

Chapter 1

I'm writing this in dark-blue ink, sitting by the wall where my shadow moves. It crawls like the hand on a numberless sundial, keeping track of time that only I can follow. My days are scheduled right down to the hour, to the very minute, and yet I'm not in a hurry. The shadow changes ever so slowly, gradually blurring and fading toward the fringes.

The treatments have just been completed, and Sara has left my room. That's not her real name; she borrowed it from some porn star. All our nurses have such names by choice, taken from forgotten DVDs left behind in patients' chambers. This is their favorite game; there's also Esther, Laura, Veronica. None of them has had sex with me yet.

Sara is usually cheerful and giggly. Just today I told her a joke about a parrot, and she laughed so hard she almost cried. She has olive skin, full lips, and a pink tongue. And she has breast implants that she's really proud of. They are large and hard – at least that's how they seem. Her body probably promises more than it can give.

Nevertheless, I like Sara, though not as much as Veronica. Veronica was born in Rio; her narrow hips remind me of samba; her gaze pierces deep inside. She has knees that emanate immodesty. And she has long, thin, strong fingers... I imagine them to be very skillful. I like to fix my eyes on her with a squint, but her look is omniscient – it is impossible to confuse Veronica. I think she is overly cold toward me.

She doesn't use perfume, and sometimes I can detect her natural scent. It is very faint, almost imperceptible, but it penetrates as deeply as her gaze. Then it seems all the objects in the room smell of her – and the sheets, and even my clothing. And I regret I'm no longer that young – I could spend hours in dreamy masturbation, scanning the air with my sensitive nostrils. But to do that now would be somewhat awkward.

Anyway, Esther arouses me even more than Veronica, perhaps because she is "bi," as Sara once confided to me. Esther moves like a panther and looks like an expensive whore. Her nipples burn like hot coals, even through her starched white blouse. Her hair shimmers purple black, and her skin is tender like silk, though it looks more like velvet. The moment she comes close I seethe with the desire to touch her. I've done so a few times and even apparently got somewhere – she once slapped me in response. Surely it was a game, but I doubt we'll go much further. Here's why: now I like Laura from Santo Domingo best of all.

Yesterday, on her evening rounds, she was really hot. Yes, her legs are not so slender and her butt looks too large and heavy, but her whole body radiates passion, a natural lust too difficult to conceal. Cats scatter when they hear her walking, and gawkers turn their heads to stare. Even paralytics and defunct oldsters get horny when they feel her vibes – and I'm no paralytic or by any means too old. She leaned over me as if to arrange the sheet, flashed her huge brown eyes, licked her lips – and I knew I would have her now or very soon. I ran the

palm of my hand up her thigh to the narrow moist strip of her thong. And I'm not even sure she was wearing a thong!

Then she teased me with her slim bare foot, gazing at my face with a come-hither look. Too bad she had to leave so quickly – but this is just the beginning, no doubt!

I whispered after her, “Where are you going?” when she reached the door.

“Wait,” I murmured. “Now I won’t be able to fall asleep.”

“Yes, you will,” Laura assured me. “I gave you a good sedative.” Then she added, “Think of me!” And these words held a lot of promise.

I did think about her, and then, in my dream I copulated wildly with a busty *mulata*. She smelled like Laura – the rainforest, the sea, the sweetest of sour smokes. Likely, from now on I’ll need this mix like a junkie.

It’s two days until Laura’s next shift. Two long days of eager anticipation. I now have another goal for myself.

Thinking about this, I face the window and view the distant mountains. The sun has moved down to the side. Turning my head, I see my shadow again; it’s the only thing marring the perfectly white wall. Soon the sun will shift farther to the south, and the wall will regain pure whiteness, announcing lunchtime.

Then the mountains will change as their colors fade, the contours sharpen and stand out against the sky. The peaks will loom jagged; indifferent and cold. A guard will bring me the newspapers, and I will leaf through them vacantly, scanning the pictures and trying not to get newsprint on my fingers.

Then I’ll do the usual set: some *hatha* poses, stretching my back and leg muscles; a tantra workout, keeping my balance with my eyes closed; and finally, *bandha yama* drills so my erection would be harder than a steel spring. I’ll think about Laura – already calling her “Lora” in the northern style. She’ll like that; it may bring us closer. Or, perhaps, we’ll even choose a new name for her.

The peaks will finally grow indistinct in the twilight. Everything will fall silent as dusk turns to night. I’ll draw the curtains, leaving only a crack so the fresh air from the mountains filters into the room. Then I’ll have dinner, drink a half bottle of wine, and begin to compose another letter to Semmant...

Listen! My confinement might last years and years, but I’ll give it to you straight: I am not afraid and have nothing to hide. Let them think I’ve lost my mind, but I know, if anyone has – it’s not me! I’ll tell them something else too: don’t count on it. I’ll say, “Semmant!” It will be like a shout, and yet the softest, the most quiet of words. Only the quietest words work for confessions – confessions of hatred, and even more so, of love.

The white walls surround me for a reason, but I will not crack up here, and he – he is my protector, my healer. Yes, at times I may lose control, and it would seem I’ve exhausted my strength, but I won’t succumb – as I can’t betray him, cannot leave him alone. Neither Esther nor Laura can help me in this – and not Sara, not Veronica. Their minds are

somewhere else, I'm on my own, and I'm not that mighty. Take these notes – they reveal my weakness. But it's still no excuse to abandon them.

I don't look for excuses – even here, behind these walls, despite the treatments and the constant spying. Oh, I know, very attentive eyes are keeping watch over my writing. I feel them with my back, my skin, and even with my shadow on the wall. But I don't care; I pay them no heed. I am not posturing or putting on an act. I could simply discard the paper – ball it up, chuck it aside. Even burn it – or I could keep quiet and just stare out at the mountains, which are impervious to any words. But I can't do it; I have to write, even though it's so unbearably difficult to get through. It's so hard to be heard by others who are lost in broad daylight, who are blinded by their inability to see, who suffocate in their own waste. They are all arrogant and infinitely naïve. And me – I'm not so different. I, too, am blind and naïve, and arrogant in my own way. That's why we speak the same language, saying almost the same thing.

So, day in and day out, watchful eyes see a familiar picture. The papers are scattered across my table; it's night, darkness, dead silence. I write to him; then I get distracted and write to all of you. My fingers grow numb; at times I shiver with cold. Then the opposite: I'm drenched in sweat – and compose with delirious haste, or sometimes a mere word per hour.

It takes enormous effort, though the story is flawless, its plot coherent and logical. I drew it up myself, right up to the final scene; I started with nothing and ended up with more than I could possibly handle. It's a great experience, no matter what; it would be foolish to keep it to myself. You may object and laugh behind my back, but I have an answer: I'll say, "Semmant!" This may raise anger, provoke envy. But time will pass, and you'll see that I'm right.

He will not become anybody's hero – he's not a hero at all. He is not a conqueror, though he knows no fear. You may be tempted to laugh at him as well – yes, his naivety surpasses mine, and yet oddly enough he is wise and discreet. No one's mockery can change that.

It's not easy to become his friend. And who would dream of competing with him, feeling overconfident for no reason? Who would dare to take his place? That would be reckless and dangerous. His armor shines with a genuine gleam and yet it cannot save him from any arrow. Yes, one should not expect too much from his shield. And then, I realize, it's more important for everyone to know: what lies beneath that shield?

I could give a concise answer, but I'll put it differently: shed your own layers one by one. Shed your clothing, your masks. Wash off the makeup. Take a long, hard look at what you see – can you make sense of it? Do this alone, since it's embarrassing, indeed. The covers have been thrown on the floor, and the labels have even been cut out of them. All that remains is to look deeper inside, brushing away small details, with or without regret. The trick is to get down to what's most vital, even if it's concealed and hidden, locked away. One may grow tired and miserable along the way; and once there, may be left speechless. The

unexpected may be found – some strange, unfamiliar things. Who will be able to name them properly? I guess no one, as is always the case. Everybody will be looking around: where is the hint, the subtlest of signs? And then again I'll say, "Semmant."

