

HE IS REAL

A novel



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I want to say thanks to the editors and translators.

Let's start!

A, Rofit

*There are only two ways to live your
life. One is as though nothing is
a miracle. The other is as though
everything is a miracle.*

Albert Einstein

Chapter 1



2010 Russia. Krasnoyarsk Region

From 8.20 to noon.

Siberian summer morning on the bank of the river in those lands where I grew up and had a carefree time, was especially sunny that day. Sitting on the grass, wet with dew, pressing my knees to my chest and staring into the distance, I was saying goodbye in my mind's eye. Painfully familiar, frozen in the beauty of nature, the view seemed to be new and exciting. I was watching the slow stream course, along the steep banks framed with endless coniferous forest, rocking in the wind. It went beyond the horizon, and the tops

of centuries-old trees mingled, forming the green boundary line, separating the earth from the sky.

I took a deep breath of the cool, refreshingly clean air, which was saturated with pine needles and slight savor of the swamp dampness that came from the reeds growing under the cliffs. At night they turned into an improvised scene for frogs and grasshoppers, and these small representatives of the fauna sang in sync so loudly and annoyingly that I wanted to get my father's gun from the utility room and shoot them all. I wish had known how to shoot a gun.

— Well, Anna, are you ready to go? — My mom asked timidly, standing a little bit away from me and waiting. She distracted me from contemplating the beauty of nature, disrupting the order of the farewell.

My mother is kind to everyone, too kind. She has lived most of her life, caring more often of her errant husband and children than about herself. She had two children, me and my elder brother. By the time of my departure he had already managed to start a family for the second time.

By the way, about my brother. When I looked at him, the thought involuntarily sneaked into my head that everything should be the other way around: I wish we could change places — and here it is, the ideal of a brother and sister. Brother weak and sentimenta — qualities more appropriate for women, — unlike me, who was driven by madness, “relative devil-may-care attitude” (it shouldn't be confused with indifference), the eternal desire to make my case in the fight against injustice and gain my point, which is usually characteristic of men with a strong will power. Though, these traits of my character manifested themselves

only when I entered the adolescence, when the familiar world turned upside down. Having grown up, I could afford to make fun of my brother, forgetting that he was older and — as it should be — smarter. He did not take offense and was not impertinent to me, he did not know how to be impudent.

Mom took my hand, and we headed to the sixth model of “Zhiguli” in white, parked near the crooked lath fence.

My father was waiting for us in the car, thoroughly checking the contents of the glove compartment, trying to see if he had forgotten anything. Without a doubt, he could be called “the one who is fancy to forget the most needed things.” What clouds he had his head in, was known only to himself, and it was from him that I unconsciously adopted this quality.

That morning, I looked back at the green forests spread out across the river, swept my eyes over the old wooden house full of memories, with blue shutters and a pointed tiled roof and got into the car.

In about six hours we would have reached the international airport of Krasnoyarsk, where the passenger Boeing would take me thousands of kilometers away from my routine life.

I know that long journeys lie heavy on my mom. She was sitting in the front seat and on the way to the airport she was thinking how to get back to her blossoming garden as quickly as possible.

“Have I put enough fertilizer in the dill bed?” She was wondering in her thoughts. And later she recalled about carrots and radishes as well; their weeding then had to be post-

poned.

Yes, I knew her thoughts, as well as the thoughts of many other people who I spoke to. Soon I will tell you how I did it.

When the sunset notified her about the completion of work in the vegetable garden, she went to the little garden with the bushes of currant, honeysuckle, gooseberries, sea buckthorns (it seems to me that there grew even some perennial shrubs I don't remember exactly), and gathering part of the crop in a large iron mug, under the rays of the Siberian sunset, she enjoyed the taste of her own home-grown berries.

With unabashed pride my father not only thought, but also spoke about his night take, falling silent from time to time, picturing himself — what he would be like tomorrow — again, having his head in the clouds, known only for him.

— Have you seen what a huge sturgeon I caught at night? — he asked, driving into the highway, passing the town exit, then pressed the gas pedal harder, and the streets of my home town were left behind, remaining in memory for many years. — I managed to salt it up and got it to the fridge, so that it will be ready for tomorrow, and your mom and I will taste it. And there are no sturgeons of this kind in Israel.

He laughed so openly and merrily that time, but, as in most cases, my mother and I did not uphold his laughter, because, actually, he did not say anything funny. He just likes to laugh about some reason and without any (more often without), humming songs and laugh, to say silly toasts

and laugh. He comments on the news presenter and laughs. He watches how the smash-hit characters beat one another up to the blood, which is scattered in droplets into all the unthinkable sides — and definitely he will laugh. He tells the same jokes again and again — it is already clear what he is going to do

It surprised me every time when, suddenly, he began to argue with seriousness that was not characteristic of him and could give me a good life advice. But the image of a silly merry fellow was much more likable for him. After all, everyone without exception loved him in this role. Innocent merry fellow, how can you dislike a man like that.

And what about me? Seeing me off to another country, my parents knew about my intention to stay there for a long time, and perhaps forever, in a place that they had no idea about, but still — garden beds and fishing, here they are, their immediate concerns. I did not look back as for my choice, I just did not expect that my closest people would accept it in such a calm way, as if they didn't need me at all. At the airport, they will say a few parting words, since I am still their child, and then they will hurry back to the old house on the bank of the river, to the place where they have been for so many years, to their native, familiar and beloved place. They have lived the most part of their lives, did their duty, my father has already planted more than one tree, and my mother gave birth to and raised more than one child. It no longer matters if they have done it together or not. The main thing is that everything is done as it should be, according to generally accepted standards.

Leaving for the country of three religions and four seas

at the other end of the world, so far from our Siberian backwater, I set my heart on starting from scratch. From the beginning and with full confidence that everything will work out in the best way, because I will not be alone.

Why did my choice fall on Israel? This state opened its borders to all the descendants of the Jews, giving them the opportunity to build it and develop it, providing initial financial aid. Jumping ahead a bit, I should say that the majority of indigenous Israelis do not even know about such a region of Russia as Siberia, many times surpassing their country in area. They generally believe that Russia is supposedly situated in a different world, separated by the border, behind which lie poverty, devastation, eternal frost and girls of incredible beauty, that sometimes can be found in the streets of their native country, causing associations with mercenary girls. That is their stereotype.

Coming back to the story about my past life, I would like to mention a period when there was no understanding of myself as a person with a firm life philosophy.

The period when I considered myself inferior compared to others, drowning in a pile of my own complexes. The surrounding seemed gray and dull. The weather in Siberia most of the days of the year is really nasty, especially in fall and spring, when trees are losing their leaves or, on the contrary, when new buds swell on their branches. Dirty muddy streams flow along the curved fractures of asphalt roads, flooding the sidewalks. The sky becomes leaden and severe. People, the majority of them, walk with sullen faces, angrily, jumping over and walking around puddles. Only young girls wearing bright fashionable clothes diluted the

whole picture with colors. They were like colored spots on a gray canvas. These young beauties were always cheerful, they were walking arm in arm with their friends or boyfriends. How much I wanted to be one of them at that time. But I was too unattractive, indecisive and miserable.

I was stuck in the routine monotonous pace of life, when I was in high school no one paid any attention to me, I walked along the corridors of secondary school and ballet school, like a ghost, I was there just because I had to. Unalterably, bell-to-bell. I also studied poorly and was not interested in anything, after some time I gave up my ballet classes, although I managed to hold on for seven years.

It seems to me, that I should stop here, there's no point in focusing upon this good-for-nothing. She fits right in a forgotten and once-existed place.

In the small room of the parent log house, which was considered to be mine, there was a wooden wardrobe with full-length mirror doors. On one of the usual boring days, before going to bed, I (sometimes I will give this letter "I" kind of detached and characteristic meaning), so, "Anna the inconspicuous" put on her pyjamas, sewn by her mother in the due hour. Lingering around the wardrobe, she began to stare intently at her reflection in the mirror, seeing there a humble girl with long skinny arms and legs, a flat body, a shapeless shock of dark hair and flapping eyelashes framing green eyes. There was nothing remarkable in this young person, a sort of faceless "gray mouse".

— Now what? Aren't you tired of walking around the streets and mixing with the gray mass of people. Try to make them turn around to look at you, smile at the sight

of you, — I distinctly heard an unfamiliar voice, of a young guy. Having turned quickly, I looked around my room. It was empty, not even a fly or a mosquito could be seen, and they usually fly into the open window. But I felt a sharp cold — it ran down my back, transpired small goosebumps along the spine and then spread all over the body. I froze in a daze.

— Believe me, it is not so difficult, — he continued speaking; the voice was already coming from behind. Turning my head slightly, I glanced toward the sound, although it was expected that I would not find anyone there. — Do not be afraid of me, I am here to help you. — I backed away, and with horror fell on the bed. — We have a lot of fun and interesting days ahead. You will realize who you are. You can become whoever you want and what you want, the main thing is that you must trust me.

That's how I heard it for the first time. In a weird way my fear disappeared quickly and most of the night was spent talking to a new acquaintance, and in remaining hours, when I fell asleep, he came to my dream in the form of a young dark-haired boy, we were riding white horses together. He easily managed to win my confidence and get on my right side. Subsequently, I appropriately called him — “an invisible friend.”

In a couple of months, I was walking down the street with my head held high, my blond-colored hair streamed in the breeze, even the girls paid attention to the harmony of my long legs in tight jeans, and strangers said compliments. It gave me undisguised pleasure to catch the admiring glances of men. Now they turned around to look at me.

At one of the school discos, “Anna the confident” was dancing with the cutest school leaver who looked like a handsome actor Freddie Prince Jr., an idol of early noughties teenagers. And the school leaver had no idea that the girl, that was dancing at the moment next to him and clinging to him in a slow dance is the one who had been passing by — “Anna the gray mouse”, so he did not notice her before.

In fact, I was indifferent to this guy, like all the others who were after him. It was interesting to live in a new way. I was just following the instructions of my “invisible friend,” who miraculously managed to awaken my confidence. He told a lot of interesting things, gave advice. Thanks to him, I was able to become myself, he managed to open that heavy door, where my real emotions were waiting in the wings. “Anna the impressed” was able to enjoy a previously unknown world, boundless and barren of obstacles.

Together with my “invisible friend” every summer morning I went for a run, swept through green fields through the cold wind, feeling free and being able to run without stopping, enjoying the freshness of the forest. Sometimes in the evenings we took my father’s boat, sailed to the middle of the river (I paddled, of course, because my “invisible friend” was all so intangible, bodiless and un-touchable with the nature of things) and dived from the bow. I imagined him diving into the water with me, as if he was a dark-haired boy. He scared me by telling about a river monster, lurking at the bottom of the river. There were monsters waiting for the right moment to grab your legs and drag you into their dark underwater dominions. We called

him Buddy. “Anna the brave” dived into the depths of the river hoping of finding him, but she found no one except fish in the murky, greenish water.

Sometimes my “invisible friend” and I were sitting motionless on the boat. Lifting the oars, we peered at the surrounding high, gentle banks, shrouded in the evening glow of the sun. We imagined that terrible creatures lived in the shady thickets of the forest in the wilds.

— Listen and you will hear how they are walking there, — my “invisible friend” used to tell me.

Fascinated by the fabulous performance, “Anna the no longer skeptic,” was listening attentively, and when suddenly the crackling of dry branches could be heard from the depths of the forest, and the birds took off above the tree-tops and tore their throats with the cries, she involuntarily shuddered with fear. And each time she waited for the appearance of at least one of these creatures, with curiosity, imagining how it would come to the shore, but no one came out.

Yes, and what is more: we loved to swim to the island. It was there, behind a sharp curve of the river, all it took was to swim a few meters. Artificially created, to be honest, I don’t know why and by whom, but it had a place to be. On its sandy shore, in the shadow of tall willow bushes, we made figures of sand and imagined that we were surrounded by the sea, the endless salty sea, playing in waves. I quickly mastered the craft of modeling, taking special delight in creating figures of mermaids, because I could stick them breasts of any size I wanted, make them perfectly round. I admit, I myself wanted to have the one like those. A few

years later, in Israel, a famous plastic surgeon would provide me with “such” breasts.

In addition to doing all sorts of nonsense with my “invisible friend,” there were others related to real male characters that were close to me in age. I went on dates, meeting several guys at the same time, started new acquaintances time after time, and I was amused by this performance. I was having a great time. But as such, I did not feel love for anyone. None of the boyfriends was even a shadow of a man who, as I thought, would be the one, and would be special, it was in him that I began to feel an increasing need. He definitely cannot be found in a small town or forests adjacent to it. But why should I be looking for him? — Why can’t he find me himself? Anyway, it was worth it to leave the place for many reasons. So let’s see what happens.

Chapter 2

2016. Israel. Bat-Yam^[1]

*“My mom always said life was like
a box of chocolates. you never know
what you’re gonna get.”*

The movie Forest Gump 1994

I was having a dream.

*Sitting on a cloud, I was talking to the one who had
changed me once. His human appearance was blurred, his face
was not visible.*

*— I’ve got a present for you, — he says in a low, gruff
voice.*

*— What is it? — I peer into his blurred image with interest.
He is no longer a boy, he grew up with me, but the man he be-
came did not reveal himself to me.*

*— This is what you have been eager to have for so long,
what you have been dreaming about — He puts sends his palm
into the weightless translucent flesh of the cloud and, raising
a piece of it, he stretches it to towards me.*

*— That’s all nonsense. — I shift my glance at a translu-
cent, smoky lump, barely visible to the eye, fit in the open
palms of the “invisible friend.”*

— *Let's see what you will say in seven days.*

— *Seven days? I'm already getting interested. But, do you know what?*

— *What?*

— *In fact, people do not sit on the clouds, and it is unlikely that your gift will be real. — I stretch my arms to him, then he passes this cloudy lump to me, which, falling down, gets into my hands. It is heavy and weighty, despite its smoky transparency.*

— *Then, it turns out, that you don't exist either, because you cannot sit on a cloud either.*

“Nonsense, a new crazy joke from my “invisible friend” I thought, having woken up, and quickly got out of bed and was not being fussed about the Delphian dream, but I should have been. The hands of the clock, hanging on the white wall, froze, indicating the beginning of the tenth hour.

— Great, I've almost overslept, — I said out loud and went to the shower at a brisk walk.

This May evening was surprisingly cool for the Israeli climate. I did not want to bother my head about the choice of attire. After several sleepless nights fatigue prevented me from thinking rationally. From the back of the chair, standing alone in the corner of the bedroom, I took a short black dress that was on me yesterday, or maybe... well, not maybe, but also the day before yesterday. Having put it on, I felt the smell of male perfume and cigarette smoke absorbed into the fabric.

My mobile phone, which was next to the pillow, made its presence felt at a due time.

— Anna, I'm downstairs, come out, — the weary voice of the driver came.

— All right.

I threw the phone into a large bag filled with the things I needed for work, threw it on my shoulder, sighed and said to myself: I can handle it, fatigue is just a signal sent by my tired brain, and my body is stronger than I think.

It does not matter, whether this statement is true or not, the main thing is that it makes sense to exist, and if you believe in it, it will certainly be so. And I believed in it.

Having approached the car where the driver was waiting for me, I opened the door, threw the bag onto the back seat, then took the front seat and asked him:

— Where are we going?

— Not far from here, just 15 minutes, — he answered, moving the car from a standstill.

The driver's name is Dani (by the way, he's a rather attractive young guy). He was eager to get to the heights in the service in the Israel Defense Forces. At the moment, his meager salary was enough only for basic necessities, so he had to take a side job at night.

In Israel, the rhythm of life is crazy, especially in the center, where people have several jobs, forgetting about sleep and rest. They are constantly going somewhere, creating traffic jams, being in a hurry and nervous. Shabbat, according to the Jews faith, was supposed to slow down this endless madness, to give at least one day of peace and quiet during the week, but the power of money turned out to be stronger than faith, and most of those living here worked even on Sabbath.

I will say this: political affairs in the state of the country, is not my main concern. Moreover I don't watch TV or read newspapers, but I would like to quickly note one important thing (I won't go too deeply into it), shedding light on one of the prominent features of the Israeli state. Hostilities in the south of the country, momentarily subsiding so that everyone could see how good life can be in peace, but just for a moment. Perhaps this is why the Israelis are trying to live by the following principle: Rejoice every day and reconcile with the fact that the ancient problems will not disappear for many centuries to come. As for me, it is hard to get used to such circumstances. When rockets are soaring over your head, you become a believer, you turn to God himself, shuddered from the increasing howl of a siren. The siren sound is the most frightening sound I have ever heard, everything gets quiet after the howl, dead silence, there's not a rustle to be heard, not a word, not a hint of movement. A few seconds, and then the whistle of approaching rockets is heard, after that goes the roar, some of them fall and explode, sometimes in the yard of the neighboring high-rise building, and some were shoot down by the opposing batteries of the Iron Dome system^[2].

Everything worked out — it means that you can continue doing your routine, that is, until the next siren goes off, there is no one who can predict with any accuracy when it will happen, but it will, without a doubt.

— Am I working alone today? — I asked Dani.

— Yes, but do not worry, I've talked to them on the phone. Two quite steady guys. In any case, I will come up with you, I will give them the necessary instructions, -he

encouraged me.

In a small room of a cheap hotel, with the windows draped with thick beige curtains and the bed occupying most of the space of the room, there was a pair of representatives of Jewish youth. The guys, a little over twenty, were similar to each other, thin, with barely noticeable light stubble on their cheekbones and the same hairstyles in the latest fashion, when the hair is cut short at the temples, and the remaining long strands are combed together at the back of the head. They were wearing similar T-shirts of the same brand, differing only in color: one in white, and the other in blue. On a low coffee table, pulled up to the bed, there was a plate, and a rolled-up bill and credit card on it, next to this flat plate there was a bottle of whiskey.

— Will you pour me a drink? — I addressed one of the guys, pointing by a look at the bottle after Dani had left the room.

— Of course, said the one in the white T-shirt, and reached for a stack of plastic cups.

We spoke Hebrew, “Anna the capable” mastered the language after several months of her stay in the country, not to say a word about the level of knowledge after less than six years.

— Are you just dancing? — asked the guy wearing a blue T-shirt. Smiling nicely, he patted the bed with his palm, just on the place next to him where I was supposed to sit.

I left my bag on the table and had a seat next to him, he handed me a one-dollar bill twisted into a tube. I shook my head slightly, showing my refusal, mentally grinning at the

significance of the one-dollar bill. What is the general sense of sniffing, using a piece of paper that equals one dollar, it is the same as drinking champagne for a thousand Euro on the side of the road from disposable cups and chasing it down with a half sour pickle.

— Yes, only dancing, — I answered confidently and calmly.

— And for a special fee? — asked the same one, wearing a blue T-shirt, then he bent over the table and, putting one end of the rolled bill in his nostril, inhaled a line of powder that waited patiently for him on the plate.

— For a special fee, you can call a prostitute. — I considered sex for money to be too low, but dancing, even if half-naked, was quite acceptable in my opinion. And this work did not dill purely in dancing, but in the ability to create a certain mood for the client.

My companion rubbed his nose and then raised his head and asked:

— I see, my name is Idan, and yours?

— Karina. Having voiced my stage name, I took the iced whiskey from the guy wearing a white T-shirt, and took a small sip.

— You are good! — said Idan, grinning in a blissful smile, he did not ask any more questions. — It's my brother's birthday, dance for him.

— With pleasure, — I expressed my consent in a soft voice full of good nature.

When I was going to Israel, there wasn't even a hint in my mind that I would strip for money. But now everything is so conventional, to nauseating extremes. Yes, I eas-

ily managed to turn my appearance into a source of income. It would seem that all you need is to take off your dress, smile believably, dance sexually, congratulate the birthday boy on the birthday, bring variety to a lonely man's night, or leave the groom pleasant memories of a stag party. But everything is not so easy. One after another, sleepless nights spent under the influence of alcohol exhaust and undermine the psyche. And the clients are finishing it off. Not like these cute young boys. Today I was lucky. They are the kind of personalities that it's a wonder the earth allows them to simply walk on him. And paradoxically, their life is full of luck, they are given many opportunities, and that is why the money flows like water into their hands. Devilish perverts and drug addicts, most of whom are also the main levers in the management of society.

A politician who is expected to bring about some changes (the one so zealously proclaiming clever slogans), a writer whose stupefied inspiration leads to new deep thoughts, a popular singer calling to actions in his songs lyrics, the judge decides who must be isolated, and who must be granted freedom, all of them keep their secrets and secretly lend themselves to vices. For themselves, they think (entrusting me their secrets) that one should not be shy with girls like me. With us chippies, the "representatives of the elite" become who they really are, because we do not limit their behavior, it is limited only by the size of the tip. And such customers have plenty of cash.

When I was only starting my career in this, as it turned out, so necessary service sector, I didn't assume that I would face similar circumstances. And after a few years,

I learned not to pay much attention to them. I thought only about money, “fast money”. My “invisible friend” didn’t particularly like this variant of earning money, but still he supported me, that’s why he is a friend.

He knew all that was required, about each interlocutor — their thoughts, background, weaknesses, had subtle knowledge of their inner world. Should my attractive appearance, genius to acting be added here — and we have everything that is needed in order to win the interest of the right person and get what you want. That was the success of conquering their hearts. The ability to speak properly, to see the interlocutor’s through, pulling the strings of his soul. With ease, he became a slave puppet in the skilful hands of a puppeteer. It’s a good job, where I could use my friend’s and my own talents with good benefit.

The clients were satisfied and I played my part, acting the joy of the time spent with them. When I was leaving, I thanked them for the tip and returned to the car to the driver.

— Are we going anywhere else? — I took an interest having lit a cigarette. The familiar taste of tobacco smoke filled my lungs.

— Yes, there is an order in Herzelia.^[3]

— Great.

Blowing smoke through the half-open window, I immediately caught the association caused by just one mention of this city. Money.

Dani typed the address on the navigator screen and started off, driving the car towards Herzelia.

Well, six years spent in the Holy Land, destroyed my

teenage dreams completely. They scattered like annoying frogs together with grasshoppers in my imagination, which nagged me with their songs during Siberian summer nights, torn to pieces with the birdshot of a double-barreled shotgun. Their pitiful remains drowned in the river and never surfaced. Shot after shot, one by one, and after six years there was no one left. Silence... You get used to this silent period and already forget about the fact that they even once existed.

Three years ago I met a good and really honest guy (and the honesty of people was tested with the abilities of my “invisible friend”) called Alexey, aka Alex. Accidental acquaintance in a shopping center cafe. At first, he seemed to be suitable for the role of a person who you can live quite a wonderful life with. A handsome, attractive, caring, understanding and self-confident intelligent programmer. But a few months was enough to realize my mistakes. Not in the It's not that he was not at all so caring and good. There was something different. It began to seem to me that I did not live my own life and that what was happening around did not correspond to the reality in which I should be. Although my “invisible friend” claimed that my choice was right, for the first time doubts about the correctness of his words visited me.

Alex and I had lived together for almost a year. But it often seemed to me that there should have been another guy in his place. The one that seemed to be close by was so close, I could just extend my arm, but at the same time he was so far away. So far that it does not make sense to measure the distance in kilometers. I did not see him, but this

circumstance did not mean that he actually did not exist.

Alex happened to notice my conversations “with myself” (in the bathroom or in the kitchen, for example, when I forgot about his presence in the apartment), I think it is clear that in fact the conversations were held not with myself, but with my “invisible friend”. Or the way I look thoughtfully for a long time through the objects around me, and in most cases I prefer time spent alone. In fact, of course, not alone.

Alex responded to my words about the splitting up, in my understanding, not in the way that a sane person would do. He took me to a psychotherapist. The doctor explained that the “invisible friend” is a product of my own brain, none other than a character created by my sick imagination. Like, I had been lonely, so I made it up.

I was sitting opposite to the doctor who was in his fifties and it did not come up in mind in any way why I had to tell him everything. My “invisible friend” insisted on doing that, but did not explain the reason for it.

“Just do as I say. It is necessary ”- It was his only argument.

I was telling the doctor about the events related to my friend. My friend was telling me about the doctor. The doctor was listening to me and making comments asking about my friend. My friend laughed at the doctor, the doctor mentally laughed at me, having already decided on the diagnosis at the back of his mind. I laughed at the doctor and at how quickly came to a medical conclusion, which, of course, was wrong.

Of course, I felt a keen desire to pin on the doctor,

knowing his hidden thoughts and desires, but did not do it on the request of my “invisible friend”. I was aware that every day, going to work, the doctor passed by his neighbor’s door with the memory of the hours spent in Nina’s bed and waiting for the next suitable occasion to repeat everything. Or about a bank account secretly opened abroad. He transfers money to the account for a trip to Ukraine under the excuse of a seminar. And the search for young and beautiful, flesh peddlers who, for his money, would agree to fulfill all his whims, was the real motive of the fictional business trip.

Well, actually, he is a good doctor, in terms of attitude to his professional activities. He has helped lots of mentally ill people for many years of his practice. Although I actually was not a mental patient.

The doctor prescribed antidepressants and tranquilizers (the latter, according to him, were supposed to block hearing voices), at first I was not even going to take them. But Alex thoughtfully insisted on treatment. And my “invisible friend” strangely supported him.

I could not realize the moment when the world lost its colors, and the days got filled with the routine of life slowly dragging on one by one. My “invisible friend” was not present in them and sometimes it seemed that he had never existed at all.

Dani and I went up to the twenty-seventh and last floor of a recently built hotel in Herzliya. The door to the room was opened by a man of about forty, of medium height and build. Immediately my attention was attracted by his dilated pupils, his eyes quickly flapping with eyelashes, and the way

he was gurning gnashing his teeth when they got onto each other. All of these suggested a large amount of cocaine taken by him. Under the influence of the drug, clients often lose track of time and money, and this was good for me tonight, as at many previous nights.

The driver came in with me, received the hourly payment from the client in cash and several hundred shekels extra for him personally and left, leaving us alone with the customer. The hotel room was spacious, with a great design, two separate bedrooms, a balcony and a large kitchen area. Through the huge, polished hall windows, the view of the city was fascinating with thousands of lights.

The client sat on the sofa, opened the drawer of the table and took out a fat wad of money. He laid it on the tabletop, as if it were in the order of things, and glanced at me, trying to concentrate his gaze, intoxicated with drugs, for a second.

Having learned to hide real emotions long ago, “Anna the charming” went to the bathroom with a calm look in order to change clothes, well, or to be more precise, to get undressed.

“Have you figured out how to lure all the money out of him?” A familiar voice spoke in the spacious bathroom — low and gruff voice, but despite this, it was so warm and soft, which sometimes whispered all sorts of nonsense to me before going to bed. It was he — my “invisible friend.”

And how did he come back? Well, everything’s easy, I wanted him to come back, I was missing him madly, he was an integral part of my life, therefore, even in a semi-

conscious state, I couldn't imagine life without him. Being under the influence of psychotropic drugs, I understood really little, but the only thing that brought me back to life was echoes of joyful moments associated with my "invisible friend." Memories made their way through the brain, clouded by medication, getting brighter until I was completely seized by them.

After quitting the pills, the familiar world began to acquire its former meaning. Day after day, it was manifesting itself with new power, in the long-forgotten voices of birds, the noise of sea waves, the wind blowing that made my hair sway and tickle my shoulders, in the beauty of the shining stars, in the freshness of the morning air, as if penetrating into every cell of my body. Feelings and emotions were returning. The delight of freshly baked buns, the pleasant weight of a stuffed stomach after eating a large piece of the most delicious chocolate cake. I got to love chocolate cake again, hot, with the bitter taste and aroma of coffee beans. It all fit together with small grooves back into a three-dimensional picture of the understanding of a real person living a full life. Everything fell right into place. And then I wanted to run away, no matter where, just to get away from the feeling of being lost, and with full confidence that I would not stay in a hopeless situation with my "invisible friend", I did it immediately.

Of course, I nursed a grievance against him. After all, it was he who pushed me to taking pills, thereby breaking our connection. He made me live the wrong life, not the life I wanted. He refused from our friendship. And did not even explain the real motives of his act.

— Could you float a couple of ideas? Do you know how to get the whole wad, to the last shekel? — I put the bag on the sink and took off my dress.

“You know it yourself.”

— I will not have sex with him. This is one of the principles, there is a line which I won't ever cross, the first time will be followed by the second, after the second the third — and that's it, you can label me as a prostitute. — Hanging a dress on the door of the shower cabin, I pulled the open toe heels on a high transparent platform out of the bag and changed my shoes.

“Actually, I did not even hint at this. Do what you are good at. In any case, I will notice something, he is a strange and closed type, and moreover he smells excellent powder that thoroughly turns the brain off, there might remain only disco lights in his head. Distract him so that he would not touch cocaine for at least half an hour.”

— I have no strength for all these games today. I can't get into the characters. I can't pretend being a “naive idiot” who fell in love with him at first sight, and admires his invented virtues. The main thing will always be what is between his legs. Or to pretend to be a poor orphan with a one-year-old baby. Well, or what else do we have in stock?

“Listen, you don't have to do it anymore. What is the problem to quit everything? We were going to move to Thailand or the Maldives, to buy a house by the sea, to live an unhurried pace and not to steam my beam. I would teach you how to play poker. We would certainly not be low in pocket. What are you waiting for?”

