in the batting of an eyelid that Vovka didn't have a chance to utter a word.

The applause, which was beginning to die down, broke out with new force. The auditorium got to its feet, and standing, applauded the four pupils carrying the baskets with flowers toward the stage. The aisle was so narrow Vovka couldn't step aside anywhere. Pale and frightened out of his wits, there was nothing he could do but march in front of the four feeling as if all this was happening in a dream.

A moment later, Vovka was on stage. The four pupils placed the flowers on the table in front of the retiring teacher and quickly returned to the auditorium. Vovka suddenly froze, losing all power of movement.

The school principal, Yosyp Havrylovych, looked at him quizzically for a while, then a smile swept across his face, and he said unexpectedly:

"The next speaker is Volodymyr Onyshchenko from Class 4B."

Everything went black in front of Vovka's eyes. How had it all happened? What was he there for? What was he to do?

His body didn't seem to belong to him. Especially his hands. He didn't know where to put them. They irritated him. First he grasped them behind his back, then he shoved them into his pockets, then he squeezed them so hard the joints crackled.

Everyone was waiting.

Vovka kept mum.

"Speak up, Onyshchenko; don't be shy," the principal said good-naturedly.

"Well say 'Dear Maria Vasylivna,'" Pavlo Pavlovych, who was the nearest to him, prompted in a whisper.

"Dear Maria Vasylivna," Vovka repeated automatically, got scared of his own voice, and fell silent.

But it was too late. Now he had to say something. And words—sincere, disjointed, eager words—surged forth of their own accord.

"I... I've got... I didn't mean to speak. . . I simply... I've got. . . One 'for lying' . . . the last one. . . nobody else has it. . . And I didn't have time to get it changed. . . I wanted to. . . I studied

hard... 'pon my word.. . Now I know everything, the whole bit. . . Honest. . ."

Suddenly Vovka's voice trembled, he choked, and bright circles started to swim before his eyes. He took off with jerk, bolted into the depth of the stage, and huddling in a corner, burst into bitter tears.

He didn't hear the noise that rose in the auditorium, and he didn't understand what was said to him. He only felt someone cautiously putting an arm around his shoulder and leading him off somewhere. He went, his hands covering his face. Then, tears still choking him, he was sitting on a couch and someone was stroking his head silently and gently. When he calmed down at length and opened his eyes, he saw that he was sitting in the staff room with Maria Vasylivna at his side and no one else around.

Seeing that Vovka had stopped crying, Maria Vasylivna smiled and for some reason said in a whisper, although there was no one else in the room:

"My silly, silly boy. What a foolish thing you've thought up. You don't have any One 'for lying' any more. You've gotten it taken away just now. Do you hear me? You've righted it. Not everyone is capable of admitting his faults. And publicly at that. Only an honest person can do so."

. . .Many years will pass, and Vovka will become Volodymyr Ivanovych, an engineer, cosmonaut, or a teacher perhaps (who knows!), but never in his life will he forget those minutes or those words.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko