



SLA 218

Ukrainian Literature and Culture

Volodymyr Vynnychenko “Hunger” & “A Strange Episode”



These texts are from:

Volodymyr Vynnychenko. “Hunger.” From: *Their Land: An Anthology of Ukrainian Short Stories*. Ed. Michael Luchkovich. Jersey City, NJ: Svoboda, 1964.

——— “A Strange Episode.” From: *Modern Ukrainian Short Stories*. Ed. George S. N. Luckyj. Littleton, Colorado: Ukrainian Academic Press, 1973.

Volodymyr Vynnychenko

Hunger

Tr. ***

Along the bottom of a ditch, near the station, halting and listening at intervals, three human beings were crawling. The stars were mutely watching their progress, knowingly nodding to each other. The wind soughed shyly hi the grass, then passed on into the ditch, then veered timidly into the steppes. The yearning of night whispered mysteriously and sighed beside them.

Now and then the man in the lead would stop, emerge slowly from the ditch, and look toward the station. Everything there was as before: the station was asleep. As before, barely visible in the light of the lantern, a figure loomed on the bench by the bell. As before, through a window one could see the person of the telegraph operator stooped over the desk. As before, one could see lights among the trees in the orchard and some persons around them. And as before, laughter emanated from the figures and from the light, and the clinking glasses, now delicate, quiet singing, or rollicking, loud laughter. And between the station and the ditch glittered the outlines of the rails, straight, extended, rigidly aimed at something in the distance. The rails, having left the zones of light, vanished hi the gloom, and one could barely see, there in front, where they were crawling, the long rows of cars.

“Well ?” whispered the other two in the rear, when the front man had slid down.

“Push right on!” the latter would say hoarsely, then silently move forward again. The men in the rear followed him, queerly twirling their knees and stopping at times. And when they stopped, the rustling in the ditch stopped too, and one could hear how softly the wind lingered near them, the sighing of something in the steppes, and the sound of laughter emanating from the orchard. And hi the dark sky above the silent, mysterious stars kept diligent watch over them.

They crawled for quite a while.

And again the man in front rose, stuck his head out of the ditch and froze. The station had moved aside and the rails no longer glittered. Instead, there stretched out a line of freight cars *in* a long, dark row.

“Hush-sh-sh!” hissed the front man, turning towards his followers. “Come out!”

“Here?” asked the man in the middle, crawling up to him.

“Here they are... Do you still have your sacks?.. Hush-sh-sh! You! Let it twist you down there!”

The man in the rear stopped with fear and squatted down. Then slowly, barely moving, he crawled up to the other two and asked:

“Are you sure ?”

“Don’t worry, I carried it on my own back ... Now be quiet!”

“Don’t lag behind... Hush-sh-sh! And don’t run away if someone starts shouting... Just drop the sacks... Do you hear?”

“Why, sure...”

“Well, God help us ...”

Swaying strangely, the trio, one by one, started off cautiously for the freight cars. The cars stood there, enveloped in some mysterious gloom. All the same, dark and identical, like coffins on wheels, it seemed as if they waited there for the men immobilely, hiding within themselves something mysteriously terrible and invisible. Somehow, it was sad.

And the station on their side dozed peacefully to the gentle singing in the orchard and the

laughter and the chatter. In the steppes the wind had gone down.

The man in front suddenly stopped.

"Who's there?" came a voice from the cars at the very same instant.

The three figures, one by one, became petrified. The stars glimmered, tensely awaiting the outcome; and even the wind fluttered from the fields, rustling something at their feet.

"Who's there? I'm asking! Do you hear?" they again heard the voice from the cars, angry and somewhat apprehensive.

"Drop the sacks..." whispered the front man hurriedly and, having thrown something aside, he uttered loudly and calmly:

"We are from here."

Somebody by the cars began to move.

"Who are you? What sort of a person walks around here?"

A dark figure disengaged itself from the cars and began to approach them. The front man at once started walking faster and the others followed suit.

"Halt! Wait!" The voice that they heard behind them was even more apprehensive, and they accelerated their steps.

"Why should we wait? There's no time..."

"I tell you, stop, or I'll shoot..."

The front man stopped, and the others did the same. The figure came quite close, so that one could now see a stick in his hand and his dark beard.

"So, what's up? How are you?" The man in the front spoke calmly.

The figure did not answer; it began a close inspection of their faces, clothes, and hands.

"Do you know us, maybe?" the middle man mumbled gravely and involuntarily.

"Yes, I know you ..." answered the person just as gravely, without ceasing to inspect them. Then he produced something from under his coat and suddenly blew a shrill whistle.

"And what would this be?" asked the man in front perturbedly.

The figure, without answering, turned its ear toward the station. The cars stood in a dark somber row, indifferent to the four men standing tensely in the darkness beside them. Only the wind hung around curiously, and the stars glimmered at one another.

The person drew his whistle and blew it again at intervals, shrilly and menacingly.

"Don't you have any fear of God, man?" asked the front man with sad reproach. "Did we run over you with a horse cart that you have to whistle and call the gendarmes?"

Suddenly, from the station there, too, came an interrupted, shrill whistling. The person stirred with relief.

"God is God and duty is duty," he said firmly and coolly. "Yesterday some tramps were also going to the station under false pretence. And in consequence it turned out that they had drilled a hole in the car and let out all the grain under the car! And you, watchman, must be responsible."

"So you think we're looking for the grain, or something?"

"Who knows? Let the gendarme be the judge of that..."

It was quiet.

"Ah," sighed the front man. "People!... Your own children may be hungry... Right away he calls the gendarme ... And perhaps those tramps hadn't eaten for three days? Yes, the same ones that let

the grain out? Ha?"

The watchman raised his hand again and blew the whistle. An answering call came back immediately. The trio sullenly froze with apprehension.

"Yes," the watchman chimed in angrily. "If it weren't for the children, I wouldn't be wandering around here chasing after you devils..."

He fell silent. There was the sound of someone hurrying to the cars.

"Are you from a hungry village?" asked the watchman gravely.

"Yes," answered the front man with reluctance.

"From Kyrasyrivka or Vodiane?"

"From Vodiane..."

"Were you going for the grain?"

"How that grain bothers him!" remarked the middle man sharply and angrily. "And even if we were after the grain, so what? Can you prove it? Are we afraid of your gendarmes! May the devil take them along with you, you rascal. You think he's frightened us! Ha, he whistles... You should be whistled over the head to knock you clean behind the cars..."

"Just try it," said the watchman contemptuously and calmly.

"That's enough, Danylo!" said the front man.

"What is this, anyway... What have you seized us for? Have you caught us in any act, or something? He thinks that when he's got a whistle it makes him a big chief."

"Where are you?" came a voice from the cars.

"Here," shouted the watchman.

Approaching rapidly, two persons appeared, mumbling and clanging something.

"What is it?" shouted one of them, as he came nearer.

"Right here..." said the watchman gravely. "Some... hung out by the freight cars."

The persons came quite close, stopped and began to inspect the captives. Both of them wore white shirts, girded by white belts. One of them had a rifle in his hand, the other one had a sabre at his side.

"Hm... yes," seriously drawled the figure with the sabre. "Where do you come from?"

"From Vodiane, *Hospodyn* Gendarme..." abruptly sighed the front man. "So, we were going to the station... We know nothing... When suddenly there is this: 'Stop, or I'll shoot!' What have we done?"

"Well, do you have your passports?"

"Passports?" The front man began to cough. Then he wiped his mouth and said briefly:

"Passports on us... it so happens that we don't... Only..."

"Hm... yes. Now then, come along with us... We'll discuss it at the station."

The front man shrugged his shoulders, sighed and set off behind the gendarme. The others followed him sullenly, with the soldier, carrying his rifle, bringing up the rear. In three or four minutes all five of them stood in the orchard from which they had heard laughter and gentle singing. On the table under the acacia trees stood lanterns with candles inside. From among the lanterns bottles protruded; and among the bottles stood plates with hors-d'oeuvres, boxes with some food, knives and glasses. Two ladies sat at the table, beside them some elderly gentlemen and two officers of the gendarmerie. One of them was bald, with a lush brown moustache, the other one was

handsome.

Around the candles moths kept circling in mad confusion, hitting the glass, falling on the table, struggling, crawling and flying up again. The eyes of the persons sitting at the table were misty, and the lips and cheeks of the ladies were somehow very red. "Well, what is it?" said the officer with the lush moustache. He looked expectantly at the gendarme. The latter, shielding the captives with his body, stepped forward and saluted.

The gendarme pulled himself even more erect and said seriously and buoyantly:

"We have caught some es-es-expropriators, Your Honor!" There was quite a commotion: even the elderly gentleman who had been diligently wiping his plate with a piece of bread turned his head in surprise and awed attention.

"Expropriators?" the officer asked lazily, in disbelief. "Aha, well, step aside."

The gendarme turned nimbly about face and stepped aside. All of them curiously eyed the figures that stood before them.

All three men were bare-foot, with large black toes, lean grey faces, a growth of beard, with peasant, emaciated necks on which dark wrinkles could be clearly seen, all three without hats, their heads drooping, as if expecting inevitable trouble because of their appearance.

One of the ladies, with large dreamy eyes, began to laugh: "Some expropriators! Phew! I thought they were real ones..."

The gendarme looked at her askew, but waited to see what the officers would say. But the officer merely hiccoughed, threw his weight against the chair support, and even more lazily turned to the captives: "Yes-s-s... Hm... Now then, what did you... that... what was it? Make trouble?" The "expropriators," whose eyes had avidly surveyed the snacks, stirred and turned their heads toward him.

"We, Your Honor, made no trouble," said the front man briefly and hurriedly. "We were on our way to the station... And then he came to us, excuse me: 'Where are you going, I'm going to shoot...' We stand before you as before God, Your Honor... We are from a hungry village... No food for two days, Your Honor..." "Now, you're lying... You all sing the same song..." "Your Honor," interceded the gendarme, "they were caught by the cars with grain."

"That's it! You see ... You wanted to steal grain?..." "Your Honor," said the front man, again turning his eyes from the table and dropping his head. "If we had been going for the grain would have had sacks, or at least bags ... And we are — just as you can see for yourself..."

"Hm!" the officer twisted his moustache.

"To hell with them, Seriozhka!" cried the other officer impatiently.

"Let each one of them have it with the whip, Skrypchuk, and to hell with them."

The gendarme saluted him but waited what Seriozhka had to say.

"Hm," said Seriozhka, as he twisted his moustache, lazily and drunkenly looking at the captives. The captives stood there, waiting alertly, and eyeing the food. The ladies whispered something to each other and laughed, gazing concentratedly at the captives.

"Put them under arrest!" Seriozhka decided suddenly, limply turning toward the table.

"Yes, Sir!" the gendarme clicked his heels. "Let's go!"

The captives began to stir again. Danylo knitted his brow and grumbled under his breath. The man in the rear, with his little, pointed nose and round, cherry-like eyes, looked frightened, becoming

even more tense and discomposed. The front man spread his arms, curtly saying:

"Your Honor! What is the charge?"

"Disorderly conduct," the officer replied lazily without turning around.

"Your Honor, we have children... Our families are hungry... What have we done? Have we caused any trouble? What have we been put in jail for?"

The handsome officer jumped to his feet impatiently. Going up to them, he shouted:

"Get going!"

"What have you arrested us for?" asked Danylo in his heavy bass voice, angrily, as he looked past the handsome officer and at the back of the officer with the lush moustache. Turning slowly, the officer carefully looked Danylo over.

"Hm! So it's you again ... Hm!.. Hit him on the mug," he winked at the front man.

The front man looked at Danylo in alarm, at the officer, with wide open eyes, failing to understand.

The ladies began to laugh.

"This is clever," chimed the elderly gentleman indifferently, wiping his lips with a serviette. "It reminds me ..."

The officer glanced more zestfully at the ladies and, turning around, shouted sharply:

"Go on! Hit him in the mug."

"Your Honor!" the front man said, raising his hands imploringly.

"Shut up! So you don't want to? Well, then, you'll get it in the mug."

"You," he said, nodding to Danylo. "If he won't hit you hi the mug, then you hit him."

The ladies, the officer, even the elderly gentlemen began to laugh merrily.

"Right!" cried the lady with the dreamy eyes. "And then he'll give it to you... And then both of you will fix the third one over there. Now then!"

Danylo, breathing heavily, looked angrily at the officer. The front man smiled disconcertedly, while the man in the rear surveyed everyone with fear, crumpling his cap with his trembling hands.

"Well!" yelled Seriozhka, suddenly and threateningly, as he madly leaped to his feet. "Am I going to joke with you, or something? Hit him in the mug!" He stamped his foot at Danylo and pointed with his head at the front man.

Danylo grew pale and said dully: "What am I to beat him for?"

"Don't reason. I'm ordering you to beat him — do it!"

"Your Honor!" cried the front man imploringly. "In what way have we deserved such humiliation? People will spit on us... Have mercy! Let Mr. Gendarme hit us... and then let us go..."

"I want you to hit each other's mugs... And the gendarme shall get his chance..."

The gendarme smiled. Danylo turned around and said:

"Send us to jail."

"No. You hit him one on the mug and then go to jail. I won't even send you to jail. I will let you go to the four corners... Do you hear? I promise! So help me! Well?"

"My God, my God!" yelled the front man, shaking his head sorrowfully. Danylo again shifted his weight from one foot to the other, silently and tensely growing numb.

"Well?" said the officer, looking at Danylo. He did not move.

And suddenly the officer's face went crimson, his eyes became bloodshot, his moustache began

to twitch.

"Skrypchuk! I won't trifle with you very long..." he barked madly. "Shoot them!"

Danylo quickly glanced at the officer, at Skrypchuk who timidly drew his revolver. Suddenly he made an angry wry face, croaking hoarsely:

"You have no right to shoot us!"

"What?" roared the officer, as he ran to the gendarme, pulling the revolver out of his hands.

The gendarme hurriedly took off the strap on which the revolver had hung around his neck, and then froze with fear again.

The ladies uttered a cry. The front and rear man looked ahead with their large eyes and obviously hardly saw anything.

But at this point the handsome officer quickly approached Seriozhka, grabbed his hand firmly and said:

"Seriozhka! Spit on it! No need... To be tried for some scum... Forget it! Spit on it!"

"No-o-o," croaked Seriozhka. "Til make him... I'll show him the right..."

"Sergey Semionich!" said the lady with the dreamy eyes. "God be with them! Send them to jail and that's enough!"

The officer with the lush moustache let the revolver go. Then, breathing heavily, he turned to the ladies.

"Larissa Ivanovna! I'll make them! They ought to do it for you..."

"No need... I don't want it..."

"No. I'll make them! Do you hear! I'll let you go free; I'll give each of you a ruble for vodka... Do you hear? Hit him!"

"Your Honor! Let us go," sobbed the front man.

"No, I'll give you a ruble for vodka, beat him! Do you hear? So help me, I will... Don't you believe me? Here..."

The officer reached determinedly with drunken hands into a pocket. He produced a purse and shook some money out into the palm of his hand. Some of the coins rolled off, fell on the ground and lay there beside Danylo's feet. The gendarme wanted to jump to pick them up, but the officer shouted:

"Let them be... It's for them! Hit him! I'll give you all of it. Hit him!"

The hand that held the money was shaking; the moustache was tangled and bristling, and the eyes stared at the front man.

"I'll give you all of it! Sock him one in the mug!"

The front man glanced at Danylo. Danylo looked at the money, at the ground, then at the money again.

"Go on, strike, you fools!" impatiently cried the handsome officer. "And then go to the devil! Take the money and hit him!" he turned to the front man.

"Well, the one who strikes shall get everything," shouted the officer with the lush moustache.

"Well?"

Everyone froze with fear. The front man smiled queerly, whispering something; Danylo was breathing heavily; the ladies and elderly gentlemen waited with avid, tense interest.

"Well?" the officer moved his hand and the coins jingled.

The three grey figures, as though drawn by a magnet, turned their heads at the jingling, and on their grey faces, emaciated by hunger, appeared something more restless, something sly and greedy. Danylo shifted his weight from one foot to the other and wheezed through his nose. The man in the rear came closer.

"Well, it's interesting..." whispered the lady with the dreamy eyes in sweet compassion, moving even closer, as she passionately watched the captives.

The officer jingled the coins again, smiling silently.

"Your Honor," the front man sobbed painfully. "Be so kind as to donate the money to us. We are hungry... We have children... Your Honor!"

Danylo stirred. The front man looked at him anxiously. He fell silent, swiftly, restlessly, surveying the group.

"No, hit him in the mug," smiled the officer, jingling the money again. His drunken, satiated eyes wandered over the hungry, tense forms of the three grey captured men. These men began to stir again, anxiously, fearing to meet one another's gaze, standing silently before the ladies and gentlemen with their oily eyes full of greed.

Suddenly Danylo turned to the front man and, without looking at him, said dully:

"Strike, Semen ..."

The front man even stepped back.

"Never mind, strike! Let's have the money..." Danylo turned to the officer.

"No, first hit him in the mug," the officer swayed drunkenly.

"Well," Danylo snorted and, swinging his arm, hit Semen in the face. Then he turned quickly and dully blurted to the officer:

"Let's have it... I hit him..."

"No, wait. Now he must hit you."

"Of course," the dreamy-eyed lady seconded with rapture.

Danylo turned sharply to Semen. Smiling queerly, and looking aside, he said in a rasping voice:

"You strike, too."

Semen hesitated.

"Go on, strike!" Danylo barked angrily. "What's the matter? Here."

The ladies and gentlemen watched greedily. The front man spread his arms, then raised one hand and shyly struck Danylo in the face. Danylo turned to the officer at once and, looking at him gravely said:

"It's done."

"Now then, there you are," the officer smiled, satisfied, and, having raised his hand, he let the money fall on the ground.

"Pick it up!"

Semen, Danylo and the chap at the back, hurriedly stooped and grabbed the coins. They began to crawl on the ground at the gendarme's, the gentleman's, and the ladies' feet, pushing one another, arguing, and even snatching the coins from one another.

And the gentlefolk stood above them deliberately pushing the coins away from them and clapping their hands with shouts of rapture:

"Bravo! Bravo! Yes, don't give in!"

The stars looked down sadly from the dark skies, and, peering through the foliage, it seemed that they were crying: a curious wind rustled anxiously among the twigs; while the moths, paying but little heed to the commotion and sensual clapping of the satiated, drunken people, just flew around and blasted themselves against the glass, crawling stubbornly on toward the light; and once again falling, crawling, and flying toward the light.

Volodymyr Vynnychenko
A Strange Episode

Why does my heart contract sadly when it looks at beauty? Why do I want to grasp my head in my hands and cry hot tears? Why? And why is there tenderness, happiness, grief and hopelessness in those tears?

But I do know. Now I do know, but until that evening, even that same evening, when that unknown, insignificant episode happened to me-I still did not know. I think that Natalie still does not know. Nor does she need to know.

Sadness introduced me to Natalie. I first saw her in the streetcar. I was reading the newspaper when she entered. The newspaper contained everything that has nothing to do with happiness-how people kill each other, how they kill themselves, how they steal, slay, cry, deceive; in other words, everything that has nothing to do with happiness and laughter (have you observed that the newspapers don't write about this?). I read all this and I became apathetic. But when she came into the car, when her eyes stopped short at my eyes, my chest suddenly became numb. I became limitlessly sad. I wanted to embrace my neighbor, obese with gluttony, and kiss him on his three-storied neck. I wanted to cover my face with my hands and sit low, listening to the bell of longing, the unknown sweet longing in my heart.

And later all this always revived again in me whenever I stared at Natalie. Even then, when I embraced her for the first time, when her body trembled in my arms, even then sadness did not leave my heart. I know this for certain: it did not leave, it only hid from the fire of longing.

And Natalie, even now, does not know why it is so sad, so full of longing, so painfully pleasant to look at beauty. She knows that she has great beauty; oh, she knows this well.

That very evening, she herself said this to me:

"You think I don't know my value? Oh! If I wanted, I could have an automobile tomorrow."

(She likes automobiles very much.)

"You don't believe me? You are smiling?"

I believed her, but smiled for a completely different reason.

"And I will! I'm tired of eating potatoes and covering myself with one coat."

(We were in such a state and we only ate potatoes and only had one coat.)

"Your stupid dreams have annoyed me. Yes, annoyed me! Oh, I am telling you this frankly. I am not a saint. . . Lord! Give me money and not songs. Money! Do you understand?"

She had never really spoken so frankly. I was sitting with my head bent, but at this point I raised it and looked at Natalie. Ah, how beautiful she was! God, she was so beautiful that I wanted to strike my head against the edge of the table and break it, like a useless flower pot.

"Well, why do you stare? You will begin to preach lessons about cynicism? Go ahead! I am not holy. I am annoyed at being holy. It is impossible! I need money, that's all. Ideals, searches, great spirit and deeds you can keep to yourself. That does not suit me. Yes. Yes! What? Didn't you expect it?"

Indeed I did not expect it. Perhaps ... perhaps I did, because why is it so sad, why did my heart contract so sadly once in a while when I looked at the beauty of her body?

I did not say anything else to her. I did not even take my coat with me and left the house in silence.

It was already late. There was fog in the street. It enveloped the street lamps like a woman's scarf. Passersby hurried along with upturned collars and hands in their pockets. They knew where they were going. But I did not know, so I did not hurry. I did not even hide my hands in my pockets nor turn up my collar. I only smiled. But if someone had taken this smile from my lips and melted it in something or other in which one can melt both laughter and weeping, then my smile would probably not reveal much laughter.

I stopped at the corner of one street. I often waited here for Natalie. We often walked here, clinging tightly to one another. Here too, one figure would appear at the sight of which our hearts would contract with pity and with disdainful fear.

Yes, we often passed by here. We hurried home. A cold potato and a coat awaited us at home.

Hm! Where do I go now? In any case not to get money. That is self explanatory. But, in any case, where?

The fog and street were damp, cold but still warmer than that lump which pressed on my chest. And I went along the street again, in the fog.

Suddenly someone came up to me. I looked around. It was the same creature whom we often met in these streets. It was the same pitiful, awful creature who aroused in us some kind of mystical fear and desire to cling more closely to one another.

She always appeared somehow unexpectedly in the same deserted places. We didn't think that she was a prostitute, although we often saw her lapping at any passerby like the shadow of a wave. But the passerby after a glance would immediately turn and walk away. We often talked about her, and Natalie would often ask me if there were men who would go with such a frightful creature, with that ghost.

Indeed, she was like a ghost, like an apparition of prostitution, like a frightful symbol of the cursed profession. She was always dressed the same, as if she had walked here every night for many years. And indeed, why should a ghost change her clothes? Always in a long gray overcoat whose pleats did not sway when she moved beneath the walls, along mutely locked doors and windows of shops. Always in an old-fashioned dark hat from which a thick, gray veil hung over her face, and always with an umbrella in her hand.

We once met her under a street lamp. Such an awful face glanced at us through the veil that my legs grew weak. It was extremely pale, with exhausted eyes, made up like all prostitutes, with painted lips which could only belong to a corpse.

Why did she walk beneath the walls in the dark? Could there be men who would go with her?

Hm! Natalie doubted this.

I looked around once more and looked her smilingly in the face. That face suited perfectly what was in my heart. All that was needed now was for me to kiss this face and discover that this creature could please me.

"Good evening," she said in a quiet, truly musical voice.

"Good evening," I answered loudly, smiling all the time.

She stared at my smile attentively, covered my face, chest with her wide gazing eyes and asked so softly and evenly:

"Are you out for a walk?"

I burst out laughing.

"Of course I am out walking. I like to go out in the streets in beautiful weather."

Once more she rested her dead eyes on me. On her face, powdered to a deathlike stillness, nothing moved, as if she were accustomed to that kind of laughter and to benefactors who "go out" in good weather on streets like that.

"Come with me?" she leaned her head.

"Where?"

"Well where? To my house."

"Why?"

She looked at me. "You don't know?"

I also looked at her. A passerby under an umbrella glanced back at us. He looked at her and then quickly at me and I read surprise, contempt and pity for me on his face.

And what would Natalie say?

"Will you go?" she asked again, bowing her head.

Suddenly I grew so cold that frost even went through my head, not because I was wearing only one jacket, but because of something else, something which makes even people on the equator cold.

"I don't have any money," I said sadly and coldly.

"You can pay me some other time."

Hm! This ghost decidedly wanted to take Natalie's place. Wonderful. "Let's go," I said.

She turned around silently and moved forward almost without a sound, stepping on the wet sidewalk. A gray overcoat, like a pall, straight without swaying, hung to the very ground.

I smiled and resolutely followed her. We didn't walk for long.

She lived on the sixth floor, in the attic, in a small room in which one wall was cut in half and stretched over it was a covering. One corner was closed off with some gray covering; in the other stood a bed, wide and peaceful. Many engravings hung on the walls.

They were chiefly photographs of classical works. Many of Rodin. I noticed this at once. Where could she have taken them, this ghost, and what use were they to her?

"You have a lot of engravings," I said.

She looked at me a little frightened as if I wanted to take these engravings away from her.

"Do you like them or were they a gift?"

"I like them," she said softly and began hurriedly and swiftly to undress.

I sat on a stool near the table and leaned my head on my arms. I did not want to laugh anymore ... Yes I wanted to ... No! The end!

"You are sad?" I heard near me, in a soft whisper.

I lifted my head and laughed in her face.

"Why am I sad? Because I came up to the sixth floor? That is still not a big problem. There are worse things ... Well! Are we going to sleep now? Wonderful ... It is quiet here. But what is that in the corner? A second bed? Perhaps for special guests."

"No, my clothes hang there."

"Clothes? Well, it's all the same . . . Even if a heart hung there I wouldn't care! Spit on everything and that's it. Right?"

"Right," she retorted softly, but looked at me very fixedly. By God, she had pretty eyes ... No, not eyes but their expression. Her eyes were ugly, fishlike; nothing could improve them. But their

expression was beautiful. Oh, if Natalie's eyes could have such an expression. But—what's the use!

"Well that means I ought to undress? Wonderful. Do you have many guests?"

"No, not many ..."

"Not many? Well, it's all the same." But, perhaps I should take my cap and leave?

"I am ugly and few people come to me."