— I don't fully understand it myself. — I said with sad-

ness, looking at the mirror reflection of my slim naked body. I worked thoroughly at its curves. Jogging along the coast, if not after waking up, then before going to bed, when it was the weekend, had already become a habit. I straightened my hair, spreading out long blond wavy strands, my eyes were tired, but still radiated cold arrogance. And in general, by the age of twenty-four, my face got a clearer shape. As if a sculptor has sharpened its lines, creating proportional angles, sharpening my cheekbones and chin. My expressive eyes, emphasized by a dark pencil, in the eyeliner under the lower eyelids looked so bright green and shiny that customers kept asking if they were not the lenses.

— And what should I do with all this? — I slightly smiled at my reflection, a corner of my lip rose, a dimple appeared on my cheek, and, not waiting for the answer, I added affirmatively: — We'll continue making money.

Wearing expensive black lace lingerie, kept for special occasions, I went out to the client in the hall, he was waiting for me, sitting on a white leather sofa and had already managed to take off his T-shirt, exposing his chest, which was overgrown with dark curls. The desired wad of money (just a trophy, no strings attached) was still on the table. “Anna the charming” came up to the “cash holder” and, smiling seductively, began to move in the dance, trying to bewitch him with her touches. She was dancing, gradually making her dance more and more immodest.

The client, in turn, was periodically pulling out a bill for a bill from the wad, and stuffed them under the openwork fabric of my panties, sometimes throwing notes into the air. They were falling on me, gently sliding over my body and

barely audible fell to the floor. At the moment, when customers give good tips, you begin to experience temporary joy and love your work, forgetting about fatigue. At the same time, it seems that the hour allotted for us expires very quickly, although everything goes at a single flat pace, and on a habit that has been worked out to automatism.

Money works wonders in a mystical way, with each of us.

The driver's words, that there were no more orders, and we were returning, pleased me, giving a feeling of relief. I relaxed, falling into the soft seat of the car, covered my unbearably heavy eyelids for several seconds, imagined me falling into a comfortable bed and getting to sleep. After all, over this night I managed to earn a lot of shekels (the only thing which Anna still took interest in — those pieces of paper soaked in indelible ink), and all things considered, the night, did not go in vain.

“Have you still reached out to his baked mind?” I began a mental dialogue with my “invisible friend.”

“Yeah, but I didn't inspire anything to him. He had a knack for it, but used it in very rare cases and with caution. Most often he enabled me to manipulate people having resorted to his prompts. This night I didn't have a desire to bother with all these manipulations, but nevertheless, the client had easily given me the wad of cash. Therefore, I assumed that my friend contributed to what had happened. — He just loved your sexually explicit dances and palmsing. And then he thought about ordering two more Ethiopian prostitutes. Wound up.”

What could be said to that? Sometimes it can be so simple. I refrained from commenting, ending our conversation, looked at the handsome Dani, tired and frowning, he was trying to concentrate on the night road. Respectable and responsible Dani, was sweating his guts out for the sake of his dream, there he has his own family, which he provides adequately. Moreover, this guy will make a caring father and a faithful husband.

He will continue military service and in four years, having received the rank of a senior sergeant, will die from the terrorist bullet, on the border with the Gaza Strip. Of course, I did not know about this at that time. And now, after several years, I consider that the well-known statement — the best are taken first — is true, and there is nothing more than the tricks of the “representatives of another world”. (Long ago we found a common language with the one, of the kind, who was assigned to the role of my mentor, I’ll tell you about others, but first things first).

Once in my empty rented apartment, I threw the bag on the floor in the hallway, took off my dress and threw it over the bag. I took a bottle of whiskey from the refrigerator, filled a shot glass up to the brim, drank and then swallowed a sleeping pill.

Standing under the shower, in a hurry, rubbing my body with a soapy washcloth, strongly pressing it to the skin, I was imagining that I was washing away all the traces from unknown hands, of those strangers who touched me today. I was imagining that the beloved warm big palms were sliding over my clean bare skin... and some time later, when I was in bed, waiting for the effect of the sleeping pill I had

taken, once again a cold feeling of anguish swept over me, striking a person who is falling asleep and waking up many times alone. There has always been somebody to fill up the leisure, but making away with loneliness is completely different.

“Everything will be fine,” whispered the quiet voice of my “invisible friend.”

The effect of the pill taken a few minutes ago was not long in coming, my body relaxed, and my thoughts began to fade. I suddenly fell into a common dream (I rarely had them under the pills), saw my mother holding a cup filled with berries on her lap, she was saying how she missed me, with the sad expression fixed on her face, and stroked the sharp knuckles of my fingers with her free hand. Her eyes were so sad that it seemed that tears would flow from them, and then she dissolved, together with the dream that was going away.

My bedroom was filled with darkness; I always deliberately closed the blinds tightly so that the morning light would not wake me up with bright rays of the rising sun. Being only half-awake, I did not realize at once the sensation of the palm, which was still holding my hand. Reflexively I pulled it over, but in response I felt a strong pressure on my hand. And next to me someone was laying — kind of a man, my whole body could sense his presence.

I was paralyzed with horror, holding down my movements. Again I fell into a dream where I clearly understood that everything happening was just a dream, and in order to wake up, you must open your eyes, but my attempts did not bring the proper result. I heard the stranger, breathing

intermittently very close in pitch darkness. He squeezed my hand hard, making it impossible to take it back. Fear was replaced by heartache, overflowed with despair. This pain was tearing me from the inside, it was impossible to escape from it and it was impossible to stop it. I understood that it was his pain, of that somebody who was present, existing in another world.

Time after time I tried to wake up, but he did not let me go, trying to show me something in a kind of dream. Obviously, I did not understand anything, I was only scared to death. I screamed in a desperate attempt, and it helped me to wake up. I returned to reality.

The shock of the dream vision that I've seen made me restless for a long time. Even when I was sitting at the kitchen table and smoking the second cigarette in a row, my fingers holding it were trembling convulsively.

— My friend, do you know who it was? — I said out loud and sighed heavily, still shaking at times.

“Nobody, just a nightmare, never mind,” replied my “invisible friend.” Not all that much, he reassured me.

Noon, I managed to sleep for four hours. But the thought of returning to bed caused a frightening feeling of anxiety. I cautiously went into the bedroom, opened the blinds, found in the closet the things I needed to relax on the beach and went to the sea.

Part 2. Seven days

What is called love in ordinary human language, this passion, awakening from the contact of two personalities, is not only the means by which generations come to the earth. It also creates life in the other world. It is a way of transition from earth to heaven, from material things to spiritual things.

— Annie Besant

Chapter 3



Day one

I got cosy on a sun lounger, in the first row from the sea line, listening to the sound of the waves that were lapping the sandy shore, stretched my arms and put my face to the scorching sunrays and felt how they tickled my cheeks.

A few minutes later it got unbearably hot; I wanted

to find myself in refreshing sea water, not yet warmed up before the beginning of the southern summer. Having opened my eyes, I stood up, and saw the figure of a tall guy, with well-developed muscles, he was running by not far from me, along the beach. He was wearing bright shorts, loose and elongated, tightly fitting his bouncy buttocks, and a red T-shirt that was waving in the wind along his broad back. It was hard not to notice that his legs and arms muscles, playing with every movement and glistening in the sun. Having my eyes glued on the perfectly built body that suddenly appeared in front of me, and was so quickly disappearing at a distance, I smiled involuntarily, with admiration.

Surprisingly, the guy turned around, caught sight of my smile, and smiled in response. “Anna, suddenly confused,” quickly turned away and, having forgotten her desire to go into the sea, began to search for a pack of cigarettes with a cigarette lighter in her bag. I told myself — well, okay, in any case, the guy will be glad, to receive some advances. I looked stealthily again in his direction and noticed how he had changed direction and was running back. Towards me. I began to feel somehow embarrassed. Embarrassed? I frowned at the feeling. For a long time I have not experienced “embarrassment” in front of the stronger sex.

The stranger slowed down, dropping into a walk. I had found a pack of cigarettes, but pretended to continue looking for it in the bag. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed how he was getting closer and closer, shortening the distance between us with confident steps. Once close, he sat down on a nearby lounge. I turned my head to him and met the look of a pair of blue eyes, studying me intently.

I tried to hide my interest behind a blank, stern look.

— Hello. Sorry if I disturbed you, I just could not help doing it. — He began to speak Russian powerfully. I liked his pleasant deep voice, he spoke steadily even being a little out of breath. His large, athletic chest was rising and falling, sweat was dripping down his firm shoulders, onto his large sculptured arms, and I really wanted to touch them.

— It is the same as running past the opportunity that destiny gives you, — he finished, and it seems to me that his speech was longer, I just missed a little, focusing on the distinctive features of his sexy body.

— May I invite you? — He suggested, casting a glance at the cafe behind us. I, still not saying a word, began to look at his face, which had a little frowned look because of the scorching sun that hit his eyes.

I would guess his age at about thirty. Expressive masculine features, light stubble on his cheeks, which evenly filled, and slightly smoothed sharp angles of his cheekbones and chin. Thick dark hair, trimmed short, in a sporty style. The look is firm and decisive. But also so kind and open. You can probably endlessly list it on and on finding something noticeable in him, admire it, then find something else, to admire it even more... well, as for me, everything in him fit together.

And then I understood. My silence lingered on. Frozen in a stupor, like an idiot with the most stupid smirk on my face, I was looking at him with frank interest. Even my “invisible friend” was silent and didn’t express his biased opinion.

The guy, on the contrary, was looking at me in temper-

ate manner, expecting my response, without focusing on my slowed down behavior.

— Is your training over? Didn't you go jogging? — Finally I said.

He reacted with a slightly embarrassed smile; it gave him an incredible charm. Such a smile could endear anyone, and I definitely would not be an exception, I thought at that moment.

— I still have time to run, as long as you do not run away. — He said jokingly, his bright expressive eyes shone in the glaring rays of the midday sun.

— So far, I'm not going to run away. Let's go to the cafe. — And with such guys as he I could go not only to the cafe, but could also do many more interesting things with him.

I got up from the lounge, picked up the towel on which I had been lying, having no idea that my day would be filled with such an unexpected event, shook it, and threw it into my bag. Then I pulled my short white beach dress off the back of the sun lounge and put it on.

We sat at a table with the sea view. That day, there were few visitors at the seaside cafe. Muffled music played from the loudspeakers, attached to the pillars around the perimeter of the hall, if it could be called that, a sad howling voice of an Israeli singer, accompanied by a heartbreaking melody.

The strangeness of my own behavior was driving me mad; I couldn't stop looking at my new acquaintance, hardly noticing what was happening around. I do not want

to get ahead of myself, but I'll still say: there was something fascinating in him besides his catchy appearance. I managed to catch the energy emanating from him, I just didn't focus on that at that time, having decided that it was his masculine attractiveness to blame, due to which I involuntarily gained confidence in him, experiencing instant and strong sympathy. No more, no less.

“My friend, don't you want to tell me anything? Who is this?”- I mentally asked a question addressed to my “invisible friend.” But I never heard the response.

— My name is Michael, but you can call me Misha. — The guy said meanwhile and leaned back in his chair relaxed, his arms folded on his broad chest.

— Anna. — My voice seemed to become thinner and quieter; I repeated what had already been said louder, more confidently: — Anna.

— Beautiful name. And you yourself are very beautiful. — He noticed, continuing to look at me with warmth.

— So you say, Misha, it suits you. You're as big as a bear. — That's it! What an egg I laid, I mean.

After my words, he smiled. How did he manage to smile so charmingly? So naturally on the one hand, and so mysterious — on the other.

— Well, so what are we going to order? — I decided to remind, trying to change the topic of conversation.

— Anything you want.

— I will drink orange juice — It was the first thing that my mind, blurred by the impression he made, could think of.

Misha got up from the table and headed for the bar.

“And why are you suddenly so confused, baby?” — My “invisible friend” appeared at last.

— You’d better talk about the case, who is he? — I put forward a counter question, having said the words to myself, but this time I did not receive an answer.

— Your juice. — Leaning down, Misha put the filled glass next to me, and sat down opposite me, holding the bottle of “Coke” in his hand.

“Anna the naive” started flirting, straightening her hair, clapping her eyelashes, making a languid look... well, like a stupid little fool at the age of sixteen. Not only did I cross the border of these years long ago, but let’s say I was also an experienced conqueror of men’s hearts. But, “Anna the naive” appeared from nowhere and seized me, not leaving a chance to resist.

Misha and I talked for a long time, actually without any specific topics, without noticing how the sun began to go down.

Michael-Misha has lived in Israel for a couple of years. He earned his living by protecting the peace of a famous politician, creating for him the safety of movement around the city. And I appeared before my new acquaintance in the image of a girl working at the bar counter of one of the night clubs of Tel Aviv. The truth was only my story how I arrived all alone from a small Russian town to Israel.

We could easily find a common language, Misha was not impudent, did not try to get to the seat next to me, looked into my eyes without disturbing the space of the table separating us, looked at the sea sunset, then again looked into my eyes.

Our relaxed communication was interrupted only by Misha's telephone call, several times. Running his finger across the screen, rejecting the call, he tried not to focus on this endlessly vibrating device. But after not knowing what the call, he succumbed to the caller's insistence, got up from the table, and left me in order to answer the call.

When I was left alone, I looked at the sea, which was playing the waves. Just a few years ago, my "invisible friend" and I were imagining how it surrounded us, and here it is in reality. With my friend, it was possible to make many wishes come true, except for one and the main thing. And without the implementation of this "main" thing, the rest began to lose their meaning and significance, until they became completely unnecessary.

The sun was already almost hidden behind the horizon, leaving purple-pink traces in the sky. These strips of vague clouds resembled the careless strokes of a surrealist painter who depicted them in his picture with in a chaotic consistency, subject only to his inspiration.

Misha came back. He was standing with the phone in his hand, I was looking up at him, tapping with a plastic straw on the bottom of the glass. He looked down at me, head down. In the fading light of the setting sun, his face looked more relaxed, and even sexier. I did not want to take my eyes off him, the fragments depicting what I could do with this guy flashed in my mind.

— Anna, I have to go, they are calling me to work. — His excited rough voice distracted me from the obsession.

— Well, we are really so late. — I said at ease. As if I had never thought about anything so unchaste at all.

— Will you go out on a date with me? — He handed me his phone, and, having agreed, I dialed my number on the screen.

He put the phone into his shorts pocket and looked at me with regret. His eyes simply could not help but express that feeling (honestly, it wasn't that subconscious desire when you try to indulge yourself in wishful thinking).

— See you soon, Anna, — he said, as he was leaving, smiled playfully and hurried on his business. He quickly ran up the stairs laid out of concrete blocks, leading up to the shore, got up and go out of sight, but not out of my thoughts.

