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(1951-)

The Tree of Life

The thaw had ended. During the night frost set in, and by morning the ground was again hard thirty centimeters deep. In the feeble sunlight, the black skeletons of acacia trees, to which mist had clung with icy fingers, had turned into frozen waterfalls.

Cold is always hard.

A man in a quilted jacket, his face ink-blue from a hangover, bore down on a greasy pneumatic hammer, and the loud rat-tat-tat that followed scared a flock of crows from an aspen copse nearby. The man straightened his back, spat with a scowl of hopelessness, expressed his attitude to God and someone's mother in a violent curse, and again went into a feverish shake of a dance.

Behind him, four other men were extracting the black clods with crowbars and shovels until they reached the yellow clay which they heaped around the hole in what looked like a parapet. These robust, red-faced physical training college students wearing numbered shirts of the Dynamo soccer club worked by a rigid set of rules. Each took a five-minute shift working assiduously, while the others had a rest, because there was only enough space for one man to do the spadework.

It looked as if they were digging a trench for a pipeline.

At long last the grave was finished. From the bus we rolled out a standard coffin knocked together of gray unplanned boards, put it on our shoulders and made for the parapet.

When we were putting the heavy pine box down, Liosa's fur cap suddenly slipped from under his armpit and dropped into the grave. Liosa blinked foolishly and looked around. The cap was new, of a formal cut, worn by all the executives in the institution where he worked. Slon and I pretended not to have noticed anything.

What is dearer to man — his cap or reputation?

In winter, it's the cap, of course, because Liosa became fidgety, seeking support in us. We turned away. One of the four gravediggers jumped into the hole, from which he raised the cap on the handle of a shovel.

All this looked like children playing a funeral. A stupid inward laughter twisted our mouths. We wanted to laugh out of fear.

We were burying Alik, a onetime leader and soloist of our world-famous rock group "Bells," world-famous in our town, of course. The group broke up ten years ago, after we had graduated

from college, and this was the first time we gathered in full strength.

Friends in need are friends indeed.

During the last concert of that wild graduation spring, the frenzied female admirers of Alik almost tore his fireproof stage togs to pieces. Alik was repulsing his female fans in real earnest, yelling that he had shelled out a hundred rubles on the black market for his outfit and was sparing it for his funeral.

Who could have thought that he had spoken the truth?

Now he was lying in the coffin in his eternal togs. On Friday evening an unidentified car hit him on a street corner and then disappeared. Lost in thought, the hunched Alik was walking home after evening guitar lessons he gave at a club. His British semi-acoustic guitar remained intact, while the pattern of a tire track remained on his sheet music.

Our industry produced such tires in the hundreds of thousands.

In the meantime, Alik's distant relative who looked like a public lecturer, had begun to reel off a funeral speech, hinting at the great merits and unmaterialized plans we were leaving behind us once we went the way of all flesh. His lips moved like a fish's, but even at the distance of two steps nobody heard him. Behind our backs sputtered the dirty orange-colored compressor, while the pneumatic hammer kept pecking the ground with a rattling iron pin as if trying to breach the brain of the earth through its frozen crust.

With a creak of his new leather coat, Slon walked up to the blue-faced character. The only intelligible word we heard of the jerky dialog was "quota."

Everybody had a quota to meet.

Slon produced a kid-leather wallet and shoved something into the man's fist in a friendly gesture. The man walked over to the compressor.

A moment later silence fell.

A similar silence used to descend when Alik took the microphone and drawled into it the title of the next hit. A wave of enthusiastic whistling and screaming rippled through the auditorium in concentric circles.

Ten years, like one day, had flitted past since that concert of stars. It seemed we hadn't lived at all since then.

What a bright, dazzlingly bright moon suffused the green club at the college campus on the high Dnieper bank that late spring! What ferocious mosquitoes attacked the naked legs of the girls whose young eyes popped with an ecstatic trance, as they screamed in the front rows after Alik's magic "One, two, three, four!" With what unsurpassable aplomb we "pulled off" something from the Beatles' masterpieces! How precisely the big Slon imitated the long-nosed Ringo, as he carelessly presided over his thud-box "kitchen" with its cluster of "Premier" bongos. He seemed to be beating away with his heart the mounting rhythm of "Let It Be," that requiem for youth. With what red-hot narcotic treble did Alik shout his "Let It Be" into the microphone in the best possible English, as if he were sensing the beginning of the end. With what laser rays did his horned guitar illuminate the crowd. With what heaven-breathed ecstasy he was watched by Natka, the flower child, who, as a special person in attendance, sat right on the stage next to the thirty-watt loudspeakers with a wreath of camomile on her long black hair. Oh, was she in love with him! Up to her ears. As a matter of fact, all the girls were ours then. Dozens of hands stretched toward Alik's jacket when he jumped off the stage into the aisle to check on how we sounded at a distance. That evening we sounded divinely. Even the lisping Liosa had changed beyond recognition — dressed in a short jersey that reached only to his navel, his hair

stuck to his sweating back, he imparted such a throbbing subterranean pulse to life's current with his Yamaha bass guitar it made your aorta burst and you wanted to weep. Even my GDR-manufactured guitar measured the rhythm, pauses and counterpoints with unprecedented clarity as if it were an electronic computer.

At that time we were unsurpassable little replicas who died in their great idols.

In the frightening silence Alik's relative fumbled through the end of his speech, after which he didn't know what to do next, wanting, perhaps, to start his speech from the beginning. But the four trained young men picked up the ropes and the coffin drifted into the yellow gullet of the grave. The clods of earth ringingly hit the lid, followed by the heavy thuds of bigger pieces of earth — the men had taken to the shovels. A marker " " was stuck into the grave mound, and wreaths were placed around it. Slon, who presided over the ceremonies, handed out the fee to each of the four men for their labors. Following an old custom, the relatives had a glass of drink and some cold rissole. Alik's mother, who was supported on either side by his cousins, had calmed down by then, and kept repeating mechanically, "You just go on eating the food."

That's all there was to the entire sacrament.

A merry sparrow came flying God knows from where, lit on the wreath, casting sidelong glances with his beady eyes, and then started to steal up to the food crumbs. Slon stamped his foot, and the sparrow frightenedly fluttered away. Alik's old granny, all dressed in the black of mourning, asked Slon to bend down, and whispered something in his ear. After that he did not eat anything more; when we were in the car on our way to town, he told me, hiding his embarrassment:

"She said it was his soul flying away. God's bird. Funny, Superstitions..."

Slon opened the door of his new dark-green Zhiguli car that had a recent scratch on its side, and Liosa and I settled on the back seat. The bus with the relatives moaned into action and set in motion with skidding wheels, we drove behind it to Alik's funeral feast, while he remained at the new industrialized cemetery, although he would have loved to join us. He was the only living person in our midst. Random death does not cancel the regularities of life.

Alik's mother phoned me on Saturday morning when, after I had had a cup of coffee and a cigarette, I was about to get down to some serious work. I was successfully completing my master's thesis, and considering the favorable position of the stars and the topicality of the subject I was working on, my supervisor was hurrying me. Before that I had stayed in harness really good, embodying his project on location, so to speak — that is, squeezing everything possible and impossible out of my subordinates, as I cursed the nasty weather and piercing winds during the reconstruction of the stadium. I was referred to as the man "with a firm hand," offered employment at my alma mater, and my chances ascended. The time of indecision and sentimental reflections had ended — I had to make hay while the sun shone. I knew for sure that my master's thesis would be in my pocket any time now, I was entrusted with reading the basic course in sanitary engineering at college, and then, with luck, I'd make a go at a doctor's thesis. I was bursting with energy, I could get along with my superiors, and intriguers were afraid of me. On the whole, the policy at that time was framed with a view on such people as me, gifted and businesslike, who wouldn't let themselves get out of hand.

Liosa and Slon also took everything they could from life. Our hour of destiny was upon us.

Liosa went into public relations. From the college's trade union committee office, where he used to sit on the windowsill, he moved into the armchair of a trust committee, and recently he had firmly settled in a leather armchair in a prestigious Republic institution. And he was proud of himself. Now he referred to the wildest malpractices as to sporadic shortcomings. Since he was

in charge of culture, he considered himself a highly cultured person. He mumbled his speeches prepared by ghostwriters, and lectured others. Liosa told funny anecdotes in a way that wasn't funny at all, and everyone burst into laughter. His lisping speech was imitated by his most flattering subordinates. He had an entire choir of lispers now. But for us he remained the same old snotty Liosa.

After college Slon was assigned to build gigantic purification plants far outside town. Three years of working as a foreman in the cold made him realize that he had no smiling prospects to hope for, so he quit the job and through his acquaintances got himself fixed up as a butcher at the central market. He stood at the chopping block in brand-new jeans stuffed into patched felt boots, and chopped calves' carcasses with a huff and puff, adding extra bones to all and every customer with flat-faced insolence. For him the hard-to-get jeans were no more than comfortable working clothes.

In brief, we had already firmly laid hold of something in life in one way or another and knew quite well what we wanted from it.

It was only Alik who did not know. In the coffin his thin transparent face had arrested a strangely mysterious smile of a revelation which seemed to have disclosed to him something we all would never be able to grasp.

Between us, Alik was a run-of-the-mill failure with a set of morbid complexes. We all sympathized with him — that's why he tried to give us a wide berth all the time.

It was only the unexpected phone call which brought our dispersed group together.

Without any collusion we sat down in a group at the long table in the semidark room with a rubber plant. About five oaken chairs with high backs remained unoccupied. A peeled mirror by the wardrobe was covered with a black cloth. It is believed that a mirror is the window into the afterworld. Alik's mother kept worrying that not all would be seated and asked for a bench to be brought into the room. With a vacant look in her eyes, she apologized for the meat in jelly that had not frozen properly, rushed to the kitchen for something and returned empty handed. Suddenly, after glancing in our direction, she became asthmatically short-winded. Alik's cousins came to her rescue, but she managed to get hold of herself.

The distant relative cleared his throat and proposed that we drink for the repose of the deceased. Without so much as a scowl, everyone downed the drink, because we had really frozen during the one-hour stay at the cemetery. In the listening silence of the room, forks started to clatter delicately.

None of the guests raised their eyes.

Alik's mother jumped to her feet again and became fidgety:

"Alik's cover, where is Alik's cover? Let him have the meal together with us..."

The cousins led her carefully off into another room.

The distant relative, noisily sucking in the air, proposed a drink to the bright memory of the deceased. After a short sigh, everyone downed the second drink and reached for their preferred foods across the table. The granny in black started to treat the dreadfully chilled Slon who was timidly picking on sauerkraut.

"It's a sin not to remember a friend. Eat, my dear, don't be ashamed. To the living their due. See, I'm so old and have outlived so many — two sons-in-law, poor souls, I saw off to their graves. Death doesn't take me, however, and keeps me, an old bag, in this world for some reason."

Slon persistently refused the treat, but when we downed a third drink, he surrendered and ate everything he could lay his hands on, attacking with special zeal the scarce cod liver the granny

had shoved up to him.

A conversation broke out which the distant relative conducted in a cultured manner.

"With different nations the, er-r, customs are different. Some lament, tear hair out of their heads, strew it with dust, and, er-r, after their death have their wives and... horses burned. And those – what you call them? – Aztecs, they, er-r, make a merry holiday out of it and shape skulls out of sugar for fun. But we'll do it in a human way, have a drink, some food, and remember the deceased with a good word."

After the granny had helped Slon to another spoonful of mushrooms, he gave a childish sob, uttering, "That's just the food for us... Alik loved it" and buried his face in the granny's shoulder.

Liosa drawled a meaningful "hm-well" and placed the opened bottle of liquor farther away from Slon.

Slon wiped his eyes with a sleeve, snuffled and raising his voice, blurted out: "I feel myself a human being only after I squeeze a hundred and sixty out of my iron."

Everyone looked in bewilderment and disapproval in our direction.

"Alik was the most talented of us," Slon said with a challenge. "He immolated himself, while we sit here and do nothing but eat."

That was true.

Upon graduation the three of us became mellowed at the proper time. Our perpetual holiday of daily rehearsals, concert tours to earn some extra pocket money, and the hullabaloo that went with it came to an end that mad spring. Our ways parted. Each had to strike out for himself. We had to get fixed up on a job and be on to a good thing.

But Alik did not seem to belong to this world. By old habit he tried to drag us to a rehearsal, but each of us had some important business to attend to, such as going to a dry cleaner's, hospital, or meeting our production quotas at the end of the month. Later on our commitments devoured all of our time, and Alik remained completely alone in the end.

He telephoned us, grabbed us by the hand, promised to get the best imaginable equipment so we'd get on television by all means, win the "Hello, We're Looking for Talents" contest, and create a rock style exclusively our own.

What a Don Quixote! We realized that pretty well. In our place, a new generation of close-cropped boys was appearing who could pluck the guitars passably and, perhaps, even better than we. In any case, the competition was getting tougher, the rock groups in town were breeding like cockroaches, and most of the fine lads learned to speculate shamelessly on folklore which moved the most exacting contest committees. All these groups had a "hefty" backing and performed on behalf of factories and colleges. We were nobody, representing nobody. Who could guarantee us success or a TV appearance? At best we would be chased around wedding parties by the newly established association of instrumental groups. That would have been simply improper at our age.

The time had come to earn a more reliable living.