"Really?" But Natalie is so beautiful that...

My heart is so full of pain that I want to fall to the bottom and burrow on the floor with my crooked fingers.

I smiled wryly at her. I don't think she could read gladness in that smile.

Carefully, meekly she touched my arm and gently caressed it.

And strangely, I suddenly became warm inside and felt sorry for myself.

"Do you stroke everyone like this?"

"Those who are sad."

No, definitely there was something very wonderful in her voice, something meek, but at the same time something which comes from a deep understanding.

"Why do you think I am sad?"

She smiled and without saying anything walked away, stopped near the table and thought. The light from the lamp streaming through the green lampshade put a greenish-gray color on her ugly face. She looked like a corpse, thoughtfully pondering its past life and from the fog and silence of the casket seeing everything, understanding and growing sad with a meek, humble sadness.

"Those who are sad can understand each other." And saying this, she looked at me guiltily and fearfully, frightened because she dared to compare herself with me.

I got up at once and walked about the room. How I wanted to squeeze my chest with my hands and squeeze out what was choking it, like the air from a ball. God, how it choked!

"Listen! Do you have any wine?"

"No, I don't have any ..."

"But that ..." Hm! She probably would have a rope. But to hell with that.

"Well, why don't you undress? Undress."

"I have to turn off the lamp ..." she said softly. I looked at her. Truly, she could not undress with the light on. But this was exactly what I needed.

"Why put out the light? It is not necessary; I don't like it when it's dark. I like light, laughter, happiness." And I even laughed.

"Why do you look at me like that? Don't you believe me? There is nothing strange in what I said. Everyone likes light and happiness. Perhaps you even have candles? Bring them! We will light them in all the corners. So that the light will pierce the eyes. So that everything will be seen. In every corner, two, three candles. Away with the clothes ... From that corner! Light in all the corners!"

And I seized the edge of the bed sheet and pulled it. At that moment a broken scream was heard behind me, but I stopped dead with the bed sheet in my hands! In the corner on two small chests stood an unfinished sculpture. It was of an extremely ugly woman, so ugly that I couldn't take my eyes off her. It was something piercing, something unexpected, strangely alluring, frightful and at the same time full of some kind of mysterious longing, sweet, quiet grief? I looked around at my hostess. She stood behind me and was smiling guiltily, sorrowfully.

She was very like that woman.

"Did somebody sculpt it here?"

Without answering she tried to take the bedspread from me and cover up the work.

"Wait!" I pushed her away impatiently. "Tell me who made this?"

She grew angry. Her face took on the same expression as that of the woman, even the lips composed themselves in a similar painful, alluring way. Some kind of beauty rested on those ugly, creased features. Yes, yes! It was beauty. It was something unbelievable, absurd, but here was real beauty.

"I am sculpting it ..." she said, looking at the figure of the woman. And the woman looked at her; it seemed as if they understood each other.

"You? ... Yourself?"

The ghost smiled. Something happened to her, some kind of change. The guilt and fear vanished somewhere. Bowing her head, she said slowly:

"Maybe it is myself. Maybe it is something which is in everybody ... Is it not so?"

And sharply lifting her head, she looked at me. I transferred my gaze to the figure. Truly there was something familiar in it, something close. Truly ...

"It is a beautiful work," I mumbled.

I wanted to say something else, but I didn't know what.

"Do you think so?" she asked.

"Yes, I think so ..."

Oh what was so familiar in that figure? The eyes? Drooping breasts dried from plainness and turmoils of the heart, jaws distorted by animal instinct? Mouth which reveals hurtful suffering? Or that longing-that meek, darkened, mysterious longing-which found a place somewhere between the lips, somewhere under a low forehead between the drooping eyes?

I took the stool, sat and began to look at the marvelous figure. Its gaze was fixed somewhere past me to the ghost as if she carelessly and severely let herself be looked over, as much as I wished.

All three of us were silent. A clay covering fell from the knees of the figure to the bottom. The legs seemed strange and unbelievable, but undoubtedly they were existing lines. Such a figure cannot be found and yet is. It is in each one of us. Even ...

Suddenly it hit me. What a resemblance to Natalie.

Quite confused, I jumped up from the stool and began to look at the idiotic work. What stupidity! How? Where? What nonsense! The ghost quickly touched my arm. I looked around.

"Does it bother you?"

I sat down again. What nonsense. I think a lot about Natalie and she appears even in such a frightful thing as this.

I smiled.

"My sculpture bothers you."

"It is really marvelous. There is something in it ... Have you been working long on it?"