Having watched him go, I stood up, took my bag from the back of the chair and was about to leave, but I was stopped by the waiter, holding a square tray on his palm.

— Shall I bring two sets of table-ware or one? — He asked, and put the large white plate on the table. Cake, with warm chocolate trails flowing from rounded edges. The cake was emanating coffee beans aroma.

— One. — I answered, grinning, and getting back to my seat at the table. It seems that in the choice of dessert our tastes with Misha coincided.

I was sitting on the sand at the edge of the waves, that were running on my bare feet. The sun finally disappeared over the horizon, and the first stars began to light up in the sky. A light evening breeze blew over me, wet and cool, it washed away the midday heat. By this time the beach had become almost empty, and the cafe behind me, on the contrary, had been filled with more visitors. Electronic rhythms

of music were heard from its open terrace — they played the records of popular American DJs.

I was thinking about Misha. For the first time, I was deep in thoughts about someone. It seemed to me that he was not like my ex-boyfriends, who believed that they embodied the highest value in this world. In his appearance you could find everything that can please, as it seems to me, any girl. Perhaps he himself understood it, but he behaved so naturally and openly, not trying to pretend, spoke in untutored manner, and it attracted me to meet him once again. To meet him, a simple, good-natured guy wearing a red T-shirt.

The first impression in most cases turns out to be wrong; I won't sin against the truth. Therefore, I should not rule out the possibility that he is actually not the one he represents himself to be. Here, for example: a pervert with secret desires, or gigolo, who can well use his looks for his disgusting purposes, well, or a jailbird who ran away from Russia.

“Well, I've got carried away too much, — I said mentally. Just let things go on. I do not know when I will be lucky to have free evening, but I must meet him. To relax, to have rest, to have fun. To have sex. And I haven't had the latter for a long time. The main thing is that this Misha shouldn't really turn out to be a pervert, otherwise it will not be fun. Am I saying everything right, buddy? — No answer. — You decided to become a mysterious silent? Well, let's see how long you will last.”

I got up and put my bag over my shoulder. It was time to return home.

Chapter 4

Day two

Yet another day, even if it started like many previous ones (dinner ritual — having woken up, to have a glass of coffee together with smoking a cigarette), but acquired a new distinctive feature. In my fleeting fantasies, an image of a guy from the beach appeared over and over again. And these fantasies were filled with madness and sex, causing a smile on my face to appear.

I was sitting on the couch, at a coffee table, in my small, but cozy, rented apartment. I was holding a glass of coffee in my hand and looking at the dark surface of the drink, tried to switch to, and recall the dream that I saw last night. I spent it on the same sofa, with the TV on and bedroom door closed.

The memory flashed as if a fragment from a movie. My “invisible friend” came to me in a dream in the form of a dog. A shaggy golden retriever (much larger than a retriever in life) was sitting opposite me in a clearing in the woods, lit by the rays of the Siberian summer sun, covered with green grass and daisies.

— Riddle me that! Who can be the object of lust for

many men, and not to have any passion for any of them? — He looked up to a clear sky, and as if by the way, he wagged his tail, knocking white-yellow flowers with it.

— A lesbian? — I suggested, and spread my hands with palms open, lost guessing, in case he needs another answer.

Having swallowed his silly bait, I really solved the riddle.

— Wrong. — He shook his hairy face, and continued speaking: — I'll give you a hint. She exposes her body in front of many at night, not bothering much, and during the day she becomes a shy virgin.

— Stripper?

— Not quite right. A stripper, who is crazy in the head.

— The crazy one of us is you. — I frowned.

— We might be both right. A crazy stripper and her off the rails friend. — He put his shaggy, heavy paw on my shoulder. — Why can't dogs laugh? Do you know?

— They do not know how to speak either, and you do. No more of that nonsense. Where did you disappear yesterday?

— Come on, don't be angry. You perfectly managed to make a good impression on your new acquaintance on your own. — He looked at me with round blue eyes, not feeling a drop of regret. — Well, when are you going to have a date?

With sadness, sighing softly, I shook my one free shoulder.

— I understand that you are tired and confused. But I would advise you to meet him tonight. — He smiled, exposing his white fangs, his long tongue fell out of his mouth.

— May be. — I removed his paw from my shoulder. —

In any case, an order might come in the evening, and I will have to go to work.

— Send the work to hell. Give it a rest! Tell them you are ill and have a date. — My “invisible friend” — dog said with persistence.

— It turns out that the break in dates did not last long? They did not lead to anything good. And anyway, you know, I’m a little scared. This Misha is affecting me in a strange way. — I looked at my friend’s pretty face and, squinting a little, added: — You keep quiet about something interesting. Yes?

— I am not keeping quiet about anything. — He explained himself. — You’d better hug me, stroke, look how pretty and soft I am today.

Sitting on his hind legs, he arched his back and proudly raised the tip of his nose to the top. The wind blew, and its long golden hair came in waves along the body.

— Yeah, the very charm. — I moved closer to him and tightly hugged his shaggy thick neck. He nuzzled my hair. — In spite of everything, I love you very much.

— And I love you so much, that it’s unlikely for anyone to love you so. — Grumbled the dog.

Well, yes, you are a dog this time, a faithful friend, — I said with irony, patting his big shaggy head. — That’s it. Let’s finish the exchange of sentiments. — And I let him out of my arms. — If he offers to meet today, I’ll agree.

Yapping and merrily wagging his tail, the dog began to run around me, treading down the daisies. He ran around like a puppy, who was finally allowed to be on the loose in an open field. He began to tumble. He screamed,

because he almost twisted his neck. In the nomination for the award under the motto — “We are all fools, but some of us are especially full,” he could claim the first place of honor.

My recollections were interrupted by a telephone signal, a short melody played, announcing the message received. Of course, “Anna the naive” hoped that it would be Misha, and in fact she was not mistaken. He offered to walk along the embankment and spend the evening in one of the bars on the coast.

21.00

Having finished all the ritual associated with applying my makeup (and I tried my best), and looking at my mirror reflection, I was unhappy with the result. The traces of fatigue accumulated after a large number of sleepless nights, reflecting in the swollen eyes, and bruises under them, could not be hidden even by expensive cosmetics.

I recalled all the men who I came to amuse for their own money. They had not only a lot of money, but also a lot of girls. Each of them told me almost the same thing, literally: “You yourself do not understand how beautiful you are.” These words that came up in my memory were able to help and inspired confidence in my attractiveness. Once again I ran the comb through my long, blond hair and threw it on the shelf in the hallway, and then I left the apartment.

But going down the stairs, “Anna the uncertain” began to feel doubts again. This time, doubts about the attire chosen and about the shoes selected to match it. Perhaps it was

not worth wearing high heels sandals and a short red dress. Perhaps, I looked vulgar, because this dress almost did not cover the body, although, on the other hand, Misha might like it, and he will experience the feeling of admiration. He will pay attention to my long legs, thin waist, under the tight-fitting fabric of the dress, and my outfit will suit his taste.

So, I thought, having stopped and holding the door handle of the glass front door, it seems that I really like this Misha if I go through all these options in my thoughts. Having gathered my courage, I opened the door, lifted my head proudly and walking with a firm tread, shaking my hips to the beat of my heels headed to the meeting with the guy from the beach.

He was already waiting for me, being mine, at least for today, a tall, attractive, healthy athlete, wearing dark worn jeans and a T-shirt, emphasizing his tight torso. He was standing on the sidewalk by the road, watching what was happening around him with a restrained and impenetrable gaze. Anyone in my place would believe that his professional activity has something to do with the protection and maintenance of order.

The feeling of embarrassment and desire to search for my shortcomings, fell on “Anna the uncertain” with renewed vigor, transforming into a sense of childish shyness. All that was left to do for her cheeks was to flash red with embarrassment, here you are, the standard situation of the girl on the first date.

Having stopped next to Misha, I smiled sweetly. So sweetly, that it seems to me I overdid it.

— Hi, — he leaned and he briefly kissed my cheek, near the corner of my lips, and, kept standing very close, looking down at me.

— Hello, — I said, unable to move, once again, as if I had swallowed my tongue.

I couldn't fail to notice the weirdness of his look. It swept across my face, lingering on its outlines for a split second, and then stopped. Misha began to peer into my eyes, and a smile flashed across his lips, almost imperceptibly, with a bit of regret. Honestly, I felt somehow uncomfortable. He seemed to have seen a familiar person in me, a person he had known for a long time, and could not believe that we met again, apologizing deep inside for the innumerable amount of time that separated us with an abyss of long years.

How could I understand this? I have no idea, it might have seemed to me. I have not heard the words of my “invisible friend”, confirming the accuracy of my assumptions.

— Well, shall we take a walk to the bar? — He spoke in his low voice, full of calmness.

— Let's take a walk, — I agreed, once again, beaming with a smile.

We took seats at a wide wooden bar counter, in one of the cafes on the sandy beach of Bat Yam. A refreshing sea breeze searched around the open log-in porch lit by colorful lights. Foot tapping club music was making its way through the hubbub of the visitors.

Misha moved so close to me that our chairs stood close to each other, thus increasing the distance between him and

a young, dark-haired Israeli woman sitting next to him. While waiting for the bartender, she seemed to touch Misha accidentally several times with her elbow and knee, trying to attract his attention.

Yes, the majority of Israeli women never lacked the impudence and audacity. And just try to object at least one of them, she will instantly bring down a squall of nervous cries, even if she is not right, even if her arguments are stupid and not substantiated, she will still thoroughly throw mud at you. I usually resolved similar difficulties quickly and easily. While working in a striptease, I often encountered the attacks from snooty Israeli strippers. As for beauty, they, of course, were inferior to girls of Slavic appearance, so, the richest visitors of the club were more interested in us (the Russians and Ukrainians). They shared their generosity — we were treated to drinks, they gave their tips just to extend the minutes of our communication. All the Israeli women could do — was to show their hot temper, to us, in order to intimidate us. Over the years of work in the club, they learned how to move competitors aside. On each regular customer they hung, an imaginary label — “private property”, and the Russian girls tried not to linger with such clients for a long time

Their system worked well, but (How to destroy the system? — To break it!) a few clashes with battering were enough to ensure that these impudent girls did not bug me anymore. The strippers were mainly fighting for the pieces of paper with indelible paint, and I was steadfast to my principles, but it turned out that I still protected these pieces of paper.

Having thrown a short glance behind Misha on his vulgar neighbor, (who was sitting now not so close to him), I imagined her long nose hitting the bar counter with a crunch, you just had to press her head down sharply and firmly. Moreover, all these thoughts, associations and memories flashed so quickly that in real time everything took about five seconds. Possessive instinct sparkled in me. And to whom? To a man who I did not really know.

Misha, of course, was not interested in all this; he took a packet of Marlboro light from his jeans pocket and put it on the table. He threw his hand on the back of my chair, put his arm around my shoulders, and suddenly I felt so good and warm in my heart because he was here and now, side by side with me.

— And I thought that athletes do not smoke. — I said jokingly, and took a cigarette out of the pack.

— You will be surprised, but they not only smoke. — He snapped his lighter, giving me a light. — Order the whiskey — you are an expert. — He offered and gave me the menu with alcoholic beverages.

Although not being a bartender, I really knew a lot about whiskey.

— I can do without the menu. Have you ever tried Macallan?

— No, but I'd like to try.

I decided to parade my knowledge, pointing to an expensive single malt whiskey. I have no idea how things stand for Misha in terms of his financial possibilities, but ordering even a couple of shots will cost a considerable amount. I never take my wallet to a date, and have never encountered

such a situation where it could be useful.

— Two shots of Macallan, — Misha turned to the bartender who approached us.

The bartender poured the golden drink twenty-five years of age into shots, Misha and I picked them up, touched their rims with the clink and drank quickly. Throwing back my head, in order to take a sip, I felt a sharp pain in the muscles of my neck. They constantly ached after the nights spent at work, because I had to twist my head so that the hair would stream as if in the wind, fly up with each movement, and fascinatingly, a little disheveled, fell on my shoulders. It seemed to me that it added sexuality. I restrained my emotions, preventing them from reflecting on my face, and the warmth of alcohol with caramel tinge, which began to spread over my body, quickly drowned out the pain.

Misha ordered another couple of shots. We talked at ease. I was listening to him with interest, asking questions, being eager to find out as much as possible about him, and to understand what kind of person he is, but he answered somehow evasively. He tried to tell jokes, and I laughed at them. He tried to flirt, and I was embarrassed when he touched me. Everything seemed to be an interesting game that I really enjoyed playing with him.

Misha ordered another couple of shots. Then he treated the bartender. The latter asked to leave a credit card as a pledge, reaching out his hand with the card to him, Misha gave his permission to withdraw the tip, specified — a couple of hundreds. And the eyes of the young bartender shone with joy, with respectful gratitude.

A dub tip, goes as it should be, fifty is already flattering, a hundred rarely happens, and two hundred is actually an exception. He might be coming off like a big shot, I thought. Now I could only continue making guesses, because my friend, still did not want to tell me anything.

— Do you want to take a walk? — Misha suggested, and I gladly agreed.

After midnight, the sea was smooth, Misha and I were strolling along the surf line, walking on the damp, cool sand feeling a little drunk with the whiskey I had chosen. The night beach, filled with empty plastic sun loungers with tables, was lit by lanterns that were stretching along the coast, mounted on high metal pillars. And in the darkened areas, inaccessible to light, hiding from the unwanted eyes, there were loving couples. Besides them, pretty drunk tourists, and Ethiopians, waiting for the moment when these tourists leave their clothes on the beach and go swimming in the sea, in order to search their pockets, no one else could be met.

— What else do you know as well as whiskey? — Misha asked his question.

— So you think I will just tell you all my secrets? — I jokingly answered.

— C'mon, don't be so secretive. Everyone has their own story, for example, I am interested in yours.

The story of my life would have sounded a lie to him, made of concocted moments. I couldn't tell the truth. I can imagine his disappointed and surprised face when I say that in fact I'm not a bartender at all and have never been one.

During my time at the strip club I was friends with the barmaids, that's why I know some features of their work. Or about the period spent under mind-blocking pills. Yes, or about the addiction to whiskey. You can actually recall much more, but I think we shouldn't.

— Look, girls like to talk nonstop, then you will get tired of listening to it, — Walking with a relaxed gait, I now and then clumsily bumped my shoulder onto Misha's shoulder, slightly pushing him.

— But, everything begins with communication. — He noticed unintentionally.

— Although, in most cases, a guy meets a girl not to talk. — I threw him a hint.

— I don't argue here, — he got it quickly. — Do you want to skip the official part? — By his sly smile, it could be understood that he is not so much a supporter of the "official parts".

