

Birthday

Volodymyr Dibrova

I

Boyko is celebrating his fortieth birthday in America. He's here for a semester at the invitation of Professor Kohut, whose first name, like Boyko's, is Yuri, or, as they say here, George.

Boyko is a philologist of note in certain circles. He has a candidate's degree, and he is a translator and member of the Writers' Union. His body of work to date includes some poetry written as an adolescent, several translations, a volume of literary criticism, and a monograph on morphology (written together with several colleagues). With him here in America are his wife, Luda, and their two daughters, who are twelve and seven.

The Boykos would like to mark the upcoming occasion simply and at home, without guests or any fuss. But Professor Kohut knows that Boyko's birthday is approaching. If he isn't invited, his feelings will surely be hurt. He might even think of them as, well, ungrateful swine. All the more because there is good reason to be grateful. It was Kohut who sent them the invitation, found them an inexpensive apartment, and arranged for Boyko's appearances before the diaspora.

They are on cordial terms. Over coffee—Boyko always drops by between classes—Professor Kohut tells him about his new projects. It could be about setting up a committee of some kind, or compiling an anthology of translations, or bringing someone over for the summer. In three months Kohut's academic department is hosting a conference, and invitations have been sent to the luminaries in the field. The crowning event will be a medieval Slavic banquet, and Kohut has implied more than once that he's counting on Boyko's help with it.

"Of course!" Boyko has assured him. "I'll be thrilled!"

The Boykos' apartment is just a few blocks from the Kohuts' home, and as good neighbors they frequently drop by. Professor Kohut has a wife and fifteen-year-old son, but the visitors rarely catch them at home.

From the start, the Boyko girls feel at home in their backyard, with its swings, monkey bars, and slide, and they make friends easily with the kids next door. People affiliated with the university live in the neighborhood; the oaks, maples, and a kind of tree somewhat like the walnut remind Boyko of home. Every week he rakes the leaves around Kohut's house (winter is just

around the corner) and stuffs them in plastic bags. One weekend he helped Kohut take down his shed. Kohut is planning to plant tomatoes on that spot, come spring.

II

Boyko picks up a translation of the hottest new Ukrainian fiction. The translation is the project Kohut is wrestling with at the moment. Boyko compares it to the original, and groans. Even without Kohut, the prose is loaded with double barrels of insanity: it seeps first from every aspect of Soviet life, and then it's compounded by the fury swirling in the author's head. This bedlam makes the work unfit for translation, no matter what kind of effort is put into it.

But Kohut doesn't know that. Every morning he conscientiously sits down before his computer and until five p.m. pulls words from the foreign language into the other one. To render both the spirit and letter of the original, he puts anything he can't translate into a footnote, where it is explained as an idiosyncrasy of the Ukrainian character. For everything else he relies on the dictionary. As a result, every narrative he has laid low reeks of schizophrenia. In his translation, when someone in the original text shows a "dulia," it is never an insulting gesture but always a pear, and any reference to "Besarabka" is never to the market in Kyiv but always and only to a female from Bessarabia. When a character cries, "Shit, why is that Soviet prick always hanging around?" his translation reads, "Shucks, why is that quivering sow still lolling about?"

"Shit!" proclaims Boyko, hurrying to share this latest gem with his wife. "What am I going to do? The whole thing has to be redone!"

"Leave it alone," says Luda.

"What do you mean, leave it alone!? He asked me to check it! He wants me to fix anything that's wrong!"

"Well then, point out a blunder or two and say you don't see anything else. Tell him you haven't learned the language well enough to get the nuances."

"Nuances! But it's not even literature—it's a disgrace! My poorest students translate better than this!"

"That's not your problem."

"But it *is* my problem! He asked me to do it. It's a matter of honor—of professional ethics!"

"Have you lost your mind?! He'll hate you for your ethics! We've got to stay here until spring. And if he won't extend your visa, who will? Why, he's like God here! He can do anything!"

Boyko erases all his pencil marks except for a few brief comments and praises Kohut for having recreated the original so perceptively.

"Unfortunately," confesses Boyko, "I haven't mastered the language

yet, so I can't correct your work—I don't have the right."

Kohut agrees.

Then, to erase any implied double meaning, Boyko adds, "I probably don't have the gift."

Kohut throws up his hands.

Boyko doesn't know how to interpret the gesture, and Kohut offers no comment.

"By the way," Boyko interjects into the silence, "There's something I wanted to ask. My *jour de naissance* is approaching..."

Kohut doesn't understand.

"My birthday," Boyko explains. "You celebrate birthdays here, don't you? How do you think we should mark the occasion?"

Kohut replies that here people go to regular restaurants or ethnic ones—Chinese, Korean, or Mexican—to celebrate that kind of event.

Boyko extends an invitation to Kohut—including his family, of course. He asks what place would suit him best. Kohut mentions an inexpensive Chinese restaurant nearby and offers to drive everyone there. He also proposes to bring drink for the occasion.

"Why be extravagant?" he says. "Then you'll save more to take back home with you when you go."

III

The Boykos are trying to keep the number of guests to a minimum. But in addition to their benefactor they are obliged to invite a few countrymen who, for one reason or another, are currently in town. They are, specifically, Lev Sambur and Uliana Zhovtianska (who never let Kohut out of their sight anyway) and the Kravetses, husband and wife, and their son (the Kravetses have helped the Boykos out, loaning them bedding, pillows, nails, and a hammer).

Sambur is a theater director and impresario of pop entertainment. Back home he gained renown as the organizer of glittering spectacles of various kinds—competitions, celebrations, stage performances, festivals, and reunions. He is here thanks to Kohut, who got him an invitation to be artist-in-residence and the department's visiting fellow. For the past three months Sambur has been living in a dormitory on \$50 a week. Nothing is expected of him, but he and Kohut have made a verbal agreement that Sambur will help out with the banquet.

"A piece of cake!" Sambur has assured him. "Just you whistle!"

But Kohut seems to have forgotten about this for now. Lev knows no English. The money he receives barely suffices for food, and the only way he can earn more is through Kohut. Every morning, at ten minutes of eight, Sambur runs out to the curb and peers out for Kohut's Mazda. Kohut makes a detour on his way to the department to drop Sambur off at the library.

Fridays they go to the fitness center together and then to the sauna, where they talk about contemporary Ukrainian culture.

"Well," Sambur consoles himself, "at least he won't grumble that my time here was wasted."

Aimlessly he clips photos out of magazines and pastes them into collages. To handle any contingency, he has come up with two scenarios for the banquet. The no-holds-barred one calls for Polovtsian folk dances and a laser show; the other is geared to a stand-up, cold-buffet kind of affair.

Like every true theater professional, Sambur dreams of Broadway and Hollywood. And why not, he reasons: am I any worse an artist than any of them? Not at all! If only Kohut let me stay for a year, I'd tackle learning the language head-on. Then I'd be babbling away by spring—or summer, at any rate.

"Maybe you want me to put on a play for them?" Sambur asks Kohut every Friday. "For free! There's a theater at the university, isn't there? If you provide the translation, I'll show them a new interpretation of anything they want. Totally neo-avant-garde!"

But Kohut doesn't respond.

"Maybe I've offended him," frets Sambur. "But how? There's absolutely no reason! If it's about Uliana—why, I haven't touched her! After all, I'm not stupid—I understand how things are. If he has any intentions about her—well, by all means! Full steam ahead! I pass! For a friend, I'd not only go beg at a monastery—I'd join it!"

Uliana is a celebrity poet as well as a doctoral candidate in fine arts—her specialty is the Baroque. This is her third stay in America. She managed to arrange this one on her own by a timely application to conduct some complex scholarly research. The topic that got her the stipend straddles the fields of feminism, ecology, and minority studies.

Uliana arrived here from New York last Wednesday. She expects Kohut, as department chairman, to propose that she conduct a course on the Baroque next semester. She's been told that universities here have special funds for such things.

The final invitees are the Kravetses, Larysa and Alex. He defended his dissertation here and then didn't go back home. Instead he found a job at the university, in the chemistry lab. While he was making something of himself, she sat at home with their son. They have finally applied for green cards and are waiting for the outcome. Larysa wants to find a job now too. She is a philologist by education, specializing in Romance languages. Kohut is her direct (and only!) connection to the academic job market. That connection is all the more promising because, as they've just learned, Kohut doesn't have an instructor lined up yet for the Russian conversation class next semester.

Kravets earns enough for the family to live comfortably and have a nice apartment. But their Ihor, who is seven, doesn't talk (he can't say "Mama" or "Papa"), and he doesn't understand where he is or what is

happening around him at any given moment. At times it seems to the Kravetses that someone has stolen their child and is holding him captive behind some soundproof wall, and that all they have been left is his blameless and confused physical presence.

IV

In two trips, Kohut drives everyone to the Chinese restaurant —except for the Kravetses, who have their own car. Kohut's wife and son are unable to come, but they have passed along their greetings.

The staff of the Chinese restaurant is dressed in white nylon shirts and black vests. They are all short and agile, and they all look alike. Clearly these refugees are not from Hong-Kong or Taiwan, but from the depths of the mainland itself.

Kohut explains that refugee smuggling is big business. People give traffickers all their money just to jump on a boat. The traffickers pack the ballast with illegal immigrants for the trip across the ocean, and then cast them off into the icy waters along the American coast. The Chinese don't complain, though—as a stoical people they're happy simply to still be alive.

Their waitress is a shining example of this. No more than seventeen at the most, she radiates a happiness that has absolutely no relation to the reality of the moment. The Boykos' guests suspect some kind of trick ("she's probably already figuring the tip"), and so their perusal of the menu starts from the prices.

The waitress hasn't mastered the language yet, but she's learning. She passes out menus and pencils and indicates that she'd like everyone to mark down their order. They look at Kohut and wait to hear his proposals.