Listen – I admit my idea was different. I had a less ambitious plan. Everything was supposed to turn out simpler. Some may even blame me: I was following the footsteps of evil. And yes, I relied on the blindness of the crowd. I indulged others' greed, but my intentions were pure; they were good. At least I was unselfish; perhaps that vindicates me somehow, though I seek no vindication whatsoever.

I don't seek it because I feel no guilt; I'm even proud of myself, pleased. I might have done many things wrong, but now I know where I erred. I recognize the most horrible delusion, which could confound anybody.

Others can learn it too, if they have the patience to hear me out. Which is not likely. But I continue.

Because the only thing that matters is to keep moving forward.

Chapter 2

I am Bogdan Bogdanov, a genius in cybernetics, an expert in everything expressed in digits. Almost nobody knows my name, but those who do look back on that fact gladly – or, at least, so they pretend. I also remember all of them; that's just the way my memory works. Though I admit that it – my memory – is rather sparsely populated.

My childhood was checkered with events, but they left no visible traces, and even the earliest of them got seriously messed up. I was born in a small village in the Balkans, but my family soon started moving around a lot with a depressing urgency to get away from police and creditors. As a result, another place was listed in my documents: some nondescript city with an unpronounceable name – I never did learn how to spell it. My aura of Indigo was identified by an ugly old woman from Ziar when I turned twelve. She stank horribly, but I'm grateful to her: after her discovery, a lot fell into place.

My life as an adult was quite eventful as well. I went from job to job as I traversed all of Europe. I was poor, then earned a decent living; got filthy rich, then ended up with nothing. I've been living in Madrid for three years now – through circumstances beyond my control. This city is alien to me; I don't like it at all. It tolerates me though; or at least it did, until it started to take revenge. I had a penthouse in its best barrio, drank *sidra* with its taxi drivers, breathed its foul air, and even made friends with a real countess. And now – now I'm in the nut house.

Of course, they call it something else. A hospital for VIPs, that's its official title. But you can't argue with the rumors, as everybody knows: the VIPs who land here are pretty far gone, most of them irreversibly so. That is not so unusual and, frankly, doesn't even imply anything bad.

To tell the truth, my perceived importance wouldn't allow me to belong there. Had it not been for Countess Anna Pilar María Cortez de Vega, I should have ended up in a dirty clinic for poor psychos instead of in this domain of comfort. Thanks to her, I'm now in the company of aristocrats. *Señores* and *señoras* – all from distinguished families, as a rule – languishing in adjoining chambers. Some cracked up over money, others over broken hearts. Then there are a few who went mad over love and money at the same time. But that's just what I imagine when I'm alone with my thoughts. Most likely their problems are born of degenerate minds that are the product of hereditary decline. The gene pool has become too small; the ocean of diversity has shriveled to the size of a puddle. This is the fate of the noble elite, unwilling to compromise.

As for my gene spectrum, everything is just fine. Degeneracy poses no threat to my offspring – if I ever have any. And, as far as my mind is concerned, I live by a different set of rules – and I do not accept compromises either. I act as if they don't exist. This has absolutely nothing to do with nobility.

My father came from a line of cobblers and had reeked of goat glue since he was a child, while my mother, quite the opposite, grew up all prissy in a banker's family that lost everything when the pound sterling crashed. My parents got along well, despite their different backgrounds, united by a contempt for their hapless ancestors who gave them no chance at all. At least my mother never blamed her husband for the countless adversities we met – the troubles that befell us with the persistence of capricious fate. And as far as I could tell, he was gentler with her than was the custom in the places we lived. He probably regarded her more highly than was the norm. Which, to be fair, is really to his credit.

Still, my father's way of thinking was always quite straightforward. I would even say it was predictably crude, albeit quite sly and shrewd. He never mastered his profession, but then, it didn't interest him in the least. He was a vagabond by nature and, on top of that, locked horns with the authorities all the time. So we wandered from village to village for many years; we had no permanent home and didn't stay anywhere for very long. The neighbors never liked us, and the local police instantly sensed the opportunity for easy pickings, but that was just an illusion – my father always managed to leave them empty-handed. We traveled all over the Balkan Mountains, through the Rhodopes, the Pindus, the Dolomites, then reached the Danube and went all the way to Budapest. That was where we settled down for a while. My father started to sell pottery, and my mother ran into a long-lost cousin who taught her how to read tarot cards. Our life took on some semblance of stability, and I got twin brothers and a sister who were one year apart.

I finally enrolled in school there – two years behind schedule, which served me well. Reading, writing, and doing math were things I had already learned; besides that, I was bigger than my classmates, so they were afraid to pick on me, whether they had a reason to or not. All they could do was eject me from their circles since I was so obviously foreign to them in every sense. I took it all in stride, without even realizing why. The teachers were just as hostile, but the coursework came to me effortlessly. As for the animosity, I had learned to ignore it since my earliest days. My family life wasn't the best either. My younger siblings only irritated me with their squealing; I didn't have any feelings of tenderness for them. This greatly upset my mother, and my dad complained that I wasn't worth anything. And I probably never would be, he added, judging by my aimless look and inability to get along with anyone.

There was only one person who understood me well: a girl four years my senior, an exotic performer in a traveling circus we met up with near Miskolc after we had to flee Budapest in a hurry. She had a large mouth and a searching glance that belied her childish features. She could curl her ears up and straighten them out on command, and the only friend she had until I came along was a toy frog that blew soap bubbles. Her smile taught me to dream, and her hands taught me something too, though she was completely innocent – just desperately and endlessly kind. When she danced in the arena I knew her heart pounded there, under the circus floor, under the heels and the ponies' hooves, under all the sets and

sawdust shavings. Nobody wanted to see her wings, but I could make out their transparent shadow. I could even hear them flutter – and I felt sorry for her, and she came to me in full-color dreams. Later, we crossed paths more than once: the circus headed north like we had, making its way toward Warsaw, but it lingered for a long while near Tatry and then returned there again and again, as if enchanted by the beauty of the place and the scent of mountain pines on the air.

By then, we had settled in Liptov, where my father got involved in improving the local medicinal waters with the aid of common table salt. He also made friends with the circus troupe, especially with a magician named Simon, as he saw big potential in that line of work. It was there that I turned twelve and the old woman from Ziar peered into my very soul with her dusky eyes. She looked at me in shock and for a long time whispered to my mother, who absently shuffled her cards. I overheard her say, “Are you sure this is your child? Do you know the father? Maybe the devil impregnated you?”

Neither of them could figure it out and they were rattled, indeed; but my mother told my father everything nonetheless. Knowing no better confidant, he grabbed a bottle of *slivovitz* and went to see Simon, supposedly to learn a silver coin trick.

The circus was touring the thermal pools then, entertaining fat cats with ailing livers. My girl did not dance there anymore; she’d suddenly grown up and run off with some Romanian officer. I bore her no ill will and wished her the best, for somehow I knew: wings are just not meant to last. As for Simon, he remained true to his top hat with the stars and his tattered black tailcoat. His trade implied a certain erudition, and he knew about the phenomenon of Indigo. Once he heard about me, his ears pricked up. My father took notice, and for the first time he began to think I might finally be of some use. After draining the entire bottle, they decided to make me a whiz kid in the circus. Simon convinced my father that the talent for doing quick calculations, if I was found to possess the ability, was all the rage now and could bring in good money. I think that was his best trick ever.

My dad, now that he was in better spirits, started asking around about how to turn me into a whiz kid as fast as possible. To his misfortune, he crossed paths with an official from Mikulas who was crafty and quick, and who reported my existence to the very top. That set the bureaucratic gears in motion. Highly important people came to see me, and soon my fate was decided. They made my father sign the papers by reminding him of a few of his sins, and a month later I found myself on a ferry crossing the English Channel en route to a special boarding school that had been established by the Crown with funding from one of its less innocuous ministries.

The waves danced below. I was nauseated and understood nothing, only sensing I would never see my parents, my brothers, or my sister again. That’s pretty much how it turned out, which doesn’t bother me at all. I’d just like to know how far that official went in his career – whether he was given a high position, a secretary, or a government car.

That, you could say, was where my childhood ended. I'm not complaining; it usually doesn't last much longer anyway. The mountains and forested hills were gone from my life and replaced with plains covered in yellowish-gray sand, low, heavy clouds, and the sea breeze.

"Go catch yourself a fish, throw it to a pelican. Don't you cry for it, what's the point? Let your cheeks be salty only from the ocean spray." I repeated this nursery rhyme to myself, but it wasn't me who made it up. I don't remember who did, and it's not important. It was one of us from the island, at any rate. One of us from the School.

Chapter 3

At that time, unusual children were the subject of much talk. Their eyes, overly intense and vivid, were mentioned quite often – as was their skill in sensing each other from a distance, and their own language, made up of interjections, which they did not shed until early adolescence. Myths circulated, and one of them was so promising that some governments decided to invest quite a bit of money in us. Of course, this was no act of charity: these people were pure pragmatists. The idea was to create a special breed, a regiment of obedient geniuses who would later be able to pay society back in full. The millions being spent were supposed to reap benefits a hundred-fold. Someone, I guess, genuinely believed that.

They brought us from everywhere, and, to their credit, put a lot of effort into us. The project was massive and not intended to be done half way. The director of the facility met each child personally at the main entrance. I can still recall his narrow face and his troubled, ailing look. And I remember something else: everyone always called him simply the Director. Proper names were just not fitting, for him or for the School.

“Hello,” he said to me quietly. “We will try to make you happy.”

For some reason, it was hard to put much faith in his words.

I didn’t believe him, but I was wrong; they all tried as best as they could. We were treated with cautious dread, as if we were overly complicated playthings. They crammed a mass of knowledge into our brains, and we were eager to learn. But playing in each youngster’s head was his own music, the beating of his own pulse, which was, in fact, encouraged. On the wall of the dining common there was even a sign that read: *Do not be like everybody else!* And there was another one in the assembly hall, confronting us with the question: *Do you have a mission?* In slightly smaller script, as if in clarification, was one more: *What do you do best?*

These were the rules that defined our lives at the School. Clearly, they drilled their way into us forever. I really don’t know what clever tactics were supposed to turn us into team players. Any way you slice it, that idea sounds impractical and just plain stupid. However, top brass saw it differently. They had their own plan, and they conducted training exercises and special games with us. The shrinks worked in turns and called us in for short sessions every few days. We regarded this as a necessary evil.

Sometimes, the Director spoke before us, in person. At those meetings, he was a different man – the morose, self-consumed functionary would be transfigured into a veritable prophet. He would talk in impassioned detail about our extraordinary future. About how they were going to form us into an organized force, something like a Foreign Legion, to induce bloodless intellectual blitzkriegs. He drew diagrams and schematics linked with arcs and arrows to show how they were all connected. He inscribed small squares to indicate the headquarters, reservists, support center, and mobilized groups. United and structured, we

would be capable of anything. Even the most complex problems would bend to our will in the shortest time!

He truly burned with the thought of it; it was obvious this project meant a lot to him. We could see he knew how to dream, and that worked in his favor. Of course, his goal was unobtainable. But one should never demand too much from a goal.

They probably should have hung something else in the dining hall, but even that would not have made much difference. When we grew up it became clear: every one of us was insubordinate beyond measure. The Foreign Legion of Indigo would issue forth as a band of loners who could not take orders. On top of that, some of us – children with overly vivid eyes – fell into a depression that was anything but childish, despite our young, happy-go-lucky years. And we weren't the least bit grateful – not to society or anybody else.

