

The Price of a Human Name

Ihor Kostetsky

The tubby gentleman furrowed his brow at a sheet of brown paper. The sheet—a list of tenants—was fastened to the door with two tacks. Having found no doorbell, the gentleman bent his finger and knocked. Then he knocked louder. “May I”—said the man—“may I see Pavlo Palii?” A woman with bluish eyebrows stood at the door. Inside the apartment someone was shouting at her in a shrill, piercing voice. “Come in,” said the woman. In the hallway, the gentleman slipped his bent finger between his lips and sucked it twice. A *kylym* hung in the doorway, a thick raspberry-colored fabric hung on the wall over the window. A leather ottoman. And couch. Above the couch a painting—thick yellow paint, thickly smeared. A man without a jacket, or even a vest, crept out from under the *kylym* and greeted the guest without taking the cigarette out of his mouth. “Pavlo Palii,” he introduced himself. “Nice to meet you,” said the tubby gentleman, and added, “I’ve come about a sensitive matter. Forgive me, I forgot to introduce myself—I’m Pavlo Palii.” “Yes, we’re both Pavlo Palii,” said the host.

“We’re both Pavlo Palii,” the visitor repeated. “Well, not exactly, because I...” The host sat on the couch cross-legged, smoking and watching his visitor doze off. “Sorry,” the visitor said, “I didn’t sleep well last night. Well, as a matter of fact I did, but...” The host propped himself up on the couch and listened. He flicked his ashes onto a small *kylym* on the floor. He said nothing, just listened, although the visitor also said nearly nothing. The host was silent the way people listening to someone speak are silent. “It can’t be confirmed that we were both Pavlo Palii. May I first ask you a question?” the visitor asked. The woman appeared from behind the *kylym*—her knees were very high. “Which handkerchief will you take?” she asked. “Go to hell! Get lost!” cursed the host, stomping his feet at her, which forced him to uncross his legs. The guest slipped his finger between his lips and sucked it gently. “Get the hell out,” the host kept yelling in his piercing voice at the woman, who stood just as people do when someone is scolding them for the first time. Then, calmly and politely, he turned to the visitor: “What was your question?”

“Oh, yes, my question,” the visitor said. He sucked on his finger once again and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe it. “You wanted to ask me a question,” the host prompted. “A question,” the visitor repeated, looking in the direction of the *kylym* that was still flapping behind the woman who had left the room. “Bring me a cigarette,” the host shouted after her. “I’m not sure

it's appropriate for me to make this request." "Go ahead—ask," encouraged the host. "You must be from the east," said the visitor. "Yes," said the host. "A recent arrival?" the visitor asked, added, "I'm also from the east."

"I'm also from the east," the visitor repeated. "Pardon me, but I'm going to keep my hat on. My sinuses have become inflamed." "I understand," the host responded. "Thank you," said the visitor, and inhaled so deeply that for a moment his nostrils stuck together. The room smelled faintly of glue. "I also came from the east—but much earlier, after World War I. But I wanted to ask you a question... You know, I've forgotten what dried thistle smells like—oh well, must be pleasant, yes? I just wanted to ask why you exhibited your paintings under the name Pavlo Palii." "Take it," said a hand holding out a cigarette from behind the kylym. "Why that one? You could've picked one that didn't get soaked—it's all yellow," the host said, and pinched the woman's hand in full view of the visitor. "I have matches," the visitor offered. From his pocket he pulled a bundle wrapped in newspaper and started unwrapping. "Don't bother, I have matches," said the host. "You asked why I exhibited under the name Pavlo Palii. Because that is my real name."

"Pavlo Palii is my real name," the host repeated. "I see," the visitor said. "If you don't believe me, I could show you my passport. Bring my passport," the host ordered the woman in a thin, piercing voice. "Heavens no, you don't have to!" exclaimed the visitor. He got up, pushed the ottoman slightly back, and sat down again. "I believe you... I just meant... I just wanted to talk about..." "Pavlo Palii is my real name," the host insisted. "My father baptized me with that name, and I never changed it. It's not my fault our names are identical. Judge for yourself, professor." "You see," said the older painter, "our names are not actually identical—Pavlo Palii is my pseudonym." "Indeed," said the host excitedly, "I read that once in a catalogue. They listed your real name in parentheses, but I can't remember what it was." "It doesn't matter," the visitor said. "Take it," said a voice as the hand appeared from behind the kylym.

"Here is my passport," the host announced. Rather than opening it, he slapped it against his knee. Then he slapped it again. "So, what should we do?" he asked. "What was it you actually came for?" "Well, I wanted..." the visitor got up from the ottoman and moved it again. "I wanted to ask you—no, to tell you, that our painting styles are so different. You're a colorist. You started as a colorist—rather, as a disciple of the colorist style, isn't that right?" "Yes, that's right," the host said. He swiped his very long, very black curls off his forehead with his passport. "That's right," he repeated, "Color is my element. What else did you want to know?" "What else?" the visitor echoed, "How long have you been showing your work?" "This is my first exhibit. I finished art school just before the war," the host explained, tapping his chest with the passport three times. "I have been exhibiting as Pavlo Palii for thirty-six years. My work has been copied—I am an academic painter," the visitor said. "I know," said the host, pointing at the guest with the passport, "You were a professor at two art schools in the capital." "Three," the visitor

corrected him. "I know, I saw your portrait," he said, using the passport to scratch behind his ear. "Well," the guest started, "I wanted to ask you ... I want to know whether you might agree to..." "Oh, no—never," said the host, raising his passport above his forehead. "I have no reason to be ashamed of my name."

"I have no reason to be ashamed of my name," the host repeated, attempting to swat a fly on the painting with the passport. "You're still a novice, while I've already made a name for myself," said the visitor. "It's my name," said the host. "Alright," said the visitor, "but what you upstarts are doing—" "Discredits you, sir, and now people might confuse us—that is what unnerves you. I can do nothing to allay your agony," said the host, and scratched behind his ear with the passport. "But—" the visitor started to say. "I can do nothing to allay your agony. Bring me a cigarette," the host yelled out shrilly. "Here," the hand behind the curtain responded immediately. "Well, I was hoping..." continued the visitor. "How could you hope that a man would renounce his honorable, untarnished—" "Goodness, please, that is not what I had in mind," the visitor protested. "Looks like I'll need to ask you for a match after all," said the host. He was holding the passport and matchbox in one hand and a match with a red, rubbed out tip in the other. "Be my guest," the visitor offered. "Last match, and it won't light." "Here, help yourself," said the visitor, pulling out the wrapped packet in such a way that the newspaper fanned out into rectangles with corners somewhat tattered from repeated handling. The visitor held the unwrapped bundle on his knees while the host helped himself to one of the seven matches. Alongside the matches lay a few crisp bills.

"I don't know, I could even offer you—perhaps you'd want some money?" "For what?" said the host, squinting from the smoke, "For my name?" The younger painter feigned curiosity. "I don't know, maybe you need money," the visitor suggested. "How much would you pay for my name—how much have you got there?" the host asked. "Around two thousand—it's all I have." "Well, well, you wanted to buy an honorable name for two thousand," said the host, dismissing the offer by waving the passport under his nose. He took a drag, blew out a cloud, and laughed. The older painter sat on the bench, newspaper, matches, and money on his lap. Slowly he began to wrap up the bundle, then, with a smile, exhaled through his nostrils. "I'll take the checkered purple one," the host yelled. "Fine," the voice behind the kylym responded.

The younger man rose. The older man rose. On his way out the older man was still trying to stuff the newspaper-wrapped bundle into his pocket.

"Just a minute," the woman called out, catching up the tubby gentleman at the third building he was passing. He stopped and smiled weakly: he was still holding the bundle. "I must tell you," said the woman, "Your offer was doomed from the start—the chains of trams rattled and clanked—" "I have to tell you, he likes to torment people." She held on to his sleeve while he attempted to stuff the bundle into his pocket and two matches pierced the

newspaper. "Two days ago, he told me: he—meaning you—will eventually come. He said so yesterday. And he repeated it this morning, and again an hour before you came. That is the kind of man he is." (Jigsaws on strings rolled and jangled). Walking alongside him, she said: "No, he doesn't need the money. Don't think that he sent me—I just felt sorry for you." "Don't you care for him?" the man asked and noticed the woman's bluish fingernails. "No, I don't," the woman said, "He hates the older generation." They separated for a moment to avoid some trash on the sidewalk. "Why did you marry him?" the man asked, trying to smile. (Oh, on the scooters of Aries... trams scraping by and jangling... and Buddhists in robes). "Because I love him," said the woman. "Well—goodbye," said the man, having finally shoved the bundle into his pocket. The woman stopped walking. He pulled two matches out of the bundle and hid them in his pocket. "A strange man," thought the woman. She turned around and started walking away. (And vainly brainily buffoonize, trumpetize, kurbidize on the reflection of razz, and jazz, and jazz, and jazz.) A little boy was playing on the curb. (Bygone epochs of human progress and our era are still very far from...). The woman thought that he was a nice boy. (Fields and forests greening, orchards blooming, a whiff of spring revives life that's been dormant since—) She turned around and placed her hand on the boy's head. (But soon the time will come when the mighty—) Then she disappeared into the building. (—outlandish powers of past rulers and the even omnipotent death) She paused before entering the apartment and wondered: "How is such a man made?"

How is such a man made? Easy. Take a piece of moist wheat bread and knead it until it becomes a four-cornered chunk. Once you have the shape, you can knead it any which way, even hitting it against a stone floor. Few know how to knead correctly, so it may be best to knead for a bit then leave it for another to take over. Then you dress the chunk in a jacket, pressed pants, even adding a tie, and then thoroughly rub his brain with books on all four sides. An old-world mother lies on her side on a bench and moans from time to time. At night she asks: "Are you happy, my children?" And the son answers: "Mother, how could a Slavic person be happy?" He will repeat that once or twice and then forget as soon as the bark on him hardens. He walks around the living room preening like a peacock, his hands smoothing out his back, and smoking expensive cigarettes, while people examine and study his huge painting. And the bark on him will harden, it will harden. When the bark has hardened, then we know: worms have spread in the man's core, like in the grave. No one can see, because for that you would have to x-ray him. Our distinguished artist. Distinguished! Something must be done. He must be undressed: take off his jacket, pull off his socks, unbutton his shirt, and put him to bed "Oh, God," the man sighed and fell asleep.

Pavlo Palii (Pavlo Karpaha) said: "The horse was driven west by the hero and fell asleep." Later a nagging thought awakened him, one something like this: one should understand and forgive, forgive a lot, so conditions don't turn against you. The thought's lightness vanished when he woke up. He lay

in bed for some time, arms wrapped around his sweaty chest. Then, suddenly, he guffawed explosively. He had come up with a formula for one poet and laughed at his own ingenuity. He even found his own lying in bed and laughing devastatingly humorous. He laughed again and again, in sudden explosive bursts. Then he remembered some hilarity from more than five years back and laughed again. He didn't remember what happened then between the newspaper and the censor, but he recalled that the whole affair was hilarious. "I'm probably coming down with a fever," the gentleman said, and dozed off. He dreamed that he couldn't get the thermometer from the room next door where Marta slept, then realized that his concern was real. "Now I am a man without a name," he whispered. Finally, he realized that the opening lines from some poem or song were playing in his head repeatedly, like this:

An order was given:
Hang him by the neck
From a spar.
Choose a godfather carefully! For all pirates are not equal.
Only the one who does not change his master
Will be up to the task—

Just so, from an adventure novel. "My God," he thought, "I must have read it some forty years ago." He once remembered the entire ballad but now was stuck on the opening lines:

An order was given:
Hang him by the neck!

"I am a man without a name," he declared and fell asleep. He woke up and said: "a master of heaven and earth. Then he said: curse and write 'goddamned Gdansk,' or compose something like 'mutton—glutton' then make up a name like Raoul de Glutton. A man without a name is someone left on a desert island," he added.

And what rode up the mast
Instead of the flag?
The long body of a rebel...

"It's an interesting development when a man finds out about the bark," he whispered. "Yes, it was bark if I'm not mistaken, simple tree bark, yet tasty when sweetened. Maybe man has already tasted the sweetened bark of every tree, for example, the bark of a birch tree. He had to cross the ocean, though: there isn't any good bark in Europe. Did conquistadors who travelled to far off islands find a tree whose bark is tasty with sweetener? They made the long voyage, risked their lives. He was breathing heavily. How does it all connect?" He wondered.

The body of the rebel
Stretched like a flag
A brief moan—a rope pulled—that was all.

It doesn't all fit. A cow will graze on any grass and a sparrow will eat any grain it finds, but man is different. A man will pick through thousands of

grains to find the perfect one. He was inhaling and exhaling loudly. A man wouldn't bake bread from peas or bark. He wages wars for bread. It is deplorable, deplorable and bizarre.

Ale is vibrating in the chalices
 Long live our commander!
 At last mustachioed Francis Dreck
 Is stepping on the deck.

Well, it should really be "Drake," as in the ballad. This ballad should be called "Flag on the Mast" because the ending is about precisely that:

The Lion built the ships
 Good craftsmanship all around.
 The Lion wished to ascertain
 That the earth was round.
 A fiery ale courses in the veins
 The proudly raised flag sways in the wind
 Here comes the Lions ferocious ship,
 A ferocious scoundrel on the seas.

"A ferocious scoundrel on the seas," he said, and added, "I am a man without a name. I am shipwrecked on an island without bread or bark." He breathed heavily. "I came to the conclusion: I must take my last breath and die. My death would make it convenient for people who have bread and bark yet won't share with me." He shook his head. "Humans have thrown out thousands of grains before finding the bread-baking one. Wars are waged for bread." He shook his head again. "Though I've always been a logical man I do know one fairy tale. For the longest time the sea has been spewing primal slime. (I am a man without a name.) Much of the slime perished when it crashed against the rocks. (Marta, do you understand that I am a man without a name?) One tiny particle of slime didn't crash (afterward in the exhibit hall the visitors withdrew and coughed 'a man without a name'). The particle was nourished by the rocks and became a man. (How could you come up with this and not realize a man without a name). I know that a million years ago a particle of primal slime thought exactly what I'm thinking: maybe I'm the first to survive without a protective shell, without a name. The little particle channeled the birthing contractions of the Earth, he said, and the intensity of that thought brought on sleep."

"I like my small house," he said when he woke up. "Recently people have been theorizing that a man can survive war and bombings if he has a sack of potatoes. (I like my small house.) The man carries this sack on his back because he knows that no matter where he goes there will be hunger at the end of the war. (I like my small house.) And this man is cunning: he stuffs his potatoes into smaller sacks because a large sack may be too conspicuous. (I like my small house.)" His breathing became labored again. "And there are other people," he thought, "like an old granny who looks upon the pile of white logs cut and neatly arranged by a German. She thinks for a while, then says: 'You could bake an Easter bread with this wood.'"

(—The banner is proudly raised!

Here comes the ferocious ship—)

He laughed aloud. "A man without a name is a man who will eat grass. He will be tested: either he survives, or he doesn't. He laughed again and stroked his chest. In a nation there may arise a strong desire to fight another nation. Hatred may even be a progressive factor, but only for a time. Afterwards the consequences of hatred are worse than hatred itself. He laughed and stroked his chest. Time and again poets called for revenge—an eye for an eye—and their poems were featured in anthologies of literature. Today it sounds funny and pathetic. Today you cannot call for revenge: the impulse toward revenge will destroy the avengers, and then what. Everyone must liberate everyone." He opened his eyes. "That means: every I will gather at the round table armed with the power of his own genius. You will come with a sack of potatoes, and I will bring my painting, but not this one—a different painting. Let all work with their tools to create a new era: (Marta, where are my brushes? he called. I want to work now.) You with your potatoes, and I with my painting, and both of us without a name. Only the first step is difficult and frightening: to renounce your name. Will you survive without it?" He laughed and stroked his chest. "Then it will become easier. You'll harness the oxen and travel from Poltava to Cologne or to Buenos-Aires with granny sitting in the back. 'Who is he?' 'A man without a name.' 'What is he bringing?' 'Wit, un-human ingenuity, and un-human humanity.'"

(—a ferocious scoundrel on the seas...)

And his un-human humanity. Gradually, subdued by this thought, he fell asleep. Dreaming, he thought that a person's greatness lies in his dreams. A steelmaker and a poet both have dreams, only the ways in which they sculpt their dreams into reality are different, and how well they transform dreams into reality identifies them with groups, classes, or professions. He was a simple man; he could see it now in his dream. He never paid much attention to dreams, this too, he realized while dreaming.

(—a ferocious scoundrel on the seas...)

He got so wrapped up in his dream that he stopped pondering it and instead became its spectator. He saw a young boy running on the rails, waving his arms for balance. He distinctly felt that it was a youngster from an old Russian family, son of White émigrés. His name was Imperatuzov: he must have been from a good family. Peers, mostly girls, gathered around him clapping and yelling, "Vova Imperatuzov is taking a beating!" And indeed, someone hits Vova... When he woke up the dream lingered, and he began conceiving ways of killing people.

He contemplated killing methods. For instance, the killer drops two tiny seeds in the victim's coffee; but first he has to gain access to his coffee, perhaps gain the confidence of his wife, the one with bluish fingertips. But to do that he would have to look younger, do something about his face. Oh, well, all this "eye for an eye" sounds so ridiculous and deplorable today... He was looking at the corner of the room, lit by the grayish light of the morning.

There, a step away from the bed was the grandfather clock with elaborately outlined hours. They say it's been showing twenty after four for two years now. Who knows when the clock's final hour came: in the morning or afternoon? No rounding up to an hour, as in a story: it was exactly four twenty. His eyes swept around the room. He looked at the bookshelf divided into three vertical and five horizontal sections. The upper section had decorative glass and wood reliefs. Propped against the front ledge on top of the bookshelf were color copies of Dutch paintings: one depicting an interior and one with a marine theme. There was also a photograph of Olena Teliha. One hand of the clock pointed to another corner and a door. The adjacent wall was empty save for a stove, a small table, and a chair finished in a tasteful brown color. Next he saw a door, another door leading to Marta's room, and again a corner. Propped up in the corner were rolls of paintings, his famous name was rolled up there. Yet another wall and a door leading to the porch. Two randomly chosen paintings hang on this wall, one of them with strokes of annoying yellow in the corner. A lamp with a ribbed shade bends like an old willow over two small chairs. A table stood on the *kylym* spread between two rooms. A grey morning filled the entire room. That *kylym* isn't his, and all the rest was not his, all except these rolls of fame in the corner. No, the fame was also not his, the fame that didn't belong to his name, the fame of the name that was not his own. He felt the urge to check on one of the paintings rolled face up. He pushed his bare feet down and stepped around the table toward the paintings. His paunch hung under his nightshirt like a nice-sized piece of meat. He was tiptoeing to keep his feet from getting cold when the door between the rooms opened. There stood Marta, his companion of twenty years, a very sensible forty-year-old woman wearing a robe and a pince-nez. He quickly ran back to bed in his underpants on rickety feet.

"Would you like your coffee in bed, professor?" she asked, walking the length of the room toward the window. He wanted to say "I didn't know," but didn't because of the hoarseness in his throat. He coughed and said, "I didn't know if I should wake you last night." "I will bring your coffee now," she said, and added, "It must have been something important." "Yes, I needed a thermometer" he answered. When she pulled back the curtains the contours of the table and the walls came into focus. "Twice last night I thought you weren't asleep." He hid his hands under the covers.

"You are feverish, professor, I see it in your eyes." He wiped his forehead. "How did it go yesterday? I'll be right back," she said and left the room, holding her robe closed with her hand on her stomach. He scanned the traces of sweat on his palm, then sat up and looked out the window. Reddish sand covered the paths in the park. He saw the pine trees, fence, and a chestnut tree shooting off white blossoms. "Your coffee," Marta came in carrying a tray. "I don't want coffee today," he said. "You need a beverage to start your day." He bent his knees under the covers. "So how did it go yesterday?" she asked again. "I was waiting for you but fell asleep." She put the tray on his knees. "Don't spill it," she warned. She sounded like a mother who asks her

son about his exam. He wanted to respond but had already started to eat and merely nodded. "You are running a fever, professor," she observed. She pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "I am not a professor," he said. While he chewed, she put her palm on his forehead. "I am going to start from the beginning," he finally chewed out his words.

She got up and walked across the room, straight and tall like a spear. "Couldn't you come to some agreement with him?" she asked. "No, I couldn't. I offered him money, but that's not the point." He took a bite of his sandwich. "I came to the conclusion that my visit was unnecessary." "I don't understand what is it you want to start from scratch," she mused. He swallowed and continued, "I want a fresh start. I'm not a professor anymore. I am Pavlo Karpyha, the one in parentheses. Don't be cross, Marta. Pavlo Paliy has no value for me any more. God sent me the other Pavlo Paliy." "But you can't hide, you are Pavlo Paliy. What a disgrace," she said putting the thermometer in the basket. "Don't worry, Marta, it won't be a disgrace." "It will be a terrible disgrace," she said, and left the room.

"It won't be a disgrace," he said. He took another bite of his sandwich and placed the tray on the table, saying "There will be no disgrace, come here, Marta." "I still have a lot to do," he said. "Your hair is grey," she answered from her room. He picked up his coffee and said, "I simply don't need a name." "But you do. A man cannot exist without a name these days, professor," she called in return. "I am not a professor, I am Pavlo Karpyha," he protested. "You are Pavlo Paliy," she insisted. He put his coffee down on the tray. "A name is not important. Please, come here, Marta. We are going to start again somewhere far away, where nobody knows us," he said. "I got a letter from Canada." He sucked air in so hard that his nostrils closed shut for a moment. A slight odor of shoe polish wafted from Marta's room.

"Where is this letter," she asked, standing in the doorway. She was still fastening her dress and wasn't wearing her pince-nez. "When did you get it?" "The day before yesterday," he answered, and picked up his cup. "Really? Why didn't you mention it?" "I completely forgot about it," he took a sip of coffee, "What I told you earlier isn't so impossible. The letter is addressed to me, Pavlo Karpyha." She looked at him, straightening her dress. "Are you strong enough to begin again?" she asked. "Yes, I am," he answered and closed his eyes. "I'm not a professor anymore; I'm Pavlo Karpyha from Lubni. You need to get used to it. Today I wonder why it hasn't occurred to me that my name, Pavlo Karpyha, should not be obscured. The Karpyha line is very old, it goes back centuries. "I don't like this idea of yours," she said. "It's a good idea, Marta. And you shouldn't think for a moment that you aren't attractive in that dark brown dress. I think that you are very, very pretty, and I want to paint your portrait." "That's enough. Drink your coffee and don't talk nonsense," she said.

She blushed for the first time, maybe for the last time, or maybe she didn't blush at all, and it just looked that way, in that instant when she glanced at him finishing his coffee and smiled. He was her chatty one, with his hair

white as cotton and his somewhat peasant eyes that reminded her of her late father's. He was her friend, her ingenious pupil, her very own tubby gentleman.

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