Kohut begins to describe the Chinese dishes. When he falters, Uliana helps him out, thus demonstrating her familiarity with restaurant food as well as her understanding of subtleties in the two languages. Uliana knows, as Kohut does not, that "egg rolls" are *pyrizhky*, that "shrimp" are *krevetky*, and that broccoli, though not sold in the bazaars back home, should be called *brokoli*.

The conversation meanders into a discussion of the highs and lows of Ukrainian cuisine. In Kohut's view, Ukrainian cooking contains much too much fat and cholesterol and too little seafood.

The Boyko daughters, too, want to know what they'll be eating. They spar over the menu—if not for its lamination in sturdy plastic, it would already be ripped into pieces. They can't translate the dishes listed in English into their native language, of course, but they understand that the column on the right is a list of the prices.

"Oh, look how many dollars it costs! Look how expensive it is! Papa, don't order that! Order something cheaper!"

The adults laugh.

Seven-year-old Roxolana knows all her numbers. Her older sister Oksana converts the dollars into the currency back home, at first silently and then aloud—the count goes into the millions. The budding personalities of the two are in evidence: the older girl is an A student, whereas the younger one is a mischievous hellion. Luda shushes them, all the while beaming with pride at Oksana's mathematical ability. Boyko, for his part, is more indulgent of the younger child.

Kohut is taking bottles out of a bag—a three-liter flask of burgundy, a Spanish sherry, and a Chilean "cabernet sauvignon." All three bottles are opened, somewhat dusty, and far from full.

The guests are stunned. To bring your own bottle to a restaurant and surreptitiously pour the contents into a house carafe, under the table, is something they are all familiar with (Sambur has brought along his last bottle of "Pepper Vodka" with just that in mind). But that people do things like this in America astounds them. They just don't know what to make of it. To mask their unease, they turn their attention to the bottles, read the names of the wines out loud, and begin to praise the selection.

"My, my—Chilean! Pinochet or no Pinochet, no one has taken to cutting down the vineyards! After all, Chile's not the Soviet Union! And, oh, look here—a burgundy! Just the thing! And what year would it be? Don't tell me—it's imported from France?! No? From California? That's even better! But it's probably expensive—why, for God's sake, Yurko, did you... We could have done with less! Why, this even puts us on the spot."

Kohut says that it's okay. He pours himself some wine and, not waiting on ceremony, takes a big gulp. The Boykos exchange glances ("What is this—everybody's glass is empty, they haven't brought the food, and he's drinking already?!").

Kravets saves the situation by making a toast to the birthday boy. The guests take to drinking the wine. Boyko stands up and, as if in exoneration, starts praising Professor Kohut and the whole diaspora for having preserved the language here, on foreign soil.

"I can't speak for anyone else, but it overwhelms me," he confesses. "The mind-set, especially... I mean, the love for the land of their forefathers and some remarkable kind of hope... For I'll admit honestly, we would never... You, Yurko, for instance—a scholar, a Ukrainian, and department chairman... What you, the holder of a professorial chair, have done for us Ukrainians and for Ukraine... Well, what can I say! We must raise our glasses to that! Cheers!"

Everyone joins in the sentiment. They add that Kohut is doing Ukraine a great service by inviting its creative young people to America and allowing them to suck up the experience. Because we have had the desire, but not the opportunity. Nor the training. Nor the knowledge of how the civilized world works. That's why we need to live here for a while, to

become used to everything and then work together to gain more spirituality.

"That's certainly true," agrees Kohut.

"What's everybody drinking?" asks Roxolana, getting up from under the table.

"Wine," says Kohut.

"Wine—but that's poison!! Pour it out this instant!"

Luda jumps up and pulls the impish girl over to her side of the table, crooning, "I know you're concerned about Uncle Kohut."

The food is brought out, and all the platters are placed Chinese-style on the round tray in the center of the table. Kohut explains that the tray is actually a lazy Susan and that everyone should help himself to what he likes.

"And to whatever's giving you the eye," adds Boyko.

"Certainly—see, it moves," says Kohut, demonstrating exactly how the laden carousel turns.

"What have you poured for yourself?" asks Roxolana, wrenching herself free of Luda's restraint. The girl slips down and crawls under the table, briefly loses her way amid the knees and footwear, and then finds a way out. In getting up she bangs against Sambur and wine spills from his glass.

"Don't you know that's bad for you?" cries Roxolana.

Sambur moistens his finger in the spilled sherry and touches it to the girl's lips. "There—a little kiss for you!"

Roxolana shrieks and dives under the table again.

The Chinese waitress wants to wish everyone bon appétit, but she doesn't quite know how to say that in English. The diners assault the carousel with their spoons and forks.

"You can also eat everything with these," Professor Kohut tells them, tapping his wooden chopsticks together to demonstrate.

V

Each tends busily to satisfying his or her appetite. Some of the diners—Uliana and Sambur, for instance, and also Boyko himself—realize that no more toasts are expected and that the wine on the table is all there is, so they hurry to fill their glasses.

"Did I ever imagine that one day I'd be in America, sitting in a Chinese restaurant and drinking burgundy?"

"It's straight out of a movie," his wife seconds. "Like in *The Three Musketeers!*"

"Five years ago—no, not even that, four!" Uliana joins in, "—when I wasn't even being published yet, if anyone had told me..."

"Or me!" interjects Sambur. "Why, I would have..."

"And me," says Oksana, tugging at someone's arm, "When I was in first grade..."

"Be quiet!" Luda Boyko admonishes her daughter.

"Gee, something like this couldn't have happened in a bad dream!" cries Kravets, plunging into the conversation.

His wife responds by kicking him in the thigh with her boot. She fears that his weird sense of humor will wreck everything. For Larysa can't tell whether Alex's jokes are going over or not. That's because their Ihor keeps trying to wriggle free of her knees and make for the door. Once he ran out of the house like that and was almost run over by a truck. And when they were at the shore the year before last, he waded into the water and started gulping it down. On top of that, he adores forks and loves to bang them against plates or cups. Right now she's locked in battle with the child's unflinching will, obliged to extract a fork from his hand—and do it without crushing his fingers.

Once his toy is gone, Ihor drops down to the floor and starts crawling toward the door. Shooting her husband a look of despair, Larysa darts up after their son. But neither that look nor the kick from Larysa's boot is going to restrain Alex Kravets.

"If anyone had suggested that my life would take this direction," he proclaims, "I would have spat in his face."

"All those years I was forbidden to travel!" recalls Boyko.

"And me—the years they wouldn't publish my second collection!" cries Uliana.

"Once, when I woke up—stinking drunk, of course," Sambur breaks in, "I looked out my window at the wall where the banner proclaiming 'Glory to the CPSU' always hung—and it wasn't there! 'Well, Levko,' I said to myself, 'now you've gone and done it—you're so sloshed you're having hallucinations! You've got to put a stop to it!'"

"Why—it was a miracle!" everyone concurs. "No one could have foreseen it!"

"But why not?" questions Kohut, trying to understand.

"For numerous reasons," says Boyko, for he is not only a philologist but a political analyst as well. "Let's just consider one factor—the army. When we got together to dream about independence back then, we always said, 'Look at the map—everywhere there are divisions of the occupying army, military bases, underground shelters, nuclear weapons.' And that was very sobering, I can tell you. How could we fight all that? How could we fight when everything—railroads, roadways, sea routes, communication channels, everything—went through Moscow?"

"So now you have to investigate all that," Kohut readily advises. "You've got to set a course for NATO and Europe. And build new roads! We did that here a hundred years ago, when Henry Ford began making cars. In Italy Mussolini hurried to do the same, because he realized how impor-

tant roads are. Why, that was the first thing the Romans did when they acquired new territory—in Britain, for instance, even before the birth of Christ.”

“Just so,” says Luda, latching on to Kohut’s words. “But at home they forbade us any spirituality at all. God forbid that you let slip anywhere that you’re a believer! Even so, we still baptized our children. Oksana is Greek Catholic—we had her christened in Lviv, at the home of a friend who’s a sculptor. But later, with Roxolana, we had her baptized in an Orthodox church, in Kyiv.”

Those who initially sampled the meat dishes now go for the gifts of the sea and vice versa, as everyone animatedly recalls the deprivations each was obliged to endure.

Sambur paints a detailed picture of how difficult it was for him to put on his plays. Everyone has something to add about how his or her own national awareness was kept under close watch.

“I’ll give you one small example of what we got used to and had to accept,” says Uliana. “Once, when I was seven or eight, we managed to rent a corner in the Crimea.”

“What does that mean?” asks Kohut, and they all obligingly explain.

“So,” Uliana continues, “the landlord overhears me speaking to my parents in Ukrainian. He gets very upset and says to me in Russian, ‘You’re a civilized girl and yet you’re still speaking that degraded tongue?! How senseless!’”

Kohut doesn’t comprehend. “What? What did he say to you?”

When they translate, he is thunderstruck.

“But, why didn’t you make an issue of it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, if it wasn’t possible to take him to court, you should have left and gone somewhere else! So he’d at least feel the results of his chauvinism in his pocketbook!”

“That’s easy to say.”

“Here people are sued for things like that. It’s racism!”

“But over there, no one paid any attention. People would say we were lucky not to get shot!”

“But how was that possible?!”

“And things like that were just trifles. Look at the way they kept the famine secret—the one in ’33.”

“And ’22!”

“And ’47!”

“And what about the fact that in ’20, Kyiv was left cold, hungry, and totally empty! Why doesn’t anyone know about that?”

They speak about how under Khrushchev, back in ’63, bread was rationed and schoolchildren were issued rolls of white bread according to some special list. But not everyone sitting here can remember those times—

only Sambur, who was then fifteen, and Boyko. Luda is younger than her husband and lived in the countryside, whereas Uliana and the Kravetses are now just in their thirties.

"Why was it like that?" they ask themselves, and in discussion they come upon the answer.

"Because for a very long time we lived in slavery! And as slaves we were deliberately maimed! They amputated our self-respect! Still, at last, we broke free! And we have not only survived, but preserved our spirit, our thirst for freedom—and the language!"

They toast this with both the cabernet and the burgundy—but not with the sherry, which has a strange color and a suspicious taste.

Each tries to outdo the others in crediting himself with how many relatives and friends he encouraged to embrace being Ukrainian.

"Why, I even managed to influence my sister-in-law," confides Luda. "Just guess what her maiden name was—Barvinova! Can't be any more Russian than that! Yet now she speaks better Ukrainian than my brother! And she knits, stencils, and has mastered Poltava-style embroidery. As for her family, they're from Luhansk."

"It's supposed to be pronounced Luhanske now, not Luhansk," they correct her.

"And Donetske."

"And Hemingway, not Khemingway."

"And Sapyhiv."

"Where is that?" asks Professor Kohut.

"In the Ternopil oblast. A pretty little town that they made 'Sapogov.' The correct form is Sapyhiv, though, because it comes from Sapiha, the name of a Lithuanian palatine."

"He was Lithuanian, but became Ukrainian!"

"Because of whom?"

"Whom do you think? His wife, of course! *Cherchez la femme!* Our Ukrainian women—they're all femme fatales. He was a nobleman and chose a commoner. But she was a beauty!"

"You don't say? Didn't the Turkish sultan have a Ukrainian wife too—from Rohatyn?"

"He did—but Sapiha did too."

The girls are playing tag while Ihor stands apart. When anyone touches him, the boy waves his arms, jumps in place, and laughs gleefully. In outward appearance (discounting how he shakes his head and the strange sounds he utters instead of words) he is a completely normal little boy, nice-looking, tall, and friendly. But the children sense that he's not a playmate, and indeed he is not, for the very idea of a game with rules is somewhere far beyond his comprehension.

"Why doesn't he want to play with us?" Oksana asks Larysa Kravets.

"It's not that he doesn't want to," she begins to explain.

"He doesn't know how?"

"Oksana!" Luda chides her daughter, "don't bother the boy!"

"No, do!" says Larysa. "It's just that he doesn't understand. You go play with him and he'll catch on right away. Go on, show him—he really wants to play."

Oksana goes up to Ihor, takes him by the hand, and says, "Now you're it! Come on, run after us!"

Ihor is enthralled. He lets out gales of laughter and bangs himself against the table, head first. His mother grabs the boy and presses him to her, thereby rescuing the tableware. The girls see that nothing will come of this Ihor, so to vary their game they crawl under the table and try to involve the adults.

"I'm porking you!" Roxolana yells in Kohut's ear.

Kohut chokes, coughs, and spits out something muddy and dirt-brown.

"Roxolana! Look what you've done!" cries Boyko, getting to his feet. But the naughty girl is already scrambling back down under the table. Before vanishing amid the legs of the adults, she puts her index fingers on either side of her mouth, stretches it wide, thrusts out her tongue at Kohut, and chants, "Nah-na-na-na-nah!"

"So it was you!" cries Kohut.

"Roxie!" cries Luda, jumping up. "Oksana—help me! Pull her over here!"

Oksana dives under the table. A moment later they hear crying intermixed with scuffles and slapping sounds.

The Boykos pull their daughters apart.

"We never get involved in these things," they tell their fellow diners. "It's best to let them settle it themselves."

Meanwhile Ihor, unnoticed by his parents, ducks under the table too, intent on examining legs. He crawls up to Kohut and gives him a start. As Kohut jerks back, his wine overturns, staining his jacket, shirt, and pants.

VI

Professor Kohut rushes off to the restroom to try to wash out the stains.

"Salt!" yells Larysa. "Alex! Take the salt! Shake lots of it on the stains! Why are you still sitting here? Go help him!"

Kravets bolts into action and vanishes through the door graced with pictures of a pair of pants and a parasol.

Boyko has a sinking feeling that Kravets's aim in there will be not to get out the stains but to persuade Kohut to give Larysa the job of teaching Russian in the department. If Kohut agrees to that, it's entirely possible that Kravets will promptly add that Larysa can teach the Ukrainian class as well. In which case Boyko and his womenfolk can start packing their suitcases

this very day, for there are only enough students for one Ukrainian language class. It's damned unfair! Larysa's on the verge of getting a green card anyway! Whereas for Boyko to be allowed to stay on here for just one more measly semester, Kohut, as head of the department, will have to go to bat for him, run around, make phone calls, drum up some funds, put himself out... Who does that Larysa think she is?!

Sambur has no interest in being a language instructor himself, but he knows intuitively that Kohut won't be able to grant everyone's wishes. Nor will he want to. It'll be a boon if he satisfies any one of them—man or woman, whoever gets to him first. For Sambur knows that though Kohut is a dunce, of course, deep down he's soft-hearted. That's why he can be swayed. And whoever presses him the hardest is the one he'll oblige.

Without explanation, Boyko and Sambur jump up from the table and make a dash for the washroom. There they see Kohut, minus his jacket—it's been liberally sprinkled with salt and hangs draped over the hand dryer. He's lying on his back, stretched across the sink: he can't stand up because then the salt will fall off before drawing out the wine—Kravets is now bending over Kohut and shaking salt on his crotch. The phrase Kravets has just uttered makes it clear that he has already apologized for his son. Now he's telling Kohut that his little Ihor didn't act with intent, but only because of his awful illness. Kohut tries to rise but Kravets restrains him—the salt has to set another two or three minutes to penetrate the fabric sufficiently to draw out the liquid.

"And here's what my Larysa can do," says Kravets, getting down to specifics. "Not that I flatter her or exaggerate her abilities—not at all! She graduated with honors, and she's been a language teacher and linguist. She started working on her dissertation, but then came pregnancy, maternity leave, childbirth. She passed two sets of exams—her generals and the French exams. She can teach language courses in your department, even the graduate courses—you know, phonetics, lexicology, typology. Her dissertation title is 'Participles and Conjunctions in Various Languages.' If she hadn't had to stay home with our boy..."

"Here we have assorted kinds of day-care for situations like that," Kohut responds, pulling himself up. "They're like what you call *iasla*—nursery schools."

"Wait!" cries Kravets, pushing Kohut so he has to lie back down on the counter and over the sink. "Here's another one!" A second later a small mound of salt is heaped over another stain on Kohut's checkered pants.

"There you go," says Kravets. "That'll soak it up—it'll be fine. Now, if Larysa were hired just by the hour, or at half-salary..."

"So how are things going in here?" Boyko and Sambur are shouldering Kravets on either side, trying to separate him from Kohut. "Where's our hero? Still among us?"

The interruption is Kohut's chance to climb down off the sink.

Grabbing a couple of paper towels, he brushes the salt from his clothes. Having examined the stains, first Sambur and then Boyko step up to the urinals. But when they notice Kohut moving toward the door, they cut this activity short. They rush up to him and grab him under the arms.

"I—it's... you see, doc," Sambur is saying, "I keep wanting to talk to you about the banquet. It hasn't been called off, has it? Because I'm up for it—any time! We'll put on such a sweet little number. Totally avant-garde!"

Kohut can't fathom what he's talking about.

"Totally *avantgardeschön!*" Sambur goes on. "I'm ready to roll! The scenarios—the banquet—the Slavs!"

"Ah-h!" says Kohut, as the disjointed phrases bring Sambur's meaning home. "You mean the conference!"

"But of course!" says Sambur, giving Kohut a hug. "I've got two scenarios already written! The next move is yours. My stay here ends in December—but the banquet's not till February! So, comrade commander, chart your course and set things rolling!"

"I'll have to speak to my secretary—she'll know what form to use."

"Of course!"

"Yurko!" Boyko has squeezed between Kohut and the door. "Remember when you talked about textbooks of Ukrainian—how there aren't any really good ones? I've been thinking about that, and I have an idea. What if I worked on a textbook here—in the library—for, say, six months, at least. To become familiar with the latest methodologies..."

"I'll have to think about it. We have until the 20th—"

"Larysa has completed all her courses!" Kravets cries out behind them. "She knows all the methods—intensive, full immersion, the Bulgarian one. And that other method—what's it called?... I forgot what that one's called!"

"And the textbook"—Boyko is painting the future bright—"would appear under the aegis of your department!"

"I'll have to speak to Jennifer," says Kohut, making for the door. "She's my secretary. She'll know how to handle it. So we get the application in before the 20th."

"I was Lviv's top theatrical director for ten years," Sambur breaks in, pushing Boyko aside. "Lviv—the Vienna of Ukraine! Where cabarets and coffee shops abound! Did I ever tell you about the time we put together a sex show based on motifs in the Ukrainian classics? Think of it! It was incredible! I took the work of Nechui—"

"By the 20th," Kohut mutters, blocked on all sides. "We'll do it on the 20th."

"What? Not until the 20th?!" Sambur is incredulous. "But wait! Today's already the 23rd!"

Just then somebody bangs the door open with the tip of a shoe and charges through. The door hits Sambur in the back—his arms fly up and he drops to the floor. A hefty fellow in belted jeans rushes by noisily, a

toothbrush hanging from his mouth. Before anyone can react, the oaf occupies the last stall and bolts the door shut.

As Boyko and Kravets help their countryman to his feet, Kohut manages to slip past them and makes it out the door.

Uliana is standing there, waiting for him and choking with rage.

"How is this possible?!" she's fuming to herself. "How dare they?! One more episode in a millennium of constant slander and sexual harassment! And who's responsible? They are, the wretches! The *he's* of this world—they're the ones who do it. And this bunch! They're just the type to squeeze from *him* what by all rights must be *hers*! Because not one of them—not a single one of them—cares about what happens to Ukraine!"

"Yurko dear!" Uliana coos, managing to carry off the appearance of having met Kohut by chance.

As they are making their way back to the table, she thrusts a course outline into his hands. It's a course on Ukrainian culture and civilization, beginning with the Trypillian period—the first of its kind, and planned to run a full academic year. Uliana could sit down right now and write the course description in full, but the basic structure is already there. It needs some fleshing out—but that's a mere trifle; it would take a month or two, no more. All that's really needed is for Kohut's department to go to bat for Uliana and vouch that her services are desired—for two semesters, minimum.

"That would be fine," Kohut acquiesces. "I'll have to speak to Jennifer."

"For the spring and summer—" Uliana specifies.

"Sure," says Kohut. "Our summers aren't like yours over there, you know—"

"Or maybe we should make it for the next academic year," says Uliana, altering her plan on the fly. "That might be more logical. But in that case I absolutely must have a formal invitation—and something to tide me over until next September. Because my grant—my stipend, that is—runs out at the end of this December. Then I've got nothing for the rest of winter, or spring and summer—"

"Summers here are scorchers," Kohut is saying, having made it back to the table. "If you don't have air conditioning, things can get pretty sticky. But then you can always head out for a drive into the mountains—it's nicer up there."

"—So come spring I could teach language here, right up 'til fall."

"Falls here are warm," Kohut has paused and is recollecting something very pleasant. "About a two-and-a-half-hour's drive from here there's a railroad, and some caves. And in October there's a big festival. Farmers from all around come and cook mounds of apple preserves in huge kettles."

"Butter"—the poet can't refrain from correcting him—"It's called

apple butter.”

“Of course,” says Kohut, closing his eyes. “Excellent!”

VII

While their husbands are off tending to business, Larysa and Luda are brushing the spilled salt off the table and putting it to rights. Roxolana is running about, chasing Oksana. Ihor is waving his arms and jumping up and down—actually, he’s trying to make a dash outdoors. His mother hangs on to one of his hands, clasping it in one of her own.

“And how is he, aside from that?” asks Luda. “Everything’s normal?”

“What do you mean, normal?” says Larysa, struggling to keep calm.

“Well, does he have any allergies?”

“Allergies?”

“Our girls’ allergies drive us crazy! First Roxolana came down with them and then Oksana—allergies to oranges, mangoes, and even to... what do you call them... the ones that grow in New Zealand?”

“Kiwi.”

“That’s them—just terrible!” Luda recounts in detail how often and in what circumstances her girls’ allergies have erupted.

Larysa says that she would be the happiest mother on earth if allergies were her biggest concern.

“So he doesn’t talk to you?”

“You see for yourself.”

“But it seems to me that he said something.”

“He said, ‘A-wa-sa-wa-sa.’”

“Maybe he’s speaking a language you don’t understand.”

“Maybe.”

“Mine do that, when they’re annoying each other.”

Oksana overhears who is being talked about and comes close, followed by Roxolana.

“Here they are now!” says Luda. “You stinkers! Roxie, why did you tease our Uncle Kohut that way? Come on, tell me!”

Roxolana hides under the table.

“So, what he has—is it a kind of mental retardation?” asks Luda.

“No,” Larysa says. “Not retardation. Autism.”

“What?”

“A medical puzzle—a phenomenon yet to be explained,” says Larysa. “Until he was eighteen months old, his development was absolutely normal. Why, he was even saying two- and three-word sentences. And then, before leaving for America, we went to the clinic to get his immunizations—the ones he had to get for the travel papers. Afterwards—that’s when he began to regress. As if every day he was slipping deeper into some invisible hole. He forgot nearly every word he knew, his normal activities stopped—he

didn't recognize people, didn't know what to do with his toys."

"Don't blame the immunizations!" Luda protests. "They can't be the reason. Immunizations are needed! At my school—"

"He even forgot things he could do at twelve months!" Larysa goes on, switching Ihor's hand from her right hand to the left and sitting him down on a stool. "Sit still for a minute!" she tells him.

"Now he has to be taught everything all over again. Everything! How to go up and down stairs, how to wash his hands, how to use a spoon. Normal children learn it all without thinking, but try to get it across to him! And there's no guarantee that by tomorrow he won't have forgotten it all again."

"But it can't be from the immunizations!" Luda refuses to back down. "Probably it's Chornobyl—that's what I think. Maybe it triggered some kind of genetic mutation—how do we know? Remember how they kept everything from us? The criminals! They're the ones to blame! Even now, do you think they're telling us the truth? Before we left, I read that some place near Zhytomyr some strange sort of animal has been found—and children without fingers or toes... And how many idiots are being born!"

"Our son is no idiot!" Larysa fires back. "He started walking at eight months! One morning, from his crib, he gave us a look as if to say he wasn't the child and we the parents, but the other way around. As if he understood everything, and on top of that—"

"Well, kids can sure have an unfathomable look," says Luda, refusing to budge.

"What do you want?" Larysa cries at Ihor, holding her son down in his seat with both hands. "Can't you keep still for even a minute!"

"Is he getting any help?" asks Luda. "Does he get any therapy? You must be doing something to help him!"

In a single sentence Larysa recounts every resource they have tried, from the brutish medical shysters back home in the town where they lived to the American doctors oozing respectability here.

"Well, having the right contacts isn't everything," says Luda. "Our neighbor, Toni—she lives on the fifth floor—has a granddaughter, Ally. Her husband's a major-general, retired ten years. They eat good food, naturally, and their medical care—through the military—is just about the best there is. In a word, they've got everything anybody needs, from A to Z. And what do you think? One time their Ally broke out all over in such huge blisters that they had to call an ambulance. And what caused it, they still don't know. Maybe something she ate."

"Maybe."

"Well," says Luda, a new idea dawning, "maybe you should have tried something untraditional."

"We did!" Larysa counters, and proceeds to describe the folk healers and self-anointed faith healers they also turned to. Not here, of course, but

back home, where she and Ihor return every summer.

"By the time you land at Boryspil," Larysa sighs, "you're cursing everything on earth! Alex has a job—he's got to stay here, and it's tough to handle things all on my own. A knapsack on my back, suitcase over there, another bag slung across my shoulder—because everybody expects presents, and God forbid that anyone be left out, or they'll be offended for life! And then there's Ihor—handling him alone requires two arms, at least."

"That's it, exactly!" says Luda gleefully. "Last month I sent along a parcel, through that Baptist organization, and right afterwards I called my mother-in-law. Told her all about it and said just to expect it, because it's on the way. And guess what she said to that!"

"I can guess—" says Larysa distractedly, impatient to finish what she has to say. "We took him to others, too. Medicine women and then to a psychic, one who had an advanced degree—"

But once Luda starts to tell someone about something, she's not one to leave it hanging either. Yet for Larysa to learn precisely how Luda's mother-in-law responded to her daughter-in-law's request to send back some of the exotic folk remedy called mumio, Luda must first be ready to outshout Larysa.

"—Then my parents," says Larysa hurriedly, "sent Ihor's picture to a woman living near Lutsk—"

"—And then I explained," Luda counters, "just where it is and that it's wrapped in blue cellophane—under the freezer compartment, right next to the echinacea!"

"—She took just one look at him," confesses Larysa, revealing the Kravets family secret for everyone in the restaurant to hear, "and said that someone in our own family had bewitched him!"

Her son twists around and bangs his chest against the table in an unsuccessful attempt to break away. He arches back, thrusts his face up toward the ceiling, and howls.

Larysa is dumbfounded.

"Someone in your own family?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Why, I would have found that creature," Luda swears, "even if I had to root her right out of the ground! I would have choked her, squeezed her neck until she herself—"

"—And then that woman from Lutsk," Larysa has slid down in her chair, "said to me, 'Let them be. All of them. Every single person who has wronged you. Don't hold on to any ill will, not even a particle—because it'll poison you. Forgive them. And then go to church...'"

"—died a slow death!" declares Luda, having now made Larysa's trial her own. "I would keep choking her from morning 'til night! And through the night too!"

"Now the only thing that keeps me going," Larysa is speaking softly

now, unmindful to whom, "is some kind of... not knowledge, not presentiment.... Faith? Can it be that?... More likely it's hope. Yes—it's more like hope. Hope that that look of his at eight months, and what happened later and his good looks—that there's more to it than this."

"Do you think he might outgrow it?" Larysa suggests. "Someone I work with has a daughter who didn't talk until she was four."

"No!" Larysa interrupts, "No—I'm not talking about that."

"You're still young," Luda counsels her. "How can you tell what will happen? You know, I think it could be that speaking two languages is what's at fault. In kindergarten he hears English, and at home... What do you speak at home? Russian probably—yes? Well, with mentally retarded kids—"

"He's not mentally retarded!"

"Don't get offended. That's just the way life is. And knowing the diagnosis is half the battle."

Ihor darts up from his chair. Larysa rushes after him—she grabs hold of him and gives him a slap. Ihor trembles and screws up his eyes, and his arms flail about—but he doesn't yell, nor does he cry.

The other diners in the restaurant exchange looks—they don't know whether what they've just witnessed is child abuse or not. They decide to put on smiles, in any case. The Boyko girls, who have been off milling around the aquarium with the goldfish, come skipping back, to be on hand for whatever happens next.

Larysa pulls her son back to the table.

"I'm so tired of it!" she sighs, addressing Roxolana. "Hit him or not, he never complains. So how do you know what hurts him? Or where? What it is he wants? So tell me," she says, addressing her child. "Where were you running to? Tell me! Why don't you speak?... If someone would just stay with him, mind him for us—just once. We'd go somewhere—let everything out, maybe get drunk! Or go to a movie. In four years, we've never once gone to a movie!"

Luda moves her girls farther away from Ihor.

"Nobody ever gave us any help either," says Larysa soothingly. "Except my parents. If just once my mother-in-law had—"

Ihor screeches like a wild thing. Larysa clamps her palm over his mouth.

"Stop it! Stop it, or I'll kill you, here and now!"

"You're still young..." Luda continues persuasively.

"Oh be quiet!" Larysa snaps, eyes welling with tears. She hugs her son close, wiping her eyes on his shoulder.

"But I understand how you feel!" says Luda, conceding to the display of emotion. "Because you're the mother. While the father—well, he's always just a man."

"Sometimes I see exactly how it will be," Larysa's voice is soft, and

she is speaking more to her son than to Luda. "One morning he'll just wake up, like Sleeping Beauty, and talk to me—"

"Do you think Boyko and I always had an easy time of it?" Luda is speaking softly now too.

Larysa doesn't hear.

"—but who will awaken him from this sleep? When all around us people are blind and indifferent, at best. Stupid moles. Jealous, boorish, obtuse, evil people—"

"That's it, exactly!" Luda agrees. "If only you knew how they've made me suffer! Some day I'll tell you..."

Luda spots Uliana and Kohut making their way toward them. Luda keeps talking, but abruptly changes topic.

"You have to read to him more!" She now counsels Larysa. "And explain things to him! For instance, pick up a fork and say to him, 'Look at this. See? This is a *vylka*. Now you say it!' What I mean is—oh, what am I saying?! The word's not *vylka*, but *vydelka*!"

"Could that possibly really work?" says Larysa, barely holding back tears.

"Well," says Luda defensively, "if you keep hearing something from a very young age... Though, of course, the right word is *vydelka*. Yet, for some reason, back home we always just said *vylka*. We should have said it correctly! At home all of us—adults and kids alike—always spoke only Ukrainian. Yet we always said *vylka* instead of *vydelka*!"

Ihor grabs the *vylka-vydelka* and pokes the fork at a bottle of sauce.

"See that! He understands me! Come on now, say it—*vydelka*, *vydelka*, *vydelka*..."

Under Larysa's instructive gaze Ihor crouches down and begins to strain.

"No!" says Larysa, falling to her knees and starting to crawl under the table.

"What is it? What's the matter?" asks Luda apprehensively. Bending over, she sees a puddle spreading toward one of her new, Brazilian-made shoes.

Larysa pushes her son past Uliana and Kohut, in the direction of the men's room. She jostles against Boyko and Sambur, who are on their way back to the table, and deposits her son with his father.

"Take him!"

"What happened?" he says, bewildered.

"That's what! Look at that! Do something—anything! I've got to mop it up! Did you bring extra clothes?"

"A shirt and pants—in the bag on the back seat."

"And underwear?"

"No."

"No underwear!"

"Yes—no underwear! Why are you looking at me like that? I'm not the one who peed himself! And when he did it, he was with you!"

VIII

The bottles are empty and their cups are nearly dry too. They sit waiting for more tea.

Sambur, gesturing grandiosely, is launching into an anecdote about two telephone companies—one European and the other American—competing for Ukraine's telephone business.

But Uliana outdoes him. Capturing Kohut's attention, she starts speaking with deliberate offhandedness—but so the others can hear—about the conference she recently attended. She casually mentions that the participants included three Nobel laureates. And on the last day of the conference, during the concluding reception—which happened to be held at the Waldorf-Astoria—Uliana, speaking in Polish, engaged one of them in discussion.

Luda is trying to get her daughters to eat some of the shrimp—they're very high in calcium—but the girls are putting up a fuss. Between prods and threats, Luda is embellishing the tale of how when they were getting ready to leave for America, the girls' grandparents—her own mother and father, she means—reminded them always to carry their own soap and water, because people in the U.S. were being mowed down by AIDS right and left. Earlier they had pleaded with Luda: 'You two go wherever you like, but leave us the grandchildren!' Why, when Oksana first went to school, she wouldn't touch anything, or even sit down at a desk. She was so nervous that she began to stutter—then she broke out in red spots and her temperature climbed to 40°: that's Oksana for you. As for Roxie, she couldn't have cared less.

Sambur, alternately taking on the voices of a German, an American, and a regional head official, is artfully relating how the momentous decision was made. The gist of his anecdote is that while one businessman was presenting a prospectus and extolling his firm's advantages, the other was determining who had to be bribed how much and thus nabbing the contract.

Kravets has come back with Ihor and they sit down at the table: the child is wearing dry pants. Kravets takes his son on his lap to give his wife a break. When there is a pause in the conversation, he asks Kohut where he should go for a car inspection, since renewal of his permit is long overdue.

"What office do I go to? And how do I go about it—do I have to phone ahead, or can I go without an appointment?"

"You can keep driving on the old one for months," Kohut assures him. "Lots of people here do that. So don't worry."

"And if I'm stopped?"

"Then you'll get fined—several hundred dollars! Because in America

nobody does that. There are laws against it."

"So where is this office?" Kravets persists.

"We've been in America for years now," Larysa breaks in, "but I have yet to see any garlic shoots. Onion, yes—several kinds, green onions and various kinds of bulbs. But garlic—there are only the heads. Why doesn't anyone here sell young green garlic?"

"My wife's the one who does the grocery shopping," explains Kohut. "At one of the supermarkets. They're big stores, part of a chain. 'Chain' because there's a whole string of them—from state to state. I just go to the refrigerator, open it, and tell myself, 'Good! I'm going to cook something Mexican today!' In any case, that kind of produce is sold in specialty stores."

"And your wife," asks Larysa, "does she cook too?"

"Certainly!"

"So you both cook? Together?"

"Of course! And we've got feminism to thank for that! Nowadays men have to know how to do everything themselves, because women want to have their own careers. It's time we men founded our own men's liberation."

But this topic fails to get off the ground. Instead, taking Uliana's account of the banquet at the Waldorf-Astoria as a springboard, they launch into an animated discussion of where their literature is headed. Each of them reads voraciously and is well acquainted with the works of just about all the leading writers. Luda presses Oksana to recite a poem she wrote in third grade to mark the old calendar New Year. As Oksana prevaricates, Roxie yells out a short verse about a fly that alighted on jam.

Kohut, who once reviewed a translation of Honchar's *Sobor*, invites comment on whether Honchar writes in the social realist style. Opinion on the matter proves divided.

There echoes the idea that if any of their writers deserves the Nobel prize, it is Shevchuk. Because he writes a psychological kind of prose. Because he's an historian, a literary stylist, and a philosopher to boot—an individual as broad as Franko.

In Boyko's view, the Nobel prize has been prostituted in the service of politics. All the nominees have been selected beforehand, an iron-clad coterie rules, and only cretins don't see who's calling the shots.

Uliana is critical of Shevchuk—they once traveled by train in the same sleeping car—because he's a populist, and populism is now old hat.

The others stand up staunchly for Shevchuk. Because he risks writing about urban life, stays clear of politics, and works day and night. He also makes use of sleek and obscure lexical forms.

Sambur is fascinated by the man. "Shevchuk's a marvel—a walking encyclopedia!" he exclaims. Sambur once directed one of Shevchuk's plays—he visited him at home and drank tea with him several times.

"Belief in the masses is anachronistic," declares Uliana, squashing these arguments. "Now we're in the age of Deconstructivism and Post-Modernism."

Kohut agrees.

"Yet over there," he says, making no effort to hide his amazement, "nobody knows a thing about phenomenology! And sex studies are unknown! When I was presenting at a session of your Academy of Sciences, back in '90, that's when I realized—they don't even know the terminology! So how can there even be hope of a fruitful discussion?!"

In Kohut's view, collectivism is to blame for every deficiency. It's the brake that prevents the flow of Ukrainian culture into the Western arena—the reason why to this day Ukrainian culture has no aesthetic function, but only a social one. That's understood by younger artists, who are no longer bound by dogmas and have cast taboos aside. Kohut is hoping that the translation he is currently working on will sweep the old clichés away and have a positive impact on the situation.

"For Ukraine must wake up," he declares, "and absorb the enterprising spirit—is that what you call it?"

"The entrepreneurial spirit," says Uliana, hitting on the phrase.

"Right," says Kohut, nodding assent. "Because that's exactly what America had! How hard we've all worked! Both of my parents held down several jobs at the same time. Because they knew that if you just hang around, you get nowhere."

Luda says that after getting her girls off to school today, she watched a Western on T.V. It's part of their culture—that kind of fighting. Their very organism craves it, like ours craves alcohol.

"And then I understood," Larysa shares her revelation, "that before the whites took over, they destroyed everybody else! As they were consolidating their authority and dividing everything into spheres."

"What spheres? Where? Who was destroyed by whom?" they all clamor to know.

"Why, spheres of influence—in the Wild West, of course," Luda elucidates. "While the cowboys were killing the natives! Because before they got their Constitution, there was lawlessness everywhere—even greater than ours! Today they themselves admit that!"

In the several years that the Kravetses have lived here, Larysa has made friends with lots of Americans. So now, commenting on Luda's observation, she can explain to her countrymen that with the Americans, everything is different from how it is back home. That's because they're simply totally different from us.

"For instance, suppose you go over to somebody's house for a picnic and bring a salad. Then after the picnic is over, you take it home—I mean what's left in the bowl, of course. No one will even think of being offended by your doing that! On the contrary—it's what they expect you to do!"

"We, by contrast, are a generous people," the others respond. "We don't begrudge a guest anything. Back home, anything we have in the house goes right on the table! And that's not left-overs or canned stuff—no, everything that's fresh and really good. We don't host our friends with dregs. Let them think we're stupid Scythians—to us, they're simply boors!"

The conversation abruptly halts. The guests sense that they have said more than they should. Not knowing how to extricate themselves, they take turns checking to see what is left to be sampled—the only thing left is a trace of the yellow sauce. Their smiling waitress is putting the dirty dishes on a cart and clearing the table for dessert.

"But those of us here now"—it's Boyko who finally thinks of something to say—"could gang together—I mean, unite—and do something ... I mean, something so that... so they'll at least sit up and take notice!"

Everyone pounces on this idea and begins to elaborate on it. For each of them has both the desire and the expertise to serve the national cause. Through courses of language, culture, and civilization. Through exhibits of collages. By starting a local Ukrainian club, with weekly evening get-togethers devoted to literature and art. By the degustation of Ukrainian culinary specialities, and through lectures and slide presentations. They might offer Yurko Kohut collegial help with his translation, for that text abounds in Russian words and a slangy mishmash of Russian and Ukrainian, not to mention obscure nuances and allusions. They would all work on that translation together, so it becomes a real event in the literary world. Then everybody out there would finally get the message: we're neither Rusksies nor Sovs!

"So, Yurko, what do you think of the idea?" asks Boyko, summing things up. "Is it realistic or not?"

"It might work," says Kohut amiably. "In the spring the university holds a multicultural arts festival—students dance and sing and there is entertainment of all kinds. There's a whole collection of costumes stored at the department—Jennifer can show you where. It's a nice idea—so why not?"

Everyone is taken aback, and silence reigns.

"When I was at the banquet," says Uliana abruptly, breaking the silence, "I began a conversation with a British novelist. I asked what he knew about Ukraine. He said he knew it was a very big city and that many Catholics lived there. And another writer, a renowned poet, said frankly, 'What literature? Yukrainian? Is there really a literature like that?'"

Kohut nods. "You'll find that kind of thinking everywhere!"

"Well!" Uliana is dismayed. "Somehow we have to enlighten them! Your department must offer courses—"

"But I have no openings!" says Kohut irritably. "And where will the money come from? That's not how we do things here!"

"Of course not!" Boyko comes to Kohut's support. "What kind of

courses can there be, when there aren't any up-to-date textbooks! That's where one has to begin—with textbooks!"

"And the instructors can't be artistic types!" Kravets adds. "They've got to be teaching professionals!"

Uliana shoots looks of burning hatred, first at Kravets and then at everyone else. She refuses to make any bones about who is who here. The proposed professional—that is, Larysa Kravets—is an impudent housewife. As for Sambur, he's a drunk. And Boyko, he's a nobody—he calls himself an academic and professor, but in fact he's only a candidate and docent. As for artistic types—yes, it's true, she is one of them! She's an artist: a literary artist, whose works have been translated into English—and even into Romanian! She has more scholarly articles to her credit than all the rest of them put together—including Kohut. And she has lectured at two American colleges, to boot!

"Our heroine!" they respond, "So you've taught! So now it's time to take a break and give others a chance."

But their common front against Uliana crumbles with every remark they utter. Soon everyone is arguing with everyone else.

"What right do you have to judge me?!" they charge one another. "How dare you say, 'If I had only your troubles!' What can you possibly know about the troubles I have?!"

It becomes patently clear that each of them has a valid reason—and what luck if it's only one!—to tarry here. Their longing for their homeland—and the strain of being constantly obliged to be reticent in this foreign, albeit bounteous, land—erupts now in stormy confessions.

Uliana's confession is the loudest, because she is a poet and hence more sensitive to the world's beauty and pain than anyone else. And she's the only one able to transform the pulse of life throbbing about them into exquisite verse, and at least in that way know immortality.

Luda's confession, by contrast, drips with tiresome and mundane trivialities—bad dreams (which give rise to just the kind of mood one might expect), fretting about the children and their illnesses, recollections of how she fought off the floozies who were after her husband (the concoctions she drank, just to lose some weight! and the things she had to do, just to cater to him and keep the family together!).

"How sick I am of it all!" Luda proclaims. "So sick of it that—as God is my witness—I'd walk all the way home! Right across that ocean!"

Boyko, too, would say the hell with it all and return home to his institute, if it weren't for the parents—his and Luda's, both. Because while they're living here, a Greek journalist is staying in their place back home, and the rent is being divided, absolutely equally, between the two sets of retirees.

"Look at that! He's making money here and raking it in over there! Why Yurko, you crafty fox!" says Sambur, clapping his hands together.

"While I've got no place to call my own, either here or over there!" (It's true—Sambur's wife locked him out of the house as soon as their son got into the police academy.)

Kravets puts his head down on the table, covers his face with his hands, and groans. Because all of them are living lives of their own—but he and his Larysa cannot.

"Not to be able to have a normal conversation with your own child! Or let him out of your sight for even a moment, because he'll injure himself or someone else! Could any of you deal with that?!"

"Stop it!" cries Larysa. "Whose sympathy are you looking for? And why? As if they could possibly understand!"

"Why must you think you're so unique?!" Now Luda's temper flares. "Everyone here has kids!"

Everyone except Uliana, that is, who hears Luda's declaration as the next vile accusation flung her way. In retaliation, she calls the Boykos commies. For not that long ago both Luda and Yuri were party members. Luda Boyko was even head of the party office at the high school where she taught.

"Look who's talking!" says Boyko, by way of reminding Uliana that she's a communist too, albeit a former one.

The counterattack unnerves Uliana totally—she's long forgotten about her membership in the party.

"But I had to!" she says, recovering and striking back. "Or I wouldn't have been able to defend my thesis!"

"Then hold your tongue!"

Not Uliana.

"It's not up to you to judge!"

"Not up to me?!"

"No—not up to you!"

"Then who? Maybe you?"

"Yes—me!"

"Ha! As if you could!"

Sambur steps in to separate the party members bodily.

"Don't take it out on each other!" he says genially. "The other guy always seems to have the meatier stick."

He allows himself this witticism because he never had a party card. But that omission doesn't save Sambur—he gets it anyway. For having repeatedly staged theatrical performances for Komsomol meetings, conferences, and other gatherings—performances that glorified their whole gang. That's much worse than being nominally a member but actually opposed. And Sambur not only entertained them, but raked in the dough—just about bulldozed it in.

"Me?" says Sambur, eyes like saucers. "Why, I don't even have a decent suit to my name, and never did!"

Kohut, over whose head the dispute is being waged, hasn't been able to figure out for a while what it is that they're arguing about, but at last he can comprehend Sambur's problem and he offers advice.

"You don't have to go to the expensive stores to get one, you know. Because there are other kinds, and they've got clearance sales too—that's when they want to sell everything off fast. You can snap up all kinds of things for a song. There's also the place where people drop off the clothes and shoes they no longer want—it's open on Thursdays. And then there are the church basements. On Saturdays they sell things there even more cheaply—it's considered charity."

"In basements? Where are they? In churches?" each is exclaiming. "Which ones? Ukrainian churches?!"

"No—they belong to various denominations," clarifies Kohut. "The Ukrainian church—that's about a three hours' drive. That one's quite new. A Hindu painted the icons—but then he's also half-Chinese."

This swerving explanation baffles everybody, and they exchange glances. The Boyko girls fall silent, like the adults.

The happy Chinese girl brings them tea and fortune cookies (no ice cream or cake was ordered). In response to the waitress's question if she can bring them anything else, Boyko asks for the check, for he prefers to pay now. He takes out his money.

"They take checks here," notes Kohut helpfully.

"I'll just pay cash," says Boyko. "After all, it's more reliable."

"You can also use plastic," urges Kohut, "A credit card—or your bank cash card."

"Thanks. I know. But cash is simpler."

While their father is taking care of the bill, Roxolana and Oksana pull Ihor under the table. They press him to take a fork they have hidden there especially so he can use it to bang on the dishes.

"But you could have paid by check," Kohut is still fretting.

Making an effort to regain his composure, he picks up the teapot. Ihor moves up to Kohut from behind, looks him straight in the eye, and grins.

"Hello there," says Kohut.

Ihor bursts into laughter and touches the fork to Kohut's arm.

Kohut's eyes widen in terror. He jerks back his arm and jumps up, spilling the hot liquid all over himself. Grabbing his crotch, he doubles over and falls back down in his chair.

"What is it?" Everyone is confused. "What happened?!"

"That's it—I've had it!" moans the scalded Kohut. Very gingerly, he gets up. As the shocked restaurant-goers watch, he starts to shuffle slowly toward the door.

IX

Larysa gives her son a slap and berates her husband for not minding him. Little Ihor doesn't protest—he just closes his eyes and flails his arms about. Snickering sounds come from under the table, where the Boyko girls have hidden.

Boyko nearly overturns his chair as he rushes after Kohut. Larysa is just behind. But it is Sambur who reaches the professor first, catching up to him just at the exit.

"I understand what you said about being enterprising—I agree absolutely. Now, have I got a business proposal for you!"

Panting audibly, Sambur summarizes his plan for striking it rich within a year. For it to work, Kohut has to introduce him to one of the university deans. The plan springs from the fact that several businessmen have given Sambur verbal authorization to start up a noodle factory.

"We don't need any marketing help, or any managers. Just give us the money—the dollars—and we'll take care of the rest. We've got everything—the site, the flour, the packaging and wrapping. The only thing we need is capital. If you help us get that, we'll be able to buy fax machines, computers—in short, get the whole infrastructure. And we'll return your investment in a flash—I swear! Just put me in touch with the dean—or the provost, whoever's in charge of the physical plant. This is no joke, believe me—we'll become millionaires! Within a year! From noodles!"

"Oh, leave me alone!" says Kohut, breaking away.

Larysa, Uliana, and Boyko rush forward. Each addresses Kohut in his particular way. "Master Yuri!" "Yurko dear!" And, even, "Pater!"

"Are you badly burned?" says Boyko, crowding him. "I know what to do. Let's go to the restroom—"

"No, I don't want to!" Kohut declares to all of them. "I'm sick of it!"

"He didn't mean to do it!" says Larysa, defending her son. "He doesn't understand that you can't do things like that!"

"That's something none of you understands!" Kohut is already out the door as he pronounces this verdict. "It's part of your culture—part of that code of yours. Because your words mean something different than ours do!"

"What?" The guests are astounded. "Why are you so offended?"

"That's not the point!"

"Then what is the point?" They surround him on all sides. "Tell us! What is your point?!"

Kohut peers into the low American sky and watches planes cutting across constellations. Rather than give examples of that mysterious code of theirs, he begins to recall his painful childhood. And soon everyone understands why he was terrified by the fork Ihor wielded. His family lived in difficult circumstances. His immigrant parents worked every day—the whole week through and on weekends. They wore plain clothes, bought

plain food, and ate everything on their plates. But their little Yurko disliked anything fatty or with gristle. One day he tried to get away with tossing a piece of fatty bacon under the table. But his father caught him at it, and nearly pierced his hand through with a fork—it was the only way he could reach him. Nonetheless, in time all the children in the family managed to get a university education.

"But how does this relate to us?" ask the guests, unable to see any direct connection.

"Because you think that in America everything comes easily, just like that. And that everyone here is supposed to take care of you. But to get anything from you—that's another story. One can wait and wait and still get no gratitude—and no help!"

"How can you say that? Why, we"—each is beating his or her breast—"are always happy to help. With every ounce of strength. With total gratitude. And as for our reliance on your good will—we thought you were offering it. But if you weren't offering, well then—we'd expect nothing from you, of course! Because no means no! But how did we—we want to know, exactly—how and when did we let you down?"

Everyone is clamoring for an explanation—with names named and masks removed. So, crowding together, they extract from Kohut, now pinned against the glass doors, revelation of all the times he has been wronged and abused.

So now they learn that, for instance, Luda knew it was her girls who had damaged the trampoline out in the yard and yet blamed everything on the neighbors' kids. His wife had seen it all through the window while working out on the fitness machine.

When Kohut organized a lecture for Boyko at the university, he had delivered his standard patriotic text, geared for a diaspora audience. Afterwards, in academic circles rumors had spread that through his position Kohut was fostering the usual backwoods anti-Semitism—something that is not only vile, but a crime! To get his tenured professorship, Kohut had been obliged to maneuver around the entire Jewish kahal in Slavic studies. Publish or perish—that's the law of the academic jungle! And who will publish any of his work now, branded as he is?!

Uliana, too, has offended. She has the necessary language skills, but did not want to help him with his latest prose translation. (True, Kohut hadn't asked for her help, but she should have realized that he needed it.) On top of that, when she was giving a talk before an audience in New York, she failed to mention him as her benefactor. (Kohut was not there, but that same evening he received a call describing everything that took place.) And that offended him.

"Because here it's customary to thank people. That's the way we do things in America."

Sambur—to whom Kohut has opened up more than to anyone else—is

charged with having failed to appreciate the breadth of Kohut's spiritual and artistic world (the professor paints, composes music, and writes controversial poetry, in prose).

Nor is Larysa Kravets without sin. Once, standing in line at the supermarket, she pretended not to see him.

"I don't understand that kind of behavior," says Kohut indignantly. "I don't understand what that means in your culture. It must mean something—but what?"

"But when did I do such a thing?" says Larysa, stunned at the revelation. "What supermarket was it in?"

Loudly, and in turn, the others, too, start making justifications.

"Enough!" cries Kohut, cutting them off. "Please let me go! And good night!"

And with that, burdened by the insults he has sustained, he gingerly makes wide-legged strides out into the parking lot.

The birthday celebrant and his guests watch until Kohut reaches his Mazda and lowers himself into the seat. Then they all turn around and head back to the table.

"There we have it, friends—big trouble, right on Yurko's day! It's done! Our America has closed its doors!" they say, scaring each other. "Now he'll really take care of everything for us. Courses, visas, invitations—everything!"

X

A shroud of deep anxiety hangs over the table. Warranted or not, everyone had quietly harbored his or her own expectations.

"Why are we so wretched?" each wants to know. "Could it be a national curse of some kind?"

Boyko yanks them back to their senses.

"For God's sake, what are you doing—breeding mysticism? With laments like 'Damnation! Reason can't explain this'! That's the way the Ruskiies talk! We're not like them—we know there's a logical cause for everything! Centuries of foreign occupation, serfdom, statelessness, no elite of our own—aren't those cause enough? All of them gave us certain ways of looking at the world, they shaped our patterns of behavior and defense mechanisms. And together, all that fits the colonial syndrome—half the world suffers from it!"

This news boosts everyone's confidence and self-assertiveness. The realization dawns that they're not the ones dependent on Kohut—that, in fact, things are the other way around. Because, they tell each other, he needs us more than we need him. Otherwise he wouldn't have gathered all of us here. That's why this isn't the end of the world. We can survive without the U.S. of A.! Soon we'll have our own hard currency, and then everything

will be different. After all, we've already got independence.

The flask of "Pepper Vodka" that Sambur has pulled out of his jacket heightens their sense of liberation. Fraternally they pour the vodka into their cups and raise a toast to Boyko's fortieth.

"No, wait!" cries the birthday boy. "We've already toasted that! Let's drink to the ladies!"

The ladies do not protest, but Luda wants to drink a separate toast—to all of them together, she declares. So fortune will smile on them, always and everywhere—on them and their children.

Everyone is amenable. And because there is no prospect of replenishing the vodka, the three toasts are linked together as one. The men stand and, like hussars, toss back the vodka in one gulp, forearms parallel to the floor from fingertips to elbow.

Instead of having a bite to eat as chasers—Boyko has suggested ordering more food, but quite quickly allows himself to be dissuaded—they take to dissecting Kohut.

Uliana thinks that Kohut is a genius at banality.

"I just don't understand him," says Luda. "At times, when he gets started on something... Does he talk in riddles on purpose?"

They explain to her that it probably stems from a lack of self-confidence. Or was caused by his being ridiculed—in school, no doubt, because his parents were immigrants. Just like the city people do to the country folk back home. Kids are cruel like that everywhere. And maybe it continued even later, after he finished his dissertation and managed to latch onto a job. Back home, that part was easy—you'd finish and join the party and get the green light to go anywhere. But what have they got here? No party, no KGB, no Komsomol.... So now Kohut takes it out on us. Because who else can he lord it over?

They don't neglect to comment on Kohut's family life. Why is his wife never around? Do they live together or not? Could it be that he's gay?

Sambur says that when they're in the sauna together, Kohut never fails to look him you-know-where, even if it's just out of the corner of his eye or for a split second.

"Where?" Kravets and Boyko ask, pretending to not understand.

Luda shoos her daughters off to the aquarium and the goldfish.

"Why, he's checking you out," the two men tease, "to see whether you're circumcised or not. Come on, Lev—we want to see too!"

"What, right here?"

Laughing about it all, each in turn unbegrudgingly gives Kohut his due. For if it weren't for him, neither the Boykos nor Sambur would be sitting here. Even Uliana, if she hadn't met him in Kyiv back in '90, might not have made it onto the international scene. This Kohut of theirs is, after all, a person of stature. There's good reason why he's known not only in Ukrainian circles, but far beyond.

Having clarified everything about Kohut, they go on to criticize America. Because there's no really good bread here. And their strawberries—they taste like plastic! And the watermelons! Granted, they're sold year round, but the flavor—ugh! August is the time to eat watermelon—or October, at the outside. But to have them in March or May—that's just going against nature.

"We eat only the food we cook at home," says Luda. "Potato pancakes, omelettes, some meat, cheese pies. We do without lobster just fine. And we don't poison ourselves with the chemicals their MacDonal'd's doles out."

Everyone concedes that well-made clothes are readily available here. But what's intriguing is that no matter what you pick up, the label reads "Made in China." Footwear, dishes, toys, office supplies—it's all made for them by the Chinese. To produce something themselves, let alone make it by hand—that they can't or just won't do. Whereas Luda's sister-in-law, for example, knits sweaters so beautiful that even the ones in boutiques can't compare.

Insightful observations, notes on geography, and analyses of socio- as well as culturological phenomena are all aired. Everyone's verdict is the same: this is a very strange country indeed. Because here children are taught from infancy to be like adults, and when they get older they're enticed to be childish. They're handed so many rights and freedoms that they become unhinged and driven to excess or rage.

"And why do they need so many credit cards? One should be enough! Use it, spend, plunge into debt! But no, for them that's not nearly enough!"

History teaches that all capricious excesses lead to turmoil and perversity. That as soon as a civilization begins to reach its apex, a barbarian force inevitably descends on it from who-knows-where, raking through it forward and back and then crushing it outright and destroying everything it produced.

"That's right!"

Everyone's observation nudges the situation closer to impending disaster.

"They'll find out how the game ends! They let in everybody—blacks, gays, slant-eyes. And then they wonder why they're in a mess! But let me tell you, when disaster strikes, it'll come from someplace totally different than they expect! A hole in the ozone layer, a hurricane, an earthquake—whatever it may be, it'll bury them suddenly, and right over their heads. Because they are absolutely undisciplined and totally soft. Because they haven't gone through anything like what we've endured. In comparison to us, they're mere adolescents! We know a thing or two—things we could teach them. We know how people tick. Whereas all they have to rely on is technology—and that can always fail."

With this conclusion, a hush descends. The thoughts of some wing

homeward. With self-pride Uliana reveals her desperate longing for the sound of the Ukrainian language—even for that loathsome, thrice-cursed *surzhyk* that's a mishmash of Ukrainian and Russian combined.

Luda is agonizing over the prospect of going back home and being obliged to approach the school principal with a bribe—she's so inexperienced at doing such things. With Roxolana, there'll be no problem—she completed the whole first-grade program at age six. But because of this sojourn in America, Oksana has missed the better part of a school year. Will they agree to place her in sixth grade? If they don't, well then, the only thing left to do is grease their palms—but should it be \$50 or \$100? And should it be in small bills or large? Should the money be put inside a box of cologne or just in an envelope? And how should the presentation be made?

They reminisce about what things were like when dollars were prohibited, about the goods you could find on the shelves then. Meringues—white, or pink if you preferred—and packets of cheese with raisins, regular butter and chocolate spread, smoked cheese sausages and sliced peppers.

And what candies one could choose from! "Bilochka," "Bear-Cubs-in-a-Pine-Forest," "Tuzik," and those luscious ones called "Just-Try-to-Take-These-Away."

The men recall exactly what wine and liquor cost back then. "White-Power" went for a ruble and 22, "Kysliak" for just 0,77, "Chornylo" for 0,97. Or you could choose between the "Rubin," "Rusty," "Rumelian," or "Sun-Gift" brands (they note the cost and alcohol content of each). Even those who weren't around to enjoy "Sun-Gift" or a "Tuzik" recall when a ruble bought several times what a dollar does here today.

Bonds are forged when recollections are shared.

"There was all that to choose from! And the quality!" they say, smacking their lips. "With our soil and climate, we could be the best-fed nation in Europe—maybe the world!"

With nothing else to munch on, they break open the fortune cookies and pull out the paper slips inside. Each reads what the Chinese predict for him or her, and they compare their lucky numbers. One fortune reads: Life change with new suit. Another: Character combine light heart and deep knowledge. One's lucky numbers are 46 and 5; another's are 32 and 7.

They resolve to take turns hosting weekly get-togethers at their homes. For tea and something with the tea. To chat and share things with each another, countryman to fellow countryman. For who else can understand them?

The children each take a cookie as well. They too want to know what it reveals about them and what their lucky numbers are. In the three months she's been here, Oksana has learned more English than her father has in all his years of study and practice.

Suddenly it dawns on all of them simultaneously—so that's why we didn't have our own country before! Because everybody sat in his own burrow willing his neighbor's cow to die. When everyone should have been doing exactly the opposite. If someone wishes you ill, forgive him, because you'll never know why he does—maybe it's because of his own insecurity, or because for some reason he has a real fear of you. Pardon the person who expects a bribe from you. And the one who has fallen prey to hate and bewitches your child. Or drives you into the ranks of the party. Forgive them and embrace them—because they're all our own people. Then we'll feel how many of us there are! No fewer than the Jews! Incidentally, Kohut once told them that apparently Walt Disney, too, was Ukrainian.

Oksana runs up to Larysa. "Why is your Ihor taking our cookies?"

"Ihor dear, come here!" Larysa calls her son. "Don't touch them! Give them back!"

"He's crumbling my cookie to bits!"

"It's not on purpose—he won't do it any more. Ihor!"

"Please, tell him it's my cookie! He has his own!"

"Unfortunately, he doesn't understand that."

"Then you explain it to him—please!"

"Oksana," Luda breaks in, "don't bother him. Here, take mine."

"Mama," says Roxolana, pressing herself under Luda's arm, "I don't want to sit next to him!"

Sambur plunges his fingers into Ihor's head of hair and tousles it. "Maybe it's his way of showing the girls he likes them. How old is he—seven? Well then, it's high time! Am I right?" Sambur looks Ihor in the eye. "Who is this standing here—is he a Cossack?"

But this Cossack is emitting animal sounds. And from the way his body is writhing, it's clear Ihor doesn't have it under control.

Uliana is aghast.

"What's happening to him?"

As Larysa tells Uliana Ihor's diagnosis, Luda whispers to Sambur that someone gave the boy the evil eye.

"What kind of treatment is he getting?" asks Uliana.

"There is no treatment," says Larysa.

"What do you mean, no treatment?"

Back home there isn't any, but in France they've found a way to fight it, says Uliana. Researchers there have found that children who suffer from autism hear a constant din which varies in frequency from child to child. So they put earphones on the children and use sound equipment to create a noise of similar frequency, thereby eliminating the din. Once the children have undergone this procedure, they begin to relate to the outside world.

"You must take him to France," Uliana concludes.

Kravets replies that the former Soviet Union, too, has quite a number of psychologists—at the Leningrad school, for instance—who work in very

original ways with such children. Not every psychologist, of course, but the dedicated ones, who under communism weren't allowed to try innovative and alternative methods of treatment. On their days off, these young researchers regularly take these children by suburban train out of the city, into fields and forests. There the children might be muddy, cold, sniveling, and wet, but they're happy because they can experience the world around them. Equipment isn't always necessary for that to happen.

Uliana doesn't take well to being contradicted. She persists in urging the Kravetses to make immediate plans to fly to France.

"You've got a job—set aside a few thousand! Does it make sense to scrimp where health and well-being are concerned?"

Larysa opens her mouth to reply, but a child's shriek interrupts.

"Mama!" Roxolana wails, "He's got it again! And he's crushing it! Give it back—it's mine! What is it with you?!"

She must have kicked Ihor under the table, for he has bent over in pain. Even so, tears don't flow down his face immediately. They begin a little later, after the shock recedes. For Ihor doesn't whimper at just anything. That happens only when he's lost the strength to endure.

XI

"What is it now?" says Larysa, turning around. "What's the matter with you now?"

"I didn't do anything! He did it himself!" cries Roxolana, hiding behind her mother.

"I didn't touch him either!" Oksana chimes in.

"Maybe he choked on something," Boyko suggests.

"Oksana, come here!" orders her mother.

As Kravets bends under the table to examine his son's leg, Roxolana punches Ihor in the cheek with her fist.

But Kravets has straightened up just in time to catch what she's done. He grasps hold of her arm.

"Hey, hey—careful!" Luda warns.

"With kids there's always trouble," says Boyko, moving closer to his younger daughter. "That's why I don't get involved."

"I saw what you did!" cries Kravets, flushed with anger and shaking a finger at the girl. "Why did you hit him? He wasn't bothering you!"

"He took her cookie," Boyko explains to Kravets, "and crumbled it to bits. Why, that's as if I came over and broke something of yours... like your computer! Well—how would you feel about that?"

"But he didn't even touch her!" shouts Kravets, shaking his fist.

Ihor writhes and bawls in fright, as tears stream down his face.

"Take him away!" Luda demands. "And keep him at home! Why does everybody have to share your problem? If he's so wild that he hits other

children, stay home with him! Or else hire a nanny!"

"Let's get out of here!" Larysa cries at her husband. "I told you to go on your own, but no—you had to drag all three of us here!"

"Don't yell at me!" Kravets warns. "I wanted what was best—for you to get out for a while."

"Any more of this and my mind will give out!"

"Stop it! Is it my fault? I have no life anyway!"

"And what about me? At least you go out to work every day!"

"And if I didn't, where would we be? Don't forget who's responsible for our being here!"

"I... you," Larysa sobs, "... Ihor..." Nothing else she says is comprehensible.

They all fall silent, chagrined and embarrassed. Luda, unable to stand it any longer, is the first to speak. They should have another child, she says. This time it'll be a normal one. Then everything will fall into place.

"You think that's all it takes?!" Uliana snaps back. "There's more to a woman's life than bearing children!"

"Why are you getting involved in this?" Luda fires back in defense. "If you don't want kids, don't have them!"

Boyko hastily intervenes, telling Uliana that every child has a unique personality and character.

"It's as if you'd written a novel," he explains, "and then someone came and tore it up before your very eyes—and that was the only copy there was!"

In spite of Boyko's soothing tone, dissension and discord swell beyond the topic of children and envelop them all. Every time that one of them offended another, by word or by glance, is dragged forward and stripped bare. With no holds barred, they give vent to their feelings so forcefully that the children, mouths agape, can't comprehend everything they're hearing.

Boyko is called to account for being a brown-nose who rakes Kohut's leaves. Uliana, for setting her cap on the professor and acting up front to secure her next American stay. Sambur, for slithering unlubricated into every crevice, like a worm. The Kravetses, for never taking their fellow countrymen for a ride out of the city even though they own a car.

"Go fawn over your benefactor," Kravets retorts. "Let him drive you around. As it is, you put your butts out for him but he won't do it for you."

"It's not clear yet who is taking advantage of whom," says Boyko, smiling sagaciously. "Because I tell him one thing and do something totally different. And what I'm thinking while doing it is something neither he nor you knows—or ever will!"

"And you won't know it about us, either!" boast the others.

"But I'll put him in my next novel," Uliana vows, "and then he'll have something to scratch his head over! And he won't be the only one!"

Sambur has become so expansive that he swears to them all that he'll

expose Kohut in all his glory!

"You needn't do that!" they entreat him. "Nobody will understand!"

"But I've got to do it! As the ultimate proclamation of my own liberation!"

Kravets regrets having offended his wife. As their companions are teasing Sambur, he tries to lift Larysa's spirits.

"Never mind," he whispers in her ear. "Things aren't so bad. After all, we're here. And remember that woman from Lutsk—remember what she told you? That you have to believe and then it'll all pass?"

"Believe! That's easy for her to say!" says Larysa, wiping her eyes with a napkin. "How can I believe when there's no reason to believe. He forgot everything he knew at age two—what is there left to believe? And she was speaking not just to me but to you too!"

"But I go to work and stay there all day! You're the one who minds him!"

Everyone hears this last whisper, because for several seconds now no one has moved a muscle.

Looking up, Kravets sees that Ihor isn't at the table.

"Where is he?" Kravets says hoarsely. "Where did he go?"

Turning around, he sees Kohut, standing to his left. Only now instead of a suit Kohut is wearing red-and-yellow shorts and a sweater.

No one dares breathe. For nobody knows—did Kohut overhear something or not? And if so, how much? And, most important, what parts did he understand?

Larysa spots her son at last. He's at the end of the corridor, standing by the doors to the kitchen. Kneeling in front of him is their pleasant Chinese waitress. She is holding Ihor close and telling him something. From what Larysa sees, Ihor is saying something to the girl in turn.

"It can't be!" she shivers.

Kohut has had enough of the perplexed stares fixed on his garish clothes. He nonchalantly throws up his hands.

"I always keep extra clothes and shoes in the car," he explains. "Things are different over here, you know. Here you can go to restaurants even in shorts. Because this is a free country."

(December 1995–February 1996)

Translated by Uliana Pasicznyk

Original publication: Volodymyr Dibrova, "Den' narodzhennia," in his *Zbihovys'ka* [Gatherings], Kyiv: Krytyka, 1999, pp. 165–222.