"Six months."

Truly that frightful object drew one towards it! It pulled your eyes, it pulled your heart and breathed into it with its marvelous beauty and longing; its ugliness and wretchedness.

"I want to make an image of a human being ..."

"A human being?"

I turned my head and looked at the "ghost" from top to bottom. She now had the same expression around the mouth that the woman had. She had looked into a mirror when she was sculpting those lips. And she gave the figure her own eyes. And that flattened nose was like a squashed plum.

"This beauty and ugliness is in everyone. In many forms ... But there is... There must be. Isn't there?"

I did not speak.

"Definitely there is ... Both beauty and ugliness ... Only sometimes beauty is so hidden that it is not seen. Or ugliness hides under beauty. I want to reveal it alongside ... Or shouldn't I?"

She used the phrase "shouldn't I?" too often. In any case I remained silent and looked at her work. And the more I looked at it, the warmer and easier I felt inside ... As if what was choking me, inflating me and not allowing me to breathe freely, was slowly escaping from me through a small hole.

It was wonderful, but I did not want to fight against it. Oh, no! I wanted to listen to that musical, slightly cracking voice which seemed to be covered with silver enamel, the voice of a beautiful woman. I did not want to move and break the stillness of the night, in which we three alone seemed to exist along with that small elegant lamp on the table. The corners of this room were swathed with the sad harmony of beauty and ugliness, in the heart of the huge black slumbering city.

The features of the strange sculpture breathed of longing for the chimerical game of life. The woman stood near me; her voice was the voice of that sculpture. In my heart sadness was awakening.

"You are an artist, aren't you?"

"I ... Yes, I am an artist..."

"I saw that at once ... I am glad. I have wanted to show it for a long time. But I couldn't ... Now I see that what I am doing is right. I am happy ..."

She was agitated. She walked a few steps to one side, came back, rubbed her hands. Then she gently touched my shoulder.

"You are sad?"

I nodded my head, although I was sad no longer.

"Does something bother you? Forgive me, that I... am asking you about this ... But I like you ..."

I enjoyed listening to this although I did not stir.

She was silent.

"Did you ever feel that all misery is a form of ugliness? ..."

I did not move. I did not want to let her speak, let that longing, cracking voice continue behind me.

"I often feel that ... that is why ugly people are so unhappy ... Ugly not only facially ... All over ugliness. Am I not right?"

I sighed deeply. That woman knew sorrow. She knew the idea of it. She, perhaps, looked it over often enough as if looking at a wound.

"Why don't you speak?"

Suddenly all this felt wonderful. This ghost, the room elegantly decorated with artistic taste, the pictures and the figure behind the covering. I got up and sized up my hostess from legs to head. She

stood, arms hanging alongside her body, and gazed at her work. Her eyes held the same grief as the eyes of her sculpture. She herself was a product.

"Have you been working long?"

She sighed and turned her face towards me.

"What did you say? I am sorry, I did not..."

"I said—have you been working long?"

"At what?"

"At what? At the sculpture, of course."

"No ... Not more than a year."

"And ... at prostitution?"

She lowered her head.

"I cannot find a job that would allow me to work at night."

"I did not ask you about that. I am asking if you have been in this profession a long time."

I talked to her like a judge. And she felt I had a right to talk to her like one. But why?

"I have worked in this profession ever since I began work on the sculpture."

"And do you sculpt by day?"

"Yes."

Why did I ask her about all this? God knows. I felt tired. I sat down again on the stool, leaned my head against the back of the stool and did not move. Somewhere there in the empty atelier Natalie is sleeping. Let her sleep. Tomorrow she will find the evaluation of her beauty. Let her find it.

"Listen!" I suddenly cried, lifting my head up. "Haven't you tried to give form to this unification of beauty and ugliness so that in outwardly beautiful forms inward ugliness is revealed? No?"

"No, I haven't tried it that way. That's much harder..."

"Harder? Hm! Yes, that's right, it is harder ... But it has more effect."

"Or ... more ..."

"It must arouse extreme sorrow. Right? It must catch the painful turmoil at the heart of such a union. Right? To give it such beauty, such union, so that one could see ... No! I am not saying it right ... I can't think ... But I understand now ... Now I understand."

And I rested my head again on the spine of the chair. I really understand it now; that even in my purest moments of happiness with Natalie's beauty, my heart was choked by an unknown yearning, sadness, so that I wanted to cry hot tears to someone or something and why in those tears there was both gentleness and happiness and grief and hopelessness.

— *Translated by L. Hirna and D. Struk*