

Evhenia  
KONONENKO

Three Worlds

*Translated by Michael M. Naydan with M.T. Sharif*

Grandma hadn't been able to get up for several years. Toward evening when mother helped her with her essential toilet, the boy would move to the hallway where there was an exquisite wide windowsill. He brought his books and a bench from the kitchen and sat down to write, the windowsill serving as his desk. "Let the boy do his work." The neighbors of the communal apartment put their fingers to their lips. Behind him the kitchen buzzed with three stoves and the only sink; doors slammed in the endless hallways.

These sounds gradually became necessary for reflection. He made the most stunning discoveries of youth at his windowsill. He read his favorite books and completed his school assignments conscientiously. He was glad to get away from the irregularly shaped room with its low window that looked out onto a steep, inner courtyard. From the hallway an astonishing panorama of the city opened up to him. As a little boy he had crawled with his friends onto the roofs of buildings. But nowhere else were the colors of spring or fall so intense and nowhere else did the cupolas of the churches shine so brightly. Nowhere else did the Dnieper so mysteriously commingle with the blood of this young Kievan, who in this city had only a weary mother, a luckless grandmother, both incapable of relating to him, and an irregularly shaped room in the former apartment of a lawyer with either a Jewish or German surname, a trace of which remained with the letter "Ъ" on the entrance door. The lawyer, who had died long ago, used to wander along the hallways of his old residence, and a well-trained ear could still differentiate between the echo of his steps and the shuffling and tapping of the current residents.

Sometimes Marianna came. Her mother would shout from behind the doors: "Leave the boy alone! Let him do his lessons!" But Marianna would sit down at the edge of the windowsill and enthusiastically examine his books. She herself never did any homework; she ate standing up in the kitchen next to the stove and ambled around in her school uniform till evening. Marianna was very pretty — graceful, slim, with a pure, sweet face, and sensuous, golden hair that she never braided. He loved to stare at Marianna when she wasn't looking at him. "Pretty, very pretty, this is essential in a communal kitchen!" he thought. He wasn't in love with Marianna and was proud of this fact. He didn't end up hooked by her sumptuous pony tails and her tiny youthful breasts. Marianna simply contributed a sense of comfort to

him while he sat at his desk. Sometimes, when he didn't have others to speak to, he taught Marianna the suppositions he formulated at his perch. "Do you understand, there are three realms in the human world?"

Every classification shuts out the wide world, he knew this even then, but all the same, this vertical division of the world of people inexplicably engaged him.

"The Third World... The geography teacher used to tell us about it. Or was it the history teacher?"

"No, this isn't it at all... This isn't what I'm speaking about... Three worlds... The lower world, the middle one, and there, above, the higher. All of us live in the second, middle world. We stand in lines, or, even if we don't... We drive in overflowing traffic... We do something for our daily bread. Sometimes we go to visit people with biscuit cake."

"Uncle Yura yesterday brought us 'Kiev' cakes! We were lucky! Nearly without standing in line! They were selling them on the corner of Zhytomyr Street. Can you imagine?"

"Even if we get 'Kiev' cake, all the same, this is the middle world, not the higher. Below us is the lower world... There, people sleep on dirty mattresses in cellars. They can't play cards. There are prisons, investigators, isolation cells, the routine of being struck on the mouth with blows, black eyes..."

He grew silent, because he remembered that uncle Yura had recently given a black eye to Marianna's mother.

"All of this, of course, occurs in the middle world, but there, below, you understand, all this is a hundred times more horrible. The laws are terrible and people aren't even people!"

Someone once placed a letter in their mail box which read something like the following: "You scum, put five hundred rubles under the stone or else I'll tear out your uterus." His frightened mother had run to the policeman.

"That's not for you, that's for Valka from apartment 30," the officer reassured her.

This incident proved to him the coexistence of the horrifying lower world with the gray and monotonic middle one, but he was engaged most of all by the world of normal people.

"There also exists a third, higher realm where Shakespeare is

read! In the original! Without a dictionary! People gather to read poetry and listen to music, not to get drunk, even though they may have a glass of whiskey. Do you understand? One can grasp something about existence...”

“What’s there to understand? When there’s money, everything’s good. There’ll be books and music. Black marketeers offered my mother 120 rubles for Bulgakov\*. Where can you get that kind of money? That’s the cost of a polyester suit! Do you know how much they ask for a nice record player?”

Marianna’s answers didn’t irritate him. What could you expect from a hopeless inhabitant of the middle world? Unpleasant conditions could thrust this kind of person into the lower world, but no stroke of luck would ever allow her to poke through the upper boundary, beyond which eternity began.

Most of all he loved to sit at the desk windowsill at the end of spring, when he no longer had to drag extension cords across the long hallway for the lamp. In the lilac sky the first star flared. The current of the Dnieper turned blue, like the veins in your throat. And when the fruit trees blossomed, the view was maddening. He would open the window, without fearing the furious drafts of the large uncomfortable apartment, and sometimes pale pink petals flew in. Then it seemed to him, just a bit farther, and he’d escape the nets of the middle world into the third realm. There would be someone for him to speak to, and a place to meditate alone. Eternal books could be read, and eternal questions debated. Next to him would sit a pretty girl, like Marianna and just as intelligent and as good as she was.

“Young man, why don’t you do your homework in my room? I have a nice writing desk, I almost never sit at it.”

He shuddered. For the first time someone had addressed him with the formal “you.” The speaker was Mykola Markianovych, owner of the room with the fake leather door. The room had once served as the lawyer’s study and was so large that Mykola Markianovych and his deceased wife managed to parcel out a small vestibule for themselves and, by decree of the regional council, to install their own bathroom. As a result Mykola Markianovych didn’t use the communal facilities. This meant he didn’t take part in cleaning them either, which roused anger in the communal kitchen. Nevertheless, Mykola Markianovych had to boil his tea pot or ineptly

cook his kasha on a stove he shared with the throaty Zinka. In the kitchen they called Mykola Markianovych “professor,” although, as it became clear, he had never achieved that rank, even though he taught at the university for many years.

“Professor, your kasha’s boiled over again!” Zinka screamed with particular rapture. This was the janitress’s triumph. If she saw his mother throwing out the trash in the wrong can, Zinka would hiss, “And a school teacher, no less!”

Mykola Markianovych submissively wiped off the stove with the dish cloth, burning his hands on the hot grating.

“Professor, you’ve taken the wrong rag! How many times have we told you — the rag for the stove is hanging on a nail, and this one’s for the dishes!” Zinka refused to calm down.

“Why don’t you use my room, young man?” Mykola Markianovych repeated.

And so he ended up behind the fake leather doors. Mother didn’t allow him to bother the old man very often, but now and then he would sit at Mykola Markianovych’s desk, in front of a bronze set with an ink well, next to a lamp, whose stand was the figure of a beautiful woman. Mykola Markianovych sat in the armchair with a book or a newspaper; sometimes they talked... Stacks of books rose to the ceiling of the ancient room. The paintings and photographs on the wall reminded the boy of an altar. He felt like praying in that room, even though there weren’t any icons in it.

But sometimes Mykola Markianovych didn’t hear the knocks at his door. It would have been awkward to knock louder, so instead the boy would return to his window, where he could think, read and write. And Marianna didn’t even get in the way.

“Well, how is it? Is it beautiful in the professor’s place?”

“Very. Do you understand, Marianna, that it’s the third realm. That highest one. Right here, quite near us.”

“Your professor spent some time in a prison camp. Did you know that?”

He knew. He knew that the worlds intertwined, and that in the abysses of the lower world could be found people from the higher one. In his copybook he noted: “Belonging to the higher realm makes it possible to remain a human being in the horrifying lower world. But how do you make your way to the third realm from the bloodless

quagmire of gray, everyday life?”

“I know, Marianna. By the way, he studied Farsi there. He was in prison with a Middle East specialist.”

“What’s Farsi? Are they some kind of Kung-Fu exercise?”

“Perhaps they are exercises in the struggle for life...”

When he entered the university, they were allocated an apartment in Raiduzhny Heights\*. Grandma died around that time.

“You wouldn’t have been given a three-room apartment anyway,” the inspector of the housing office placated them.

Life continued but in a different way. Only rarely did he drop by Mykola Markianovych’s. When he did, he also revisited his window-sill, gazed out over Kiev and caught up on the latest news of the communal apartment. Marianna’s mother had divorced uncle Yura so they could take over the irregularly shaped room. Marianna was preparing to marry a huge blockhead who felt her up in the hallway, without even noticing how beautiful she was.

After several years the time came for him to get married. When he returned from his honeymoon trip, he found out that Mykola Markianovych had died. That was it. The old people were leaving. New ones weren’t replacing them. He would never be for anyone what Mykola Markianovych was for him. He would never point out to anyone the path to the third realm. Never again would he drop by his previous residence, or look out at the city through that window. Lord, how sad he felt! His sadness hurt his young wife. And her pain hurt him.

Life went on, and life’s paths led him no longer to Mykola Markianovych’s lavish apartment. A little boy was born. He had to rush home from work. But, one fine spring day, when leaves took flight, he resolved to take his one and a half year old son to see his old building. This was an adventurous idea. He changed the child’s first diaper by the metro exit, a second diaper on Volodymyr’s Hill. This was the last one his wife had given him. The child, unaccustomed to long trips, began to whine. The dazed father nervously calculated whether he had enough money to take a taxi home.

He took the child into his arms and made it to the promised site. He sat down on a bench, letting the boy walk around, and lit up a cigarette. He raised his head and found Mykola Markianovych’s

French window. In the corner there was a single window that marked his former desk.

“Hello! Is this your kid?” A corpulent, ugly woman sat down next to him. “You don’t recognize me? I had to have a third kid to snatch up the professor’s apartment. Now there are just two families there. Did you hear me? They sent Zinka to the salt mines. The Khomenkos took over her rooms. We’re dividing up the kitchen. We’ll just take the front, and they’ll take the back. We’ll have a separate apartment, just like you. We’ll be living in the third realm! I remember how you studied your lessons in the hallway. Three worlds... I remember! We covered that window with boards, to make shelves for canned goods. Come in for a visit!”

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*Notes:*

The letter “Ъ” (the hard sign in the Russian language) indicates that the name plate was a pre-revolutionary one. The letter was removed from the end of words as part of orthographic reforms adopted after the 1917 revolution.

Bulgakov — Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita*, which was banned in the Soviet Union until the mid-1960’s

Raiduzhny Heights — *Raiduzhnyi* means “rainbow.”