Alik was nervous, but he didn't give up. While we developed from rank-and-file engineers into middle-level managers, Alik made his way only to a regional contest with his group. The new generation of businesslike boys did not work to the point of self-abnegation like we used to; on the contrary — they never forgot about themselves. After three months, Alik's boys quickly signed favorable contracts with restaurant orchestras to pick up three-ruble tips from the guests for each encore or special number.

Alik was alone again. While we proceeded to ascend from the middle echelon of hard-driving managers to the highest echelon and lovingly held our offices, he managed only to get an

entertainment radio program interested in one little song which a performer with an operatic voice made a complete hash of. The song became a one-day event, and Alik's services were no longer needed.

Alik walked around town with a frown, hunched, and on seeing anyone of us, hid behind the backs of passersby like a schoolboy, or else ran into a store and jumped into a trolleybus when he had no other route of escape. Somewhere he taught guitar at six-month courses and supervised an amateur theatricals group at some insignificant factory. Of course, all this wasn't what he had dreamed of. It wasn't for Alik's feet to catch the last train car.

During our chance meetings he would hide his faded eyes that seemed to have been powdered with ashes and say that everything was "Okay," and that he was proposed to compose something similar to "The Yellow Submarine" for a cartoon film. But since we were grownup people, we never saw that cartoon. He'd listlessly inquire about our successes, and we really had something to tell him.

Slon promised that through a friend of his he'd fix up Alik with a "fantastically fashionable" position of orchestra leader at an "Intourist" restaurant which could fetch him hard currency once in a while, but Alik, looking straight into Slon's face, cringingly burst into the Russian song "Kalinka" and all of a sudden, right in the central street, danced with a dirty handkerchief he waved over his head around the huge Slon and bowed from his waist down after the performance.

Once Alik dropped in at Slon's storeroom, and catching his breath, begged to be given one thousand rubles on loan for a Philips multi-channel amplifier. Slon flatly refused to give anything for such a foolish venture, and proposed they spend this money on booze instead. However much Alik resisted, Slon dragged him into an empty restaurant banquet hall, where they were the only guests, since this happened at midday. He treated Alik to champagne until the latter was dead drunk and fed him with marinated mushrooms. When it was time to pay the bill, Alik beat his chest, cried out, "Oh, our generous benefactor," and bent down to kiss Slon's hands clutching a thick wallet. Later on the waiter who knew Slon told him that Alik had paid the bill well beforehand.

Liosa invited Alik to his institution, asked him to take a seat, phoned somewhere, and then wrote out a note. With that note Alik could be taken on a guitar ensemble at the Philharmonics without any fuss. In the meantime, Alik was melancholically regarding the huge armchair, in which three Liosas could be seated, and when an energetic lady rushed into the office with some papers, he suddenly declared that he'd never be a little frog in a polyphonic choir and suggested that Liosa choke on that note, by which behavior he scandalously compromised the executive.

Realizing that Alik was in a delicate situation, I tactfully refrained from any promises, neither did I ever upbraid him or hint at his foolish stance. By my personal example I just showed him what I had achieved through hardships and unscrupulous ambition until I got to my cushy job, and reassured him that he had everything still ahead of him. "And a tail behind me," he used to rejoin discourteously. And it was just me, such a clever and considerate character, that Alik avoided the most. He did it on instinct, like an animal or child avoiding danger. The trials he went through must have killed his human sense of gratitude for an unobtrusive, subtle understanding of his precarious situation.

We had already made our way in the world, but he had remained somewhere on the lower rungs of the social ladder. We only wished him well, but he bit the hand of help like a boy. Before the second course was served, we went out onto the stairway landing for a smoke lest we interfere with the hosts setting the table. And that's where Slon let himself go:

"And why' did you keep your mouth shut? We told him all those words, for which he didn't like us. But you, smart aleck, kept your mouth shut. Wanted to seem better than we, didn't you?"

"He didn't think much of us, but maybe he would've listened to you. Everyone is afraid of you," Liosa lisped on his part, obviously showing false modesty. By that time he had become an adept at putting the blame on other managers and institutions.

"I don't have to explain what you already know," I snapped back, and they shut up.

After that thrilling concert which was to be our swan's song, one of us had to stay behind and watch the stage equipment when the limelights were turned off and everybody had to go home. A minibus had to pick us up only in the morning. The night sky was unusually starry and of a glowing brightness, the ground had covered with heavy dew, a sign that we didn't have to fear of any rain. At the sight of his exhausted crew Alik remained for the night watch. We brought him a mattress, and instead of a blanket he covered himself with some instrument covers. We joked for a while, smoked a cigarette, and left.