One way or another, the School was ingrained in our very being. That squat, gray building just outside of Brighton, with the leaden waves rolling in beside it, forever carved into my mind. Wide corridors, staircases with banisters polished to a blinding sheen. The enormous rectangular courtyard, the athletic field, the covered natatorium... Sports were taken seriously there, as is typical for Brits. I wasn't bad at boxing, and was a fast swimmer. Later, I developed a passion for lawn tennis. I would disappear for hours on the court, and after two years I had no equal. Sometimes I even outplayed the instructor – a brawny German with a very strong serve.

Sleeping quarters occupied the first floor, with the men on one side, the women on the other. The invisible boundary was guarded by Paul, who was half-blind. It required no effort whatsoever to take advantage of him, which we did, even though our amusements then were still very innocent.

All five years I lived in the corner room with the same three roommates. We got on well, although for some reason we never became friends. To tell the truth, we didn't have much to do with each other. There weren't many conversations, either – instead, each of the four of us found comfort in the mutual silence. That's why, year after year, and without discussing it at all, we continued to live together.

I only got a little closer to one of them: Thomas, from Ötztal. It was Thomas in particular who would later play an important role. As for the School, he and I talked sometimes about sports or the mountain slopes. I taught him the topspin backhand, which he had difficulty mastering. He, in turn, educated me on the proper techniques for freeride and slalom. Brighton had neither mountains nor snow, but somehow I knew: there were skis in my future. And I trained diligently by adapting a skateboard to the purpose.

On the upper floor were the classrooms where we were taught everything by teachers who, like us, had been handpicked with great precision. Their task was clear: to push us from the shallow end of the pool into the depths. Not just to get our feet wet, but to throw us in head first, without holding back because of our age or the difficulty of the subject.

There were a lot of science classes, all mixed together. Our heads were filled with a hodgepodge of knowledge for us to sort out on our own. Now I know: many of those theories could not be grasped, no matter how you might try – unless you knew the complex mathematics with which they did not risk torturing us. But we tried anyway in some kind of excited frenzy. We even at times startled the teachers, who were not easily surprised.

By my sixteenth year, I had learned in minute detail many things that ended up being useless to me. I knew what caused killer waves and how eukaryotic ribosomes functioned, what leptons and baryons were – as well as metabolism and quark-gluon plasma. I could explain to anyone the Pareto principle and the structure of the Mayan language, the stages of subduction of the earth's crust, the endless contradiction in the law of double negation. With Bradley, our astrophysicist, I discussed the properties of neutron stars and even pulsars competently enough. I could calculate the gas density of red giants in distant galaxies. In my notebook, I drew light cones and gravity-distorted Riemann spheres. Every scientific subject occupied a spot in our schedules; there was no clemency, no indulgence. Each teacher thought his discipline was the most important. This is also burned in my memory, just like their faces, their voices. Their passionate, restless devotion.

Some of them made friends with us. On occasion we would go to the shore together and wander over the pebbles crunching beneath our feet, sit on the stones sharpened by the sea. They would invite us to their homes, offer us afternoon tea with tasteless British cakes. They were lonely – each in his own way. They wanted to share with someone, and we met that need like no one else. They relaxed with us; some of them a bit too much. It was as if we drew out their hidden nature, opened up things concealed within. All the same, they seemed like eccentrics to us, nothing more. It was still too early to think of the fearful pressure of the social system.

The administration at the School encouraged these sorts of meetings. It could be they hoped the teachers would replace our families, since many of us had not been home since we were eleven or twelve. On the whole, we respected them – certainly more than our own parents, who had been left behind in countries far and wide. We liked to soak in their experience, even if it was a bit skewed, as if refracted through a tricky lens. And, still, we wanted very much never to become like them.

Nevertheless, we would often imitate them in something – children copying their elders. I, for example, made a badge for myself with an acacia branch on it, just like Bradley had. He told us, “For the Masons, this branch is a symbol of powerful, secret knowledge.” And my mate Thomas, under the gentle tutelage of Montgomery the biochemist, got into Daoism for just under a year. This met a pressing need, since he had been tormented by a fear of death since early childhood. Besides, he, as a Tyrolean, was impressed by the immortal sages removing themselves to the mountains away from earthly vanity.

Both he and Montgomery liked to quote Lao-Tzu, “Mountains, enshrouded in mist: this is the embodiment of harmony that arises from the union of Yin and Yang.” The mantra

was naïve, but no one laughed at them. “In my search for the immortal I traversed the five mountains of the land. Their remoteness did not frighten me.” This saying hung above Thomas’s bed. Then the inscription disappeared. And Montgomery was thrown out of the School for drunkenness.

Some of the teachers acted outwardly like rebels – either on the seashore or at home sipping weak tea. They said things – obvious and self-evident, in our eyes – that would have shocked the ideologues of modern Europe. Democracy was attacked from all positions; this seemed bold to them, but, I must admit, their militant ardor had not the slightest effect on us. The fate of the world was the furthest thing from our mind: our own worlds were far more gripping. That’s probably why we felt closest to Greg McCain, a brutal cynic. His notion of boundless egotism recalled something important from the signs on the walls.

“When so much is expected of you, it’s not worth trying to please everyone. That’s foolish and unnecessary.”

“When you expect of yourself even more, you have to seize the most from every day you live.”

“As if tomorrow will be swallowed up in fire, flood, and plague. As if no broad will ever spread her legs for you again. Don’t deny yourself pleasure, dogma be damned. You’re already walking on a razor’s edge as it is...”

He talked like that profusely, puffing on his pipe and laughing in an all-knowing way. And we saw he was not one to be easily confused. “Pleasure” was the watchword in his heated sermons. Everything else served merely as a backdrop. For his own part, he denied himself nothing. This was an instructive example. At least his words were not at odds with his deeds.

The issue of pleasure was worse for us, and then – then everything got scrambled. Lightning struck; all at once, something snapped in three pupils’ brains. In the course of a week, one after the other, some horrible incidents occurred. The shrinks sounded the alarm, obviously desperate to show how necessary they were. Information was leaked to the press, and that was the beginning of the end. The matter was chewed over for quite a while; we were harassed by photographers, reporters, and frigid activists from child protective services. Though by then, there was little about us that resembled children.

Later, the Director gathered us and announced that the founders of the School were washing their hands of it all. They had an excellent reason, true; it was hard to blame them. “But we,” the Director nodded toward a group of dismal people from the administration, “we have decided to fight. We want to finish what we started, whether anybody likes it or not.”

His speech failed to make an impression, though I now understand the considerable risk they were taking. According to the rumors, it was a desperate battle, but nobody doubted the outcome. Problems began with the financing, and programs shut down, teachers deserted. Soon, the School was forced to concede defeat.

This left one question: what to do with us? It took quite a while for them to decide. For several months we lived in timeless limbo – those were strange days. Lessons were reduced, mainly limited to sporting activities. Paul, the almost sightless guard, was removed from the residential area; because of economics, moral concerns were brushed away. It was as if we were suddenly unfettered, and romances sprang up one after another. The first woman in my life also appeared at that time. For a long while, this was my happiest and bitterest memory. I didn't know what was happening to me, since I did not dare call it love. Again, we grew up in a place without a hint of love. Perhaps this was the single thing that bound us forever.

Then everything was over – somewhat suddenly. The School was turned into a special institute for the deaf. As for us, we were taken one by one by leading universities, where we went and forgot easily – both the School and, curiously enough, each other.

The real world absorbed us and began to change, rebuild, and fit us in. My doctor believes this was my first step toward madness. I know he's not right, though the procedure has been painful for some of us to endure. Yet, the world is not as strong as it seems; to us, looking from the outside, this was obvious. It's a shame this wasn't obvious to the doctor: he might have been more careful in his diagnosis. And of course, more agile in his words, especially regarding my “problem,” as he calls it.

One time I said to him, “We, Indigo children, don't hold on to offenses. We don't have time for it, and, besides, it's boring, insignificant, and unimportant. There's only one thing we take seriously: what do we do best? If we already know what our genuine calling is, we're zealous to do it, and damn the rest. If we still don't know, our quest is to find out as soon as possible. By tirelessly trying one thing after another.”

The doctor liked that. He wrinkled his face contentedly and marked down something in his little sketchpad, hiding the notes from me with the palm of his hand. I decided to help him, to explain in more detail. I told him about the mockery, the lack of money, the misunderstanding – all this inflicts wounds, pretty severely, in fact. But severely here is only according to average nobodies, only by the measurements of those who truly are not capable enough. As for us, we cannot be hurt by such nonsense. We may give in to despondency or despair, but it's just a momentary weakness. Our true problems only lie where we express ourselves fully. In what we really do best.

I laid all this out for him quite coherently, but he made no attempt to write it down – not a word. He even waved it away, as if he didn't want to spoil the picture he had already put together. Most likely he was afraid of contradictions, of shaky ground. It seems to me he sometimes doesn't follow through. He doesn't want to strain himself – maybe he's just too lazy. It's funny to see: he thinks I'm a sociopath. Of course, that's the easiest way; but to me it's clear: my “problem” lies somewhere else. Some might claim it's in naïveté and stubbornness, and they wouldn't be too far off. Naïveté is at the forefront, that's true, but I'll say it again: I was selfless and only wanted the best – judge me now for that. Cast as many

stones at me as you like; I admit, I chose hastily, but the choice was logical and simple. An idea as a panacea, a plan complex in nature but comprehensible with the slightest effort – it's not easy to think up, believe me!

Never despise anyone, our teachers told us again and again. Never despise the weak, the incompetent, the dim-witted. That is unworthy of those who are fortunate, they said; though fortunate depends on who's looking. No matter what, we learned to bear no malice and not to hold others in contempt. You cannot go against training from early childhood; only for some – the ones who didn't learn the rules – ire still overflows from their souls. That's why they're fruitless – and formless, according to our standards; that is, there's nothing to distinguish them from all the rest.

But I'm not talking about them. I now mean the weak, the mediocre; I mean those who require little, who are easy to satisfy. Their needs are simple: some kind of fear to repress animal instincts, and a sweet lie – hope – so that the meaninglessness of life does not hurl them into despair every day. There is, as a rule, no lack of fear; the issue is always the sweet lie. And this is where I come in: here is your sweetest of lies. Only this time it's no lie. It's the truth.

Really, what could be more desirable? What could be more understandable than the ghost of freedom – from creditors and loans, from boring jobs and low wages, from the full-court press of the world that leans in with all its might and squeezes hard until it wrings out your juices? How symbolic it is to restrain the world's power using its most insatiable essence, looking straight into the most evident of its various faces. How right and deserved this is: to establish the means of salvation from its malicious sins! To overturn the greed of the ruthless despots, their aggressive hubris, their desire to waylay another, to stomp him down, crush him, obliterate him...

So, it's not surprising that I am now in an insane asylum. All the same, I'm not offended. I can always take solace in the simplest of facts: there is no point in my being ashamed of what's happened to me. Just like Semmant has no reason to be ashamed of what he's done. Or of what I did for him. Or of what the two of us didn't get a chance to do.

And yes, I'll tell you, finally, what he is. He's a robot, nothing more – a program installed in an iron heart. But his own heart is by no means made of iron – so there's no cause to look down on him. There's no cause to resort to contempt, even if your teachers didn't reproach you for that. In the end, every individual is the way the installed program makes him. And if nothing is installed – well, then, it's unfortunate, very bad luck.

My Semmant is the most sophisticated program, nearly indistinguishable from a human being, especially if you work with him a bit. Because you need to work on a person to awaken what is human in him. Otherwise, everyone is just – I'll say it nicely – such senseless cattle!

But in Semmant, at least, the program was flawless. Almost flawless. Almost.