— Well, I don't know, — I answered with the air of mystery in my voice.

He stopped, pulled me to him. He put his hands on my waist and looked straight into my eyes, so heartfelt, silently, beyond all bounds deep, which made me all perk up, immediately I wanted to cuddle up to him even tighter, with my whole body, and I embraced him tight. He lowered his head, I could feel his wavy breath on my lips.

They say, the very first kiss in your life is unforgettable. That's nonsense. In my opinion, the first kiss with any person who you really love is unforgettable. After all, we rarely meet such people, and it is always interesting to kiss them for the first time, and that naive, the very first, nobody

knows when happened kiss becomes secondary. It becomes an echo of the ridiculous moment of the past, which used to seem so significant.

Yet during our first meeting with Misha in a cafe on the beach, when he was telling me about something at sunset, I constantly focused on his lips, imagining how they would kiss me, and mind it — everywhere. From time to time, I pretended to be a kind of interested listener, thinking about other things absolutely irrelevant to our talk.

He kissed me confidently, passionately and rudely at the same time, giving all of him to me and experiencing the whole storm of emotions. He embraced me greedily, squeezing me in his “bear hug”. I could feel his wet full lips, my arms wrapped around his big neck, sliding on his strong shoulders. I didn’t want to let him go, I didn’t want to leave him and being with him I didn’t want to stop. He managed to ignite a strong physical attraction in me. He’s just a very attractive guy, I said to myself, the common reaction of hormones to a so-called tactile contact. And also he is maddening sexy, excitingly masculine, strong... Well, well, stop, that’s all, turn on the light, throw a wet blanket on me, a kick in the ass will also work, as long as my hormones stop their rage.

I stopped, Misha did not open his eyes at once.

— And what did you want to talk about? — I looked at him with calm, confident eyes, as if I had everything under control (in a simulant but convincing way, it was as easy as a pie for me to imitate many emotions in a life-like manner).

Misha grinned, he was still holding me in his arms —

a situation which I really wanted to prolong.

— About anything, and as you've thrown out a hint, not only to talk. I'm mad about you. I'd go with you right now anywhere for a few days.

— Aha! A couple of shots of whiskey — and crazy ideas started to come to your head? — I decided to laugh it off.

— Absolutely not, — he assured me; looking at him, I realized that he was serious.

— If it's so, then gladly. Let's go to pack the bags, do you have money for a trip? Actually, I'm a poor bartender, — I said sarcastically.

— I'll find some for such an occasion.

By and large, he didn't need to "look for" it, but I still didn't know about it (these details will become clear later).

— And where are we going?

— Wherever you want, — he said with the air that it was possible to carry out our plans without any problems.

- Could you really dart off like this?

— Come on. — He took me by the hand and led me to the chaise-longues, which stood in even rows along the coast, sat down on one of them, and put me on his knees and continued: — All of us sometimes want to do something spontaneous, how long can we do the same things every day?

— But not always what you want matches coincides our possibilities. I can't just turn around and leave it all. But who am I trying to deceive? What can I leave? A bunch of lifeless things in a rented apartment. And in general I would like to embark on some adventure with this guy. The advice of my "invisible friend" at the moment was sim-

ply vital. It wouldn't be difficult to find out which games Misha plays, or, just the other way about, to ascertain the truthfulness of his words. But my friend was silent today, leaving me without his very necessary hints. And he could have answered. At least something, just to speak a little.

“No, don't you want to?” He didn't, didn't speak.

— I understand, — said Misha with a slight disappointment in his voice. — And when shall we meet again now?

— I have a day off in a couple of days, invite me, offer me something. I put my arm around his neck and suddenly found myself thinking that I absolutely didn't want to spend this couple of days without him.

It was quite unexpectedly. I hadn't had such a lust for a guy yet.

— I'll think of something. -He laid in the chaise and pulled me to him.

I was laying on Misha, because with his complexion he occupied all the space, I was more comfortable in his arms than in my own bed, these big hands that were holding my waist... his hands, it seemed as if I had become miniature and helpless under them. Not that “Anna — the sky is the limit for me”, but the one who got care and reliability. As if my problems can now become his problems, they won't be so difficult when shared between the two of us. And tomorrow, having woken up, I won't have to rack my brain where to go today, what to do to keep myself busy, in order not to go back to where there's no need to go.

Why not? At least for a few days.

Yes, I had an “invisible friend”, he took care of me and helped more than anyone else, but he was so incorporeal

and intangible (I still had to row with oars), he existed there and I was here in my own world. The final opinion about who he is, and why he volunteered to help me, formed quite recently, I had been making assumptions for a long time. And during all this time my friend could not confirm or deny my assumptions. This topic has never been discussed.

— Why don't you have a boyfriend or husband? And your phone is silent all the evening, and not ringing off the hook because of calls or messages? With your appearance, you should definitely have a lot of admirers. — Misha didn't give up trying to find out the details of my life.

— I shut my phone off. — Having said that with irony, I put my elbows on his firm chest, resting my chin on my palm. — Have you shut off yours too?

He did not answer, only a slight smirk played on his face.

— In fact, I have already ceased to communicate with others, a waste of time on the people who you keep communication with, just to keep yourself busy with something and in case you need a company for the evening. Neither of them really attracted me. It's not that. I'm bored of it. — I did not continue and was silent, put my head on Misha's shoulder with my palm on his stomach.

“Hey! — I mentally called my ‘invisible friend’. — Look what I've just said. Why would I be so sincere? Where are you?” His silence had already begun to make me angry and put me out of temper. I was looking for repose in Misha's arms, and they gave it to me, leaning closer to him, I nestled my head against his hot neck. I was waiting for my friend's explanations, but I didn't hear anything except the

sounds of wash.

— And why are you alone? — I asked, without lifting my head, slid my nose along his hard warm neck, inhaling the pleasant smell of men's perfumes.

— I used to be married, but lost her in an accident, — he explained and then added after a short silence: — Lots is forgotten with time, I accepted the circumstances and continued to live on. — So he used an expression, that didn't show his feelings, and turned the conversation to what, in his opinion, I was interested in. -Shall we drink one more "Chaser"?

— Yes, let's drink it. Just it's so comfortable with you. I don't want to get up. — No, I've already lost my interest in whiskey.

— And to me, so much so that I can fall asleep right now.

— And you will snore like a bear. — Having risen my head, I looked into his face.

— Sure, I will, — he stressed smiling tenderly.

We went to one more coastal bar (stretching along the beach line of Bat Yam, they are going one after the another, being only distinguished by a peculiar menu theme, signs and flowers in the interior) and drank a few more shots of our favorite Macallan. When the music went silent and the bar was closing, Misha offered to take me home. The slowly rising sun gradually lit up the clear skies over Israel and the empty streets, still not disturbed by the anxiety of people who would hurry to work soon.

I admit, I was fizzing with the desire to invite Misha to my flat under the veil of “having tea with cookies”, I wanted this guy madly. But still I decided to show myself from the good side. And it was me, who could not give a damn about the opinions of everyone around me, as well as about people themselves.

And here she is for you Misha, “Anna — then ideal girl”, positive, balanced and patient.

Misha came upstairs with me, accompanied me to the door of the apartment, kissed me long, giving me a hint that he did not want to leave, but “Anna — the ideal girl” found the strength and said goodbye. I did not go into the shower, as I liked the smell that remained on my skin. Misha’s message wishing me to see only pleasant dreams caused a feeling of warm joy. I started to imagine how he was returning home along the street flooded with morning light and still thinking about me. Sentimental nonsense, but it was nice.

Lying in bed, in the darkness of my bedroom, I once again tried to call my “invisible friend.”

— I’m with you, — he said. He finally bothered to please me with his presence.

— Oh, well, really! — I expressed my irritation. — Don’t you think you should have appeared a few hours earlier?

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t.”

— You could always do that, and now you could not? — I got up in bed, knees pressed to my chest.

“Do not get angry. I’ve been to some places, I have had a great time and you aren’t the only one to enjoy the pleasures of life. You’d better say if you like him”

What pleasures of life? He is neither alive, nor dead.

— Sure thing that I like him, but I wanted to find out who he is. Because there is something strange and insanely attractive in him. His kisses, his touches, I felt everything and did not want to imagine anything. I find it hard to believe.

“Be yourself and enjoy what you have. Unwanted suspicions only get in the way here”.

— So will you tell me or not? Don’t play jokes with me!

There was no answer. I didn’t know how to react to his odd behavior. I wanted to flare up, but quickly changed my mind, realizing that the argument with him was a useless trick.

— Great, if you don’t want to, don’t tell me. With my anger stored up, I buried myself under a blanket, drew it over my head, waiting for the effect of the sleeping pill.

Chapter 5

2015. Six months earlier

Israel. Bat Yam. Waterfront apartment

— Will you leave me for a while and go away so that I won't hear you? — I addressed my “invisible friend.” Standing in the bathroom of a guy, I was acquainted with, I ran my fingers along a lock of hair, straightening it.

“As you like,” — he replied.

— I cannot feel your presence at this moment.

“I've already gone”.

— Shut up, and then I'll understand that you are not here. And don't come back until I call you.

“Yes, no problem, I've got it all. Have fun.

I left the bathroom and went to the living room, there, on the sofa opposite a large plasma TV, which screen flashed with the pictures of MTV clips, Efi was waiting for me. I sat down next to him, turned half-around and put my elbow on the back of the sofa, ran my fingers through my hair, flowing a pair of strands between them, playing a little.

— Efi, can you give me your T-shirt? This dress constrains my ribs, — I said in Hebrew. I smoothed down my black mini-dress with my free hand, freeing up some space for the breasts constrained with décolleté.

Efi's eye automatically fell on the spot where it should have gone.

— Yes, even two. — Smiling in anticipation, he got up and went into his bedroom.

I met Efi a couple of weeks ago. Efi — a young guy with the body proportions matching my taste, olive skin, dark-haired, in excellent physical shape. Hot, southern blood ran through his veins. A great choice for infrequent and pleasant meetings. On one of my working nights in the strip club, where I worked at the period of the events described, he asked me to give him my phone number, which I agreed to do without hesitation

— Here you are. — Returning to the living room, Efi handed me a neatly folded T-shirt.

I took it from his hands, turned my back on him, threw the T-shirt on the table and pulled off my dress, it really constrained me, then put on a loose T-shirt and conveniently sat back on the sofa.

— I've got some stuff to smoke, — offered Efi, taking a transparent bag of grass from the pocket of his jeans.

— I only smoke normal cigarettes, and you can smoke what you want, it doesn't bother me.

— Then a little bit later.

He threw the bag on the coffee table, where a bottle of whiskey, that we had already started, was standing, moved closer to me, kissed me, trembling a little and tensely. He tried to seem confident, but was touching my chest which hang freely under the loose T-shirt rather clumsily. When he lay atop, I tried to play along as best as I could, giving him confidence. While kissing I patted him,

moaned, wrapped my legs around him, arching my back.

— You're so good and nice, — I whispered in his ear.

He pulled up the T-shirt that I was wearing, then began kissing my belly timidly, his short kisses were coming down lower and lower.

“What are you doing?”

— You said you would leave, — I replied in my mind to my “invisible friend.”

“And you have promised that it won't come to sex. And you began to seduce him”.

— I've changed my mind. Go away, quickly.

By this moment, Efi had already begun to pull off my panties and, having finished this action, he lowered his head, spread my legs wider, and set his soft tongue between them. I pulled towards him, trying to experience a sharp sense of pleasure, but eventually it didn't come. I relaxed every centimeter of my muscles, falling backwards into the soft surface of the sofa, but everything happening to me was just like a worn out porn movie episode, and no crazy sensations.

“Well, well, well, I've gone. But I'll tell you something before that. Imagine that you are with him. Close your eyes and imagine that it is him”.

I threw my head back, covering my eyes, took a deep breath, and I changed the current reality. For the first time, a sense of blissfulness that lurked deep inside me burst out and pierced me at the very point where that bloke's tongue, “what-d'ye-call-him?”, Ephi, was sliding along, flew through my body with a nervous tremor, causing my heart to sound incredibly strong, with deafening beats against the

chest.

— Come here, — I said breathing out, and wrapped my arms around his massive muscular neck and pulled him to myself.

With quick movements, leaning on one arm, he pulled off his pants and started kissing my breasts. I did bidding of my “invisible friend”, imagined another person (the one I had never met, but knew that he was somewhere), and at the moment I was touching him. My hands groped his shoulders, big and elastic, — those very shoulders. The hair on the back of his head, went through my palms, was smooth and dense, — the very hair. The lips that started kissing mine are those very lips. He seemed to have merged with me, appeared in reality. I did not want to open my eyes, I was afraid that he would disappear.

His fingers, gripping me forcefully on the sides at the waist, stopped trembling. His movements were fast, hard and confident when he moved his hips, penetrating into me. Small cramps began to run through my body, shaking with passion and pleasure.

He stopped for a few seconds, I heard his muffled, hoarse, not blissful, but rather painful groan near my ear. He raised himself up, clasping my thighs, with a powerful push entered me, and I opened my eyes.

His filmy eyes fixed into my face, and it wasn't Efi's look, his fingers tightened on my thighs.

— Hush, don't move, — he said, and slid his palm along my body, from the navel to the base of the neck, then squeezed it slightly and leaned over me. With the tip of his nose he ran along my cheek and pressed his smiling lips

to my temple. — Hello baby.

His harsh, low voice caused a feeling of gaining the lost, joy, mixed with pain due to long parting. Tears came to my eyes, I sobbed and hugged him tightly, It seemed to me I understood everything at that moment.

— I couldn't resist. — His hands slipped under my bare back, he caught me and lifted me, pressed me to him, burying his lips in my hair, and whispered: — Forgive me.

I lost him, his arms loosened, being unconscious, Efi leaned on me, pressing me to the sofa, still excited, still in me, and after a couple of seconds came to life. Lifting his head in my palms, I kissed him, pushed my hips, making light circular motions, after which he gave a sweet moan and everything was over. Having slipped out from under his limp body, I hurried into the shower.

— You know, I had completely forgotten to leave the cat food when I left, — returning to Efi, I began to glance frantically around the lobby of his apartment, looking for my clothes.

“A cat? Poor starving cat, which you have never had. You amazed me! — my “invisible friend” left his caustic comment, to whom I had a separate and unpleasant talk.

— Can you stay, we'll have a drink? I feel so good with you, — Efi said. He looked kindly. So kindly, that my heart sank for a second. It seems that everything went well for him, without losing consciousness. He clearly understood that I was trying to leave as soon as possible, because the obvious haste in my dressing ruled out other assumptions.

— I have to go, — I said shortly.

Everything that could be understood then, flashed in moments. I pulled the doorknob. It heavily slammed behind my back. My heels drummed down the stairs as I descended to the first floor. I ran out into the street, and I was hit in the face by the moist sea air, soaking up my dress and skin. I crossed the road and found myself taking off my shoes. Ran down the stone stairs to the beach. My bare feet stepped on the sand, a few steps — and I fell to my knees, clasping my head with both hands.

— What was it all about? What have you done? What tricks are you playing? — I spoke in a trembling downed voice.

“I didn’t do anything; it’s all your imagination. You asked me to leave, I left.”

— Somewhat too strong imagination I have. Do you think I’m a complete idiot? Don’t lie to me. You must explain. Who was that?

At that moment, when “He” was pressing me to him on Ephi’s sofa, I understood everything. I knew the answers to my questions, but these answers disappeared somewhere. Everything will be completely formed in my mind and will be remembered only in a few months, when “He” will have nothing to hide.

“Anna, I’m sorry, but I cannot explain it to you” said my “invisible friend” in his natural, balanced tone.

— How in the world you drive me mad! Why?! What’s the problem?! — I blurted out; absolutely ignoring the fact that nearby, on the shore of the sandy beach, there could be strangers (most likely, they were there) who could hear my indignant shouts, addressed not known to whom, perfectly

well. That's all, I guess I went nuts!

“Stop it, it's not like that.”

— Then where is he, huh? Where!? I felt him!

“Somewhere, but not here.”

— Well, come on! If you don't want to, don't tell. I'm not going to talk to you anymore. And I don't want to know people's thoughts, and I don't want to use this knowledge. I don't need it all, and neither do I need you! My imagination, damn it! — I threw one shoe into the sea out of spite, it was followed by the second one, with an even greater swing.

Later, when I was returning barefoot to the empty walls of my rented apartment, I cursed myself for what I had done. Because I rubbed off and crippled my feet, walking on rough paving slabs, stepping on small pieces of stone and glass, which happened now and then under my feet.

“You are a muddle head and too emotional. You've got to sleep at night and get rid of all unnecessary habits, then the head will begin to work better”, my “invisible friend” drew attention to himself.

— Leave me alone! Where did you come from again! It makes no difference what happens to me next. These obsessive thoughts about a person from the past who did not exist begin to turn into paranoia. That's why it appears, it seems... it. I have no idea who he is and how he is associated with me, but you know it for sure.

“No, how can I know that”.

— All you can do is shirk and lie. And I called you a friend. It might be someone who needs help, and I can help him. And you... you. That's it, get lost! I blurted out angrily. My words echoed in the silence of the empty night

streets.

Approaching a four-story residential building where “my temporary home” was located, I met a girl familiar to me who I worked at the club with and went to the “field”. With a quick step, she went ajog along the pavement, her long brown hair was flying up against the wind, revealing a tense grimace on her beautiful face. It was not difficult to guess that she was scared and excited about something.

— Alina!/? — I called to her after she had passed by without noticing me, as she was stubbornly soldierlike walking along the street.

I caught up with her, grabbed her hand above the elbow and stopped her. She pulled her hand out in dismay and jumped away.

— Ah, Karina, — she heaved a sigh of relief, trying to fix her nervously running pupils on my face. — Here, listen, it’s such a thing, I’m hiding from the police, walking down the street as if “neither here not there.”

— There is no police here, relax.

— There is, they are everywhere. I’m scared.

— What did you take?

— You’d better ask what I didn’t take today, — she laughed, as if in a fit, leaned forward, resting her hands on her knees, then abruptly straightened and, pulling her lips to my ear, whispered: — I can’t stay in one place for a long time, they will notice. Come with me, I have a great powder.

— No, I am not fit for walking, — I made a remark, looking down at my knocked-down feet.

— You’ve had a great walk. OK, I’ve got to go, just go

non-stop.

And she left, went on her way towards the sea, and I was standing and watching her go. It looks like... well without a doubt it doesn't look like anything, I now looked no better than her she did. Though not ripped up after the drug, but drunk, disheveled, pathetic and crumpled and also bare-foot.

With a sigh of sorrow and realizing that nothing could be done about it, I trudged home in the light of the full moon, floating over the roofs of houses, and my own shadow accompanying me, which every now and then manifested itself, gliding alongside the paving slabs in the reflection of the lanterns.

Chapter 6

2016. Israel

The guy in the red T-shirt was the first thing that appeared in my mind that had returned from sleep, making me rejoice at the awakening. Having felt around, in the darkness, artificially created by the shutters of window blinds closed tightly, for the phone slid between the wall and the edge of the bed, I picked it up and held it to my face. The harsh light coming from the screen strained my already heavy eyes.

“Thank you for yesterday night, I wish I didn’t have to wait for you for so long, but I will wait for the next one”.

— You are my darling, — I said with delight and warmth. They were the feelings caused in me by Misha if I disregard my wild desire of his crazily beautiful and sexy body that I wanted to touch and pat without stopping, even for a smoke break.

“Today’s night could be much better with you” — I started typing on the phone and... I don’t know, I started to doubt, it seemed ridiculous to me. And what will Misha think? Or maybe... no, nonsense. Sent what I managed to write as it was.

Only a few words sent by him charged me with a good

mood, despite the end of the week, which meant the inevitable beginning of the hardest and craziest working nights. Just one thought that I'll have to plunge into this madness, filled with drunken, sniffed, inadequate people with half-naked bodies, wildly screaming with joy, made me frown. And I used to have fun with them.

Hello, new day!

I cast a hurt glance at the phone with regret and got off the bed with a grudge against myself.

— Soon we will see each other” — I said, as if addressing Misha, then added words addressed to my “invisible friend”: — And you stay close today, I really need you. You know it yourself.

Later in the evening my boss called, in excited voice, he explained that I would have to work on the yacht, the clients are rich and demanding, and they agree to pay for my presence until the morning if I match their preferences, so it was worthwhile to choose the right outfit. To wrap me, like goods, in expensive gift wrapping.

The motor yacht moored on the pier of Tel Aviv behind a fashionable hotel turned out to be one of the exact copies of those that you can only see in films about high living: white, large, three-deck and streamlined, lit by multi-colored lights, spreading their light on the night pier. Loud music and the passengers' shouts came from its board. A young, tanned guy of typical Israeli appearance met us (me and my partner), asked to take off our shoes and helped us climb aboard.

In the middle of carefree merriment, on the main spacious deck, the hero of the day was dancing in front of the

fans — young girls and very elderly men, who were sitting down along the oblong table on the left side. They were clapping at him, and he shouted out in response to applause: “Welcome to my home,” although his Arab appearance did not reveal at all that he was English.

— An Arab sheikh is in his underpants, — said Lena, laughing, she got to the point, having noticed it correctly. His short body was almost bare, only his square hips were covered by swimwear boxers.

It was with Lena that I most often worked in tandem. Extremely eye catching young girl, slightly shorter than average, with perfect body proportions and a pretty face, which didn't do without a plastic surgeon services. She came to Israel to earn money to buy an apartment in Russia. And there's nothing to be surprised about, the Israelis for the most part, no matter how often the vice of greed can be attributed to them can loosen purse-strings with all their hearts. Especially on Sabbath. The God himself orders to do it. And the Arabs, of course, they suddenly become the most generous in the world when they throw a holiday. It might sound dramatic, but of all the men of different nationalities (Asians, Americans, Europeans, Indians, Russians, our Jews and Caucasians, I cannot remember who else — I was lucky to spend nights with many people, brightening up their leisure time), the Arabs really stood out with their wasteful generosity.

Having changed clothes in a cabin, Lena and I came out on the deck wearing bathing suits that covered little. We were dancing and created the purchased atmosphere of fun. The Arab, so let's call him the “hero of the day”, who cares

about their names (although you could choose Lena's option, but I liked mine more, it's my own, after all), approached Lena and me and said out loud:

— I'm going to tip these girls a thousand dollars, you'll see! — And he began to dance, hanging on our thin shoulders, and in the meantime the yacht set off, sailing from the pier.

Cutting through the waves, the yacht went on quickly, moving farther and farther into the dark space of the sea, swaying considerably from side to side. Lena and I, clinging tightly to the handrails that stretched along the side, continued to dance despite the feeling that the floor was falling away underneath. The "hero of the day" with a smile painted on his face and eyes shining like glass approached one of the guests, returned with money and began to tuck the bills (oh yeah, they are these pieces of paper soaked with indelible paint that are loved by Anna) into our bras and panties. Surprisingly, my friend and I looked at each other; our eyes sparkled, shimmering brighter than diamonds. And we continued to create the illusion of fun, smiling, dancing and clapping, clapping, dancing and smiling. Somehow, as if we were in tune with the "hero of the day".

Being tired of jumping and shouting, he headed for the table, tugging me and Lena along. Having glanced around the table, I found the guy I needed, the one who stood out not only for his bulky body, but also for the air of importance when pouring crystal powder onto a plate from the bag, making it a line and passing it around. You could get the impression that he felt like a kind of "drug lord" who decided to treat all his friends this night. I decided to sit

next to him. From the moment Lena and I began to dance, his admiring glance often lingered on my forms.

— You are so beautiful, — he said, studying me with his eyes at a closer distance. His muffled voice sounded drawling and slightly drunk.

— Thanks. — Wreathed in a naive smile, I put my hand on his naked soft shoulder.

— I have been watching you for a long time. Well, you know, I'm almost fifty years old, and I see things in people. — He looked “young” for his age, although he grew bald, and some twenty years ago he was definitely a handsome man, the one that girls were wild about, I suppose, in large quantities. — There is something special about you, — he gave his conclusion.

In response, “Anna the frivolous” looked at the “drug lord” with a naive look, while continuing to smile openly. Deep in my heart, I was not surprised at his words; clients were always saying that in order to get on the right side of me by emphasizing my importance.

— Do you want to sniff it up? He asked me, holding out the rolled bill. It should be said that it was not one dollar bill.

— I do not sniff. Let's have a drink, — I suggested, and reached for a bottle of tequila with an unfamiliar name.

I did not count how much tequila I drank that night. New and new bottles in wooden boxes appeared on the table over and over again, and their content was poured into shot glasses. My companion began to tell me how rich he was, boasted his real estate, invited me to one of his luxurious restaurants and invited me to go to the south of the

country to the Hilton Hotel, explaining that he had booked a suite in this fashionable hotel for a year in advance. Needless to say, for those cases when he suddenly gets in the mood to get away from it all for a day or two, taking with him another “anyone’s” young girl. The one that for a sniff of powder and unspeakable generosity will be squarable and really happy with the opportunity to get her share of luxury “as if for free”.

Peering at the man sitting next to me, I tried for a minute to imagine myself with him in the spacious bed of a chic room in a five-star hotel, on the, let’s say, fortieth floor with panoramic windows overlooking the outbound Red Sea. And I didn’t feel anything apart from disgust. I experienced absolutely opposite feeling, imagining this situation and putting Misha in place of the “drug lord”. A slight excitement ran through my body. But Misha could not afford such expenses, and it would be extremely difficult for him to take me to a restaurant where the waiters offer to start dinner with vintage exquisite wine. But I wanted to give my preference to the guy in the red T-shirt and the time spent with him, but not to the “drug lord” sitting next to me, who has a lot of pieces of paper soaked with indelible paint.

Life is a sheer absurdity, consisting of contradictions. Had I only thought about it, as a familiar voice responded, expressing his opinion:

“You can go ashore and leave everything; I think that your new boyfriend is not sleeping yet.”

“Well, yes, and then everything we have to do is to die together on the same day in a small apartment, having

grown fat with cheap food from cheap joints, I smiled to him in my thoughts. — You'd better tell me how to get more money from this "drug lord".

"He, when he gets sniffed, turns into a 'drug lord-philosopher'. Say his favorite expression out loud".

— As Aldington put it, "Life is a wonderful adventure, worthy for the sake of success and failure. — I quoted when our conversation with the "drug lord" reached the topic of life philosophy.

In response, he was surprised, so to speak, gasped, uttered one exclamation with an exclamation one word, "Oh ...", but emotionally. And then added:

— This is my favorite quotation. I said, you you're special.

"You my are special", it's time to ask the appropriate tip."

— And special girls are given special tips", I hinted.

The "drug lord" reached for a small bag lying behind him, and pulled out some two hundred-shekel bills.

"People should get married to girls like you instead of ordering for entertainment," he laughed, his laughter was like the laughter of a man who had cracked a sad joke affecting both of us. In response, "Anna the frivolous" just beamed up with a naive condescending smile, which I already was really fed up with.

The "hero of the day" showed his generosity this night, the "drug lord" supported him, and you shouldn't forget about the hourly pay. I could not accurately calculate the amount of money earned, but the amount appeared to be significant. Actually, I can arrange a day off tomorrow and

relax on the Sabbath at last.

“It’s long overdue” my “invisible friend” supported me.

The yacht returned to the pier, no one demanded to dance and entertain the guests. I got up from the table and went to that small cabin in the bow of the yacht, where Lena and I changed clothes not so long ago. Sitting on the bed, I took the phone out of my bag and smiled happily, reading a message from Misha left a couple of hours ago:

“Hello, baby, I’ve had a hard day today, it seems that you, too, since you haven’t written anything. Shall we have lunch together tomorrow?”

To have lunch? When a guy asks you out on a day date, it is serious. I wrote back to Misha that my day would be devoted to a good sleep, and the evening to him. And when asked how he would like to spend this evening, Misha suggested going to the beach outside the city, explaining that his boss’s car would be at our disposal on Shabbat.

My “invisible friend” was right; by midnight, Misha was still awake.

I threw the phone into my bag and returned to the deck, where the party was in full swing. The presence of new girls, wearing short beautiful dresses, with perfect makeup and impeccably styled shiny hair, added it more diversity. It was not difficult to guess who they were. Whores. And how did these men of Israel use to live without these beautiful young Slavic women? In particular, the Arabs, who managed to succeed and get rich, deftly bypassing the laws, much better than the current owners of the land — the Jews.

Lena called me to dance, but all the attention of the people present switched to the whores, only the “drug lord”

was still sitting at the same place at the table and continued looking at me with his glassy eyes. And I looked at him and was smiling, irradiating fake fun.

The party ended with the dawn, the strongest people, who stayed on their feet until the morning turned out to be, of course, the “drug lord” (you bet, he had sniffed so much), “the hero of the day” (you bet, he had drunk so much miraculous water with MDMA, which causes a feeling of euphoria) and the whores (you bet, the magic power of money will make anyone a superman).

Lena and I were sitting on the bed in the cabin, counting the tips in order to share them equally.

— Listen, today was just a wonderful night, — she said happily and handed me a bundle of notes.

— You can say that again! Quite unexpectedly.

I took the money and, having rolled it up, carelessly threw it into my bag.

— Yes, it’s great to visit such a holiday, to take a yacht ride, — it seemed that there was no limit to her joy, and her stupidity went off the scale, reaching the highest point of idiocy. I do not want to say that Lena is essentially stupid, but naive beyond the years.

— Yeah, cool, but not as the service staff.

— No, I’m not the staff.

— And who are you? What have you been doing? You’ve been serving this, as you called him, “sheikh in shorts”, and all his friends. You pleased him, saying what a fabulously unreal man he was. Were you enjoying it yourself, or what?

— At least, I was trying, what else I could do. — She looked at me aggrievedly, lowered her head a little and

slightly frowned her last fashion modeled eyebrows.

— Than don't you say that it's cool.

— And why are you so angry today? Where is the joy, emotions, the offer to get drunk or go to the "after"^[4]?

Feeling worn out, with the tired face I shrugged my shoulders. This movement has somehow begun to get into a habit lately.

— Wait. Have you met anyone? Fell in love? — Her eyes became round on what an amazing thought had come into her naive and young head.

— You are a one! Did you understand what you said? — I waved aside.

— Come on, sister, cough it up! — She triumphantly shone her wide and insanely beautiful smile. She had a delightful smile, and such a carefree, that if I were a man, I would completely forget about everything at that moment, waiting for her to smile like that again.

— I haven't fallen in love with anyone. Yes, I met someone, but you know me, do you?

I got up and started putting on my dress.

— Of course, I know you, but I don't recognize you today. And who is that guy? — Her curiosity overcame her.

— Well, he's just a guy," I answered evasively.

— Indeed. — Oh, well done, once again she smiled, and why I can't do that.

— OK, just a handsome and sexy guy who, as usual, I will quickly get tired of, — I said coldly and started looking around for my shoes. I did not find them, although I looked in all the corners. I had to kneel down and look under the bed. There was no other place for them.

— I think you've got a message.

— Who could have thought of texting me at six in the morning? I cannot find my shoes.

One of the whores might have put them on and left?" —
Said Lena laughing.

— It might have also happened, but she could have left her shoes as a sign of compassion, so that I won't have to return barefoot, — I joked (the last walk barefoot gave me a lot of impressions, it was quite memorable) and noticed my shoes in a far corner under the bed. Apparently, they got there due to strong rocking. — You are smaller than me, can you get them? — Well, why, Lena is helpful, why can't she do that.

I got up and reached for my bag, found the phone in it, I wanted to read the incoming message. "Anna the naive" — it goes without saying, she — hoped that the message would be from Misha. Lena climbed under the bed.

— Is that he, who wrote to you? Yes? — I heard her muffled voice from under the bed. One more naive who was not mistaken.

— How insightful you are today. — I bet a hundred dollars, she smiled beautifully once again.

Lena, crawled from under the bed, grunting and holding my shoes in her hands.

— And what did he write? — She leaned over me, trying to look into the phone screen.

— Just offered me a ride home from work.

— So, he's Misha. And why did he write about the bar? She looked away from the phone and stared into my eyes.

— Because I had to tell him that I work in a bar. Let's

get dressed, — I decided to hurry my friend up.

— Than ask the driver to drop you off near a bar and meet this Misha there. You could have an unforgettable afterparty. She giggled sarcastically and began to dress up.

— I'm tired, I'll meet him in the evening.

In, I really wanted to do exactly what Lena said. To land in Misha's bed and, despite my fatigue, to have our own "party" with him. But what about "Anna the perfect girl"? She would definitely not approve of such behavior.

Chapter 7

Day three

Before dating Misha, it was necessary to clear away the traces of fatigue and tequila drunk the day before (I tried hard), but it turned out to be more complicated task than I had expected. All these repeatedly advertised miracle masks with vitamins, green tea, imposed by the advice of “bloggers”, and even ordinary ice did not help. I put on a tight T-shirt and short denim shorts hoping that Misha’s look would notice my body, not tired eyes, and left the house.

When I got into the car and joyfully pulled towards Misha to kiss his cheek, he drew me to him and kissed me on the lips (recalling how excitingly pleasant his lips were) and tightly hugged me, smelling my hair.

— I missed you, — he whispered, and a shudder ran through my body because of his low hoarse voice, and even my heart began to pound.

— And I missed you. — For the first time I did not lie saying these words to a guy.

Misha smiled, sitting straight in the driver’s seat, put one hand on the steering wheel and looked at me with ad-

miration, before turning the ignition key.

— You look amazing, — he emphasized.

As for me, but for the half open big breast above the neckline of the vest, I did not notice anything amazing in my appearance today. But still I said “thank you”, expressing gratitude.

We went to the embankment flooded with light from the roadside lanterns. We were driving by the promenade paved with multi-colored concrete tiles, where numerous passers-by walked carelessly. I was looking at them through the tinted glass, sitting comfortably in the spacious seat of the executive class car. A lot of pieces of paper with indelible paint were invested in the creation of this ideal streamlined black construction, honed by the minds of geniuses who know their work. The saloon smelled of skin and purity.

I recalled how, not so long ago, in the evening hours, I went for a run, pulling the hood of a sports sweater over my head, and rushed along this paved promenade past the couples of lovers who were enjoying their walk and families surrounded by children. Then I went down to the seashore, ran along the sand by the rolling waves. Breathing in wet air soaked with iodine, jumping over dead transparent jellyfish, which sometimes got on the way. Tired, I went to the coastal bar, took a big glass of ice-caffe and returned to the beach. I sat in the sand and talked to my “invisible friend”, sipping the refreshing ice drink, without thinking about those real and visible friends who I could spend free evenings with. My “invisible friend’s” company has recently become completely suitable for me. The company of the one who I could not sit side by side, but I could imagine it.

Today, Misha was holding my hand, stroking my palm, and I wanted to let it go as long as possible. His company became no less suitable than the company of my friend. I cherished a hope that he was experiencing something more to me than just lust. My doubts could be dispelled in a split second, but my “invisible friend” was still hiding in the unknown, only strengthening this hope with his silence.

Passing the town exit, Misha turned onto the highway and added speed, pressing the gas pedal harder. The car quickly and quietly hit the stride, gently moving along a broad flat road.

— Where did you decide to take me? — I asked.

— A beautiful quiet place. Don’t be afraid.

— I’m not afraid. Did you go to this quiet place with squeezes?

— Never with girls, never. — He turned his head to me, gave a short smile and continued keeping his eyes on the road again. — I often go there alone. Gated settlement where my boss lives. Have you ever been to places like these?

— No, how can I know people living such a luxurious life, — I replied, not at all embarrassed.

It goes without saying, that I happened to be there and more than once, and not for an hour.

— Well, yes, you are a “poor bartender, — he said, glancing a trenchant look at me (here I got a little embarrassed and confusedly lowered my eyes to my tanned knees), and then continued with earnestness: — Before work, I get up early and at dawn I run by the sea along the

beach. And when my boss leaves the house, I meet him near the car ready to perform my duties — I drive him where he tells me to, follow him, where he tells me to, and solve disputes, if he says so.

And you stay close. Today I will need you very much. You know it.

It reminds you something, doesn't it?

— And I rarely have days off. I offered you to have a vacation together, but you don't want to. Well, it's OK, I hope, you will change your mind soon, — Misha finished his speech, reached for the glove compartment, took out a pack of cigarettes and handed it to me. — The lighter also should be somewhere there.

I found the lighter, lit a cigarette and silently gave it to Misha.

As I would get to know later, everything he said, even though it reflected the true essence of his "life," was not real.

— So how was your working night? — Holding the champagne glass, Misha was looking at the small bubbles circling inside it.

We were sitting shoulder to shoulder on the rug, which Misha had brought, sipping champagne brought by him, not far from the night surf line. The frothy waves that came running up hit the sand, came very close to our stretched legs, just a little more and they could reach them, but the waves were only slightly touching our toes rolling back.

— I don't want to talk about work, we are having a rest today. — I leaned back and began examining the starry sky.

Misha followed my example, lay down beside me, with his free hand behind his head, holding the glass in his other hand.

— Do you see the Great Bear? — I stretched out my finger to the sky. — Did you know that every star in this constellation has its own name?

Looking intently at a piece of celestial space with the outline of a celestial bucket shown by me, Misha squinted a little and shook his head. That's it. I was drawn to the lofty themes, and "Anna the dreamer" continued:

— I love to look at the night sky, at the stars, behind which lies another, unknown world.

— Or maybe your world is here, and not beyond the boundless stars?

I slowly turned my head to Misha, and he turned to me. His remark turned out to be ambiguous. Did he mean himself?

— Let's have a drink. — I stood up and pulled him along.

We sat opposite each other. The moonlight was falling on Misha's face, reflecting in glimpses in his bright blue eyes, looking at me with a strange languid sadness.

— What did you do before you came to Israel? — I decided to be curious.

— In Russia, I served in the army by contact, and when it was over, I got married. I built a house for us. The house near a lake, in a very beautiful place. — He thought for a moment as if he was looking for words, or maybe he had doubts about the continuation of his story. I was also silent, waiting to hear the development of his story, and hoped for

a comment from my “invisible friend.” There was no comment, but Misha continued: — In general, after my wife’s death I left. Abandoned it all and left. He paused again, tapping his fingers lightly on the half-empty glass.

— You said you were boxing. For how long? — I continued asking.

— Twelve years, and I took part in fights, but that was a long time ago. I can’t go into the ring anymore.

— Why? Got a serious injury?

— No. After all, I sought everything not for my own sake, but for us. “Us” is gone, and victories turn out to be unnecessary. — He thoughtfully looked at a pile of large stones, which lay a little distance on the sand and partially got into the water. The waves were crashing against them, splashing away.

— You still cannot accept the fact that she is no longer here? — I never thought that guys like Misha can love truly, giving themselves down to the ground.

— Yes, it was hard for me then, yes, I couldn’t reconcile with circumstances for a long time, but I said that everything was in the past. Time’s a healer, life goes on and all that stuff, — he finished and smiled encouragingly.

My Misha, at least for today, he is a tall, attractive, healthy athlete, one of those people who do not like to cause compassion and self-pity, and I am not one of those who can easily grant sympathy. But it seemed to me that he still wanted to tell a lot of things, and I wanted to listen and understand him. The time for such a dramatic scene has not come yet. Life’s going on, we’re enjoying it and all that stuff.

— Tasty champagne, by the way, — After emptying a half-filled glass in one gulp, I handed it to Misha.

He did not take the glass, but pulled me to him, put one hand on my waist, and his other hand ran into my hair on the top of the head, moving my face closer to his.

— Now it's my turn to kiss you. — How sweet he said that.

The glass fell out of my weakened hand.

Again I felt the crazy taste of his moist lips that slid over my lips, I could not help but touch the elastic male body hidden under the thin fabric of the T-shirt. I had touched a lot of gorgeous male bodies, performing private dances for four years. I don't remember exactly how many, but I remember how I had been imagining that I was touching him. Him, yes. And now I didn't have to imagine anything.

Sitting on Misha's lap, clasping his hips with my legs and still kissing, I ran my hands over his shoulders, sliding my palms up to his neck, then ran them down his back, feeling every relief of the muscles under my fingers, and excitement began to grow inside me. And not only in me.

— Anna, I feel so good with you. I do not want to leave, that is... he quickly rearranged it: I do not want you to leave. Touching my hair disheveled by the damp wind, he gently ran his hand over it.

— I'm not going anywhere yet. — Smiling tenderly, I reached for a pack of cigarettes lying on the rug to distract myself and suppress my excitement.

— Should we better go for a swim? — He stopped me. — And make up your mind to get rid of this unnecessary habit.

— I'll definitely make up my mind some day, but actu-

ally you smoke yourself, — I said, without touching the pack of cigarettes.

— But not as much as you do. Come on, get up.

— I don't have a swimsuit.

Having received an invitation to spend time on the seashore, the first thing a girl thinks about is a swimsuit, and she will always be choosing for a long time the model that highlights her merits or conceals her flaws. But I absolutely did not think about it. These are all the consequences of the previous night, I consoled myself, but this consolation did not reassure me. If a couple of hours ago, my brain thought hard, without a drop of alcohol, then what can be said about its work at the moment.

— And there's nobody here. — Misha got up and took off his T-shirt.

Still sitting, I watched, with my eyes raised, as he began to unbutton his trousers, looking at his perfect, diligently-worked, lean body. Glare of light from the bright moon, reflected in the waves, scattered around and slid along the curves of the brightly distinguished muscles, emphasizing so exciting reliefs of his strong torso, nude shoulders, arms, and everything that my eyes touched.

“Anna the perfect girl,” as the moral entrepreneur, would say embarrassed: “No, no, that is indecent...” — burying her face in hands. But it's not fated for us to be the one with you, “Anna the perfect girl,” never. Well, I will not rush off the cliff, arms outstretched, like a bird in free flight, having come to the awareness of this fact. I'll only bow before you respectfully, miss, taking off my imaginary hat. And in general, at least, I tried my best for the first time for

him. I tried, you cannot argue.

I decided to support Misha's idea and not to pretend to be anyone else. It's over with images. Having thrown off my shorts and the vest, I had only pink translucent panties on. He threw his trousers aside and stopped for a second, studying the curves of my almost nude figure. Unable to suppress emotions from the sight of heaving breasts (the surgeon stuck them on perfectly, my skills in sculpting are nothing compared to his skill), Misha smiled mysteriously, surprise flashed in his rounded eyes, sighed heavily and said something unintelligible very quietly in a hoarse voice. I turned my back on him, stretching my open palm awaiting. He wasn't slow in coming and holding hands, we went to the water.

The sea water was invigorating with coolness, and Misha's large warm body warmed me. We hugged each other, enjoying the touches. I really did not want to let him go, these embraces gave the feeling of peace, even the sea was surprisingly calm.

Misha suggested continuing the night together, leaving me the right to choose the location. I joked off, saying that it would be nice to meet the morning in the Maldives in one of the houses on the water, lying on white sheets surrounded by the crystal clear ocean surface. In response, he said that this option was quite possible. I wanted to believe, and I did believe him, but pretended not to believe. We agreed that we would certainly visit at least one of these picturesque islands in the waters of the Indian Ocean, but some other time.

— Let's go back to Bat Yam than, but I won't return you back home today, — said Misha, stroking my back.

Yes, I have already found my home in your heart, do not return me anywhere. Sounds dramatic (it's good, that not out loud). In such intimate moments, I can say a lot of delusional things. And when it (I mean the moment) was over, Bat Yam turned out to be a good idea. You never know, what if I suddenly I get a wild hair up my butt to run away, so at least it would be close to my rented apartment. And this time I won't throw my shoes away.

Upon our returning, the promenade of our city, which was busy a few hours ago, was empty. Bars and restaurants were closing, white sun loungers standing in straight rows with umbrellas stuck in the sand nearby could be seen on the deserted beach.

Misha stopped the car at a multi-storey house, built not so long ago on the coast, pressed a button in a bunch of ignition keys, and the barrier closing the entrance to the courtyard went up. We stopped at a vacant parking space. Having shut off the engine, Misha got outside and walked to the door, behind which I was still sitting, not daring to go out. Opening the door, he looked at me, awaiting my decision and the action that would follow it.

— What house is this? — Looking out, I turned my eyes upwards, running through the large number of rounded floors of the building, going to the height, and then I looked at Misha.

“You treat me shabbily, leaving me in this situation,” I mentally addressed my “invisible friend.”

It would be surprising if he answered. I don't really know what wrong I have done to him and deserved such an

attitude. We did not argue. On the contrary, we embraced not so long ago in a dream and talked about how we love each other. I got scared at the thought: “What if he does not return?” No, it cannot happen. He’s hell of a fool. It seems he’s come up with something new.

— Come on, I’ll tell you everything. — Misha held out his hand to me, I put my hand into it and got off.

We walked to the glass doors of the building. Misha put his phone to the electronic panel located on the wall, and the doors opened smoothly. Then, having crossed a spacious hall with high ceiling and walls decorated with shiny granite tiles, he put the phone against the touch screen next to the metal elevator doors. Entering the cabin, he pressed number forty in the long row of buttons. Without asking questions I was waiting for the elevator to get up to the right floor, and after a minute we went to the elevator landing. Misha went up to one of the two identical white doors that were located opposite each other, took a bunch of keys out of his pocket and opened the front door. He invited me to enter the apartment, shrouded with subdued light, with a gesture.

The apartment turned out to be spacious: at the entrance on the right there was a kitchen area with the bar counter as snow-white as the walls; beige glossy tiles covered the floor; a large hall, with a leather corner sofa and a wooden coffee table attached to it, was framed around the perimeter with sliding floor-to-ceiling windows instead of walls. Through these panoramic windows one could see the starry sky above the sea.

A huge flat-screen TV hung on the wall opposite the

sofa, and above it there were black shelves. There stood pictures in silver frames, I came closer in order to have a look at them. Misha was still standing at the door. The photographs showed people of different ages and gender, as well as Misha himself. There was no doubt, it was his apartment.

The guard, yes? The guard would not be able to afford such a luxurious by Israeli standards apartment. So he lied to me. What a surprise.

— OK, Misha, do you live here? — Turning around, I asked, confused. While waiting for the answer, I watched him head towards the kitchen area, pull out a bottle of whiskey from the refrigerator and search for glasses, opening the drawers.

— Yes, I've told you a little lie, — he said when he had found the glasses, — just as well as you did about yourself.

My heart fell to the floor, flying out of my chest with a feeling of quick dismay burning my body. With frozen anxious surprise on my face, I stared at Misha. He, with deadpan seriousness, poured whiskey into glasses, picked them up, grabbed the bottle, and walked to me.

— Take a seat, — he said politely, pointing to the sofa, and handed me a glass. — I haven't worked as a security guard for a long time. I do business with a couple of friends. We supply materials for construction companies.

“Thank you, my friend, for such an awkward situation.” — I made a big gulp of whiskey and sank on the sofa. Misha sat down next to me.

— And what does that “you have lied” mean? Where? — Actually, I've already guessed, but still asked. You never know.

Taking the TV remote control, Misha pressed the button and the screen lit up his serious face with blue light.

— About the fact that you are actually not a “poor bartender”, but a stripper who earns good money. — He shrugged his shoulders, as if it did not matter to him.

Great, it’s said enough. His response instantly caused anger to my “invisible friend.” Yet my guess was confirmed.

— Do you want to turn on the music? — offered Misha, giving me the remote control.

I grabbed it out of his hand and threw it onto the table, it bounced off the wooden tabletop, hit the floor with a crash and rolled under the sofa. Misha followed it with his eyes, not being upset a little bit. He took it calmly that the remote control could be broken.

— For the first time ever I feel comfortable in silence, — I said in an injured voice being angry, but not with him, of course and drank the whiskey with the last sip.

— No offense. I apologize sincerely. — He smiled; a little beautiful, endearing smile (once again, why I can’t do that) played on his strong face. — Let’s start it all over again?

It turns out that when I was emblazing my legend to Misha, going into the details of the bartender’s work, he was listening to me, nodded his head trustingly, and my “invisible friend” who knew about everything, was deliberately silent. Both of them decided to check if I could start a relationship with a “simple guy in a red T-shirt”. Misha did not demonstrate his status — an expensive car, a luxurious apartment, a successful business, I don’t know what else he has got — and I am still with him.

— How do you know about where I work?

— A couple of weeks ago, one of the clients asked you to send him a friend request on Facebook, this client is my friend, — he began to explain reasonably. — Your other client from the hotel in Herzliya, who you recently visited, is also one of my acquaintances. I asked him to call the agency where you work and order just you. Karina — that's what you also call yourself at work for everyone. When he told you that he wanted you to come to him the next night, you replied that you had a day off, that you wanted to go to the beach, that you were tired of parties, that you were not getting enough sleep, and so on. He asked what city you live in, and...

— Everything is clear, — I interrupted him.

— Actually, I ran around all the beaches of Bat Yam. I wanted to find you. — With these words, he poured another go of whiskey into my glass, I brought it to my lips and took a sip. — And not once.

It is commendable, I already thought that the time when guys were running after girls is gone. In any case, it hasn't yet changed the essence of what is happening. It's not my scene to be on the other side. It is my privilege to know everything about everyone.

Without getting up, Misha leaned over, fumbled his hand under the sofa and picked up the remote control that had rolled under it.

— Actually, you could order me yourself without arranging this show with that casual acquaintance, — I said arrogantly.

— Come on, you have the principle — not to start rela-

tionships with customers. Nothing personal, just money. — He turned the remote control in his hands and thoughtfully looked at the buttons.

— How do you know that? — My look has become even more surprised and frowned.

— You told this to a client from Herzelia too.

— I didn't say that.

— You just don't remember. — He put the remote on the table.

— I remember everything, I did not tell him anything about my principles. Neither him nor anyone else! — I blurted it out indignantly.

— How would I know it then? You might have drunk a lot and forgot it, — he said as if I was stupid. — Can you turn the music on yet?"

— Are you kidding? Don't you know how to use your own remote control? — I spoke my words with an even greater emphasis on the fact that he was "pulling a boner".

— They delivered the TV set in the morning. I haven't even turned it on, — he made an excuse.

I took out a cigarette from the pack lying on the table, lit a cigarette with my free hand, took the remote control, leaned back on the sofa, breathing out smoke, and fulfilled Misha's request. I found YouTube icon on the TV screen and selected a club track. Turned the volume up to the maximum and from the speakers suspended under the ceiling, the rhythmic melody played, penetrating the glass with low beats and making it shiver.

— Excellent acoustics! — I noticed, shouting over music. — Do you like arranging parties "on the fortieth floor"?

— It's forty-first. The downstairs is occupied by the lobby and gym! — He shouted in response, drank his whiskey in one gulp and put the empty glass on the table. Leaning back in the couch, pressed his shoulder to mine and turned his head to me. For several seconds we silently looked at each other, smiling kindly. Music was raising our spirits.

Needless to say, that the night turned out to be absolutely not as I had expected it to be.

Misha reached for my ear and whispered:

— I want to offer you something.

— What are you talking about? — I asked wary. Guessings swept flew in my head at lightning speed. Cocaine? Grass? Ecstasy? Money for a blowjob? ... I won't voice it all.

Having swallowed his silly bait, I was really solving the riddle.

— About the fact that I won't be able to wait for you, knowing that you undress in front of those who then will paw you over and sniff the powder from your breasts (if anything, not only from your breasts). How much do you earn a week?

I did not want to answer, only continued looking at him blankly, frowning.

— I can give you twice as much, if you take a week off.

— You are crazy. — I smiled sarcastically, pushed him away from me and paused the music track. Silence fell in the apartment.

— Want to take me for a week? — Leaning over the table, I put out a cigarette in a glass ashtray.

— Hire — you said. And I just offered you not to go to work. And I don't insist on spending the whole week with me. It's your choice. If you want to leave, I do not hold you, if you want to stay, then you'll make me happy, just hugging, falling asleep next to you. I feel good and easy with you, Anna and if money is so important to you, take it and don't think about anything for at least a week, but don't go to work. — He pulled a wad of hundred-dollar bills with a rubber band out of his back pocket, threw it and it flopped down on the table. — What will be your decision? — Putting a hand on my knee, he seriously looked at me.

After his last words something broke in me. For the first time, someone tells me that. For the first time, someone insistently makes it clear that he will never share me with others. And even if I refuse to spend time with him and leave, he will be sure that I will definitely not spend the next few days at work, with those with whom he does not want to share me. For the first time, someone, knowing what I was doing, perceived me without a stereotype — a “stripper— funny-bunny^[5]”.

I'd rather say that I perceived him like that — a guy for fun. For the first time, someone destroyed my own stereotypes in me. And most importantly, for the first time it was his attitude that became meaningful to me.

Even my friend had been silent and did not interfere for so long. He might have been somewhere around (so invisible and intangible) observing, knowing what's going on in Misha's head, but he was waiting for my choice, not pushing or imposing his opinion. And I will say without any prejudices, all I really wanted was to stay with Misha. An in-

explicable craving for him ruled out all the prejudices. And the money — I did not need his money, and I was not going to take it. I did not want to feel obliged for the time he had bought. To be with him in fact — that's what I wanted.

— I want you. The rest does not matter, — I said confidently.

Misha pulled me to him, I sat down on his lap, so that our faces were opposite each other, wrapped my legs around his hips. He ran his fingers along the curve of my cheekbones and gently kissed my lips. He affectionately hugged my waist and buried his head in my neck. The big guy Misha could sometimes be gentle. How powerfully it did carry me away — a strong bear turns into a submissive “bear cub” looking for affection, it is impossible not to pet such a thing.

I lifted his head, clasping his face with my palms, and, rising from my knees, I started kissing his lips, not tenderly, but passionately. He squeezed my buttocks, sharply lowered on him, and I gently pushed my hips. Feeling how quickly he gets excited, felt the heat below my waist and the pulsation between my legs, which were increasing as desire grew in me. His hands slipped on my back under the vest, and goose bumps ran down my skin because of his greedy touches. I wanted to put my arm below his waist, just where the most sensitive part of his body was hiding, but I lingered at his waist, feeling the muscles along the ribs.

— We didn't go into the shower after the sea. — Having torn away from my lips, he tried to calm his breathing, inhaling the air deeply with his nose. — I promise, I will not molest you brazenly.

I got down from his lap and sat down next to him, pumped up and having lost my head completely. Soon I myself won't be able to take it any more and start to harass him. I remember, that I thought — “the games are over, it seems I've had it, my friend. Maybe you will finally say something?”

Far from it.

Misha got up from the couch.

— Are you coming? — He looked in the direction of the bedroom and headed there without waiting for an answer.

Taking another sip of whiskey, I also got up from the couch, left the glass on the table and followed him.

We went into a spacious bedroom with a large bed in the center, adjacent to the wall, covered with a white silk blanket. Transparent beige light curtains were swaying with the wind in the large open window. On the left of the entrance was a glass door that led to the bathroom. Standing next to it, Misha took off his clothes, revealing a beautiful toned body, it was very difficult just to look at, without doing anything to it. As it turned out that not only his muscles were of impressive size, but also the part which I didn't get round to.

I did not even notice how I began to undress. Standing, naked I continued looking at Misha no less frankly than he did.

— I'm looking at you, and I can't believe it ... — he hesitated, as if he realized that he had almost said what he shouldn't have said. — You're incredibly beautiful. You must have driven lots of men crazy.

Why did he mention the other guys at this moment? Yes, there have been a lot of others, and maybe there will be more. Actually, in his life there have also been other girls, I don't know how many, as well as how many more there can be.

— And you've driven me mad too, — he added, after a brief pause. In response, I shook my head, replying with an embarrassed look.

Misha opened the door of the shower cabin, then he led me in and lifted the lever of the silver mixer mounted on the wall.

Being with him in a narrow confined space, I felt him only mine, denying the existence of the world beyond the doors of the bathroom. Hugging him, I looked into his insanely beautiful face, which I thought I had already seen in one of my sexual fantasies.

Champagne, whiskey, the warmth of the water and Misha's touches relaxed me, and I melted in his hands.

— Your skin is so pleasant and elastic that it is impossible to tear of it, — he bent slightly and touched my shoulder with his lips, then moved them up, along the neck, up to the earlobe. With one hand he leaned against the tiled wall above my head, and the second hand clasped my throat right under my jaw, turning it up to his lips and he kissed me hungrily. He made me defenseless, obedient to his will. Such things have never happened before. I had always had everything under control, I “led”, I did everything I wanted, but they were only “dolls in the skillful hands of a puppeteer”.

Having torn away from my lips, Misha stretched out his

hand to a shelf with plastic bottles standing in a row, took one of them, and a thin, translucent strip of liquid soap with flower aroma poured out on my breasts. Having covered it with his big palm, he began to smear this slippery mass. His fingers moved along my waist, to my thighs, then headed down the waist and down on, penetrating between my legs, where he could feel the humidity of my desire that overwhelmed me. At this point, I wanted the water falling on us become brisk cold. A soft moan came out of my chest, the world floated in my eyes due to excitement.

I haven't felt such a wild desire that I want to last as long as possible. He teased me and caused a hidden fear, attractive, inviting, similar to what you feel, looking at the drug, daring to try it for the first time.

— Misha, stop or ... — My fingers embracing his neck, were trembling.

— Yes, I'm sorry, I've promised, — he said apologetically. He took his hands away from me, opened the shower cabin door to let me out and added. — Get into bed, I'll be there soon.

I went out, stepped with my wet feet on the tiled floor, found the folded towel on the shelf, wrapped into it and took a few steps and came to the glass door leading into the bedroom. I stopped. Turning around I took a look at Misha, who was standing with his back to me under strong water streams hitting his elastic shoulders.

Get into bed, I'll be there soon.

“How strange it is”, I thought then, not even realizing that this was only the beginning: soon there would be many more of them, and left...

The rays of the predawn sun had already been penetrating into the bedroom through the open window. Having thrown off the towel, I lay down in bed, pressed the button at the head of the bed, and the blinds outside the window began to close slowly. The room got dark, the only light triangle fell to the floor from the slightly open shower door. I closed my eyes, feeling tired, slowly began to fall asleep. When Misha lay down next to me, I put my head on his shoulder half asleep, embracing his hard stomach, and crashed out.

Look, — the voice of my “invisible friend” is heard.

I look around. I am surrounded by familiar setting. One of those similar nights in a nightclub