That's when Natka unexpectedly tagged after me. All of us had fallen in love with her a long time ago. But we made a secret of it, knowing how infatuated she was with Alik. As was the fad, in those days, she was a kind of mascot who brought our group luck. We took her to every concert wherever it was staged. The Bohemian finesse of this flower child lent us a special prestige. She did not allow us to dissipate our talents on cheap imitation and work the crowd, but demanded the unthinkable, impossible from us, and was a miniature source of inspiration for our entire group.

As we walked along the alley toward our tents, Natka suddenly stopped in her tracks. The flash of a distant lightning illuminated her uncommonly pale and determined face. She looked at me with what seemed like hatred, and said with a voice gone hoarse from excessive smoking:

"Listen, you! You know, I'm gonna marry you. You'll come out on top. You're a machine for life." I was taken aback. "And what about Alik?" I asked.

"He doesn't need me, he doesn't need anybody — only his music. It'll burn him in the end."

That was the truth.

Natka became my wife. I made her drop smoking, bought her a cookbook, and made her attend courses in tailoring. Together we made preserved mushrooms for winter. Then two girls were born to us. She put on weight horribly. Most of all she was afraid to catch Alik's eye.

Could I run a risk with a stolen happiness?

We were invited to the table again, where things went much smoother this time. The granny in black told how Alik, when still a child, liked to steal up to her and blow his trumpet into her ear. The distant relative spoke with passion about the prospects of cremation in our town, tried to make a show of bravery, and lied for some reason that he had bequeathed his body to the Academy of Sciences for research. Alik's mother, who gave off a heavy smell of tincture of valerian, was serving the second course in a more sensible way now, inviting us to eat our fill lest the food get spoiled the following day. Then she took a seat next to ours and began to thank us for taking the trouble to come, realizing that we all had important jobs to attend to. She thanked us profusely for having found the time. I looked at the ceiling, Slon at his feet, while Liosa into emptiness. She said that Alik recalled us often lately, and that's why she took the courage to trouble us busy people, because that's what his last wish was supposed to have been.

"Alik left some recordings. Maybe you'll have a look at them," she said, gazing in our eyes, as she whispered mechanically now and again, "You just go ahead and eat, eat."

We indifferently downed glass after glass, but we didn't get drunk. Alik, it proved, had thought of us all the time. And how did we respond? Cruel despair and sober remorse choked us,

demanding repentance, relief, immediate action. We wanted to justify ourselves and be good right then and there. If Alik were to ask us diffidently to come to the farthest end of town today, we would've crawled there on all fours and would've crawled like that every single day. But there was no one to accept our repentance and absolve us of our sin—it was too late.

He was the soul of our company, and now he was no more. What remained behind were three empty shells with the bitter burden of eternal penance.

Then, in Alik's room, we listened to his voice, an altogether different voice from the one we had known. It was the steely vibrating voice of an enraged angel who, disrupting conventional harmonies and keys, shot up into the heavenly heights, folded his wings and then dropped into the black murk seething with unknown passions and overtones. In our mind's eye we seemed to see a tired-out *kobzar* sitting on the curb of a fountain with an electric guitar in the middle of a crowded downtown square and shouting in rage about talent and conscience, while all the passersby were looking askance at him and shunning this amateurish phenomenon in our organized world. He replaced an entire orchestra, rain and thunderstorm, the noise of the wind and the cawing of gulls; he was a synthesizer of the voices of new unheard-of instruments backing the diverse rhythms of a new superstar.

In his compositions, Alik superimposed on tape all the instrumental parts and percussion section. And it sounded much better and more mature than anything Liosa, Slon and I could have ever achieved.

We had comfortably settled ourselves under the thick crown of the huge tree of life, while he stuck out like a defenseless, susceptible shoot into unexplored heights, breaking through his firmament in order to make contact with the unknown world. He was a bold feeble twig which mankind always sends ahead to reconnoiter the day to come for all of us. He broke under the onslaught of stratospheric storms, while we kept in the background.

Before parting we had another drink and then walked out into the blue early winter dawn. Slon proposed to give us a lift in his car, and we settled on the back seat. The engine snarled into action, the car made a jump and hurtled along a steep lane, making its way through a tangled labyrinth. Slon drummed his fingers against the steering wheel, winked at us from the inside rear-view mirror, and hollered at the top of his voice "Let It Be." Liosa and I watched him with fright. Slon desperately jumped red lights, the car careened, the brakes screeched, and he must have regained the sense of being 'his old self again.

Somebody's hunched shadow suddenly appeared right before the bumper of our car on a street corner. The shadow froze and then made a belated dash off to one side, throwing farther away an instrument case and sheet music.

We didn't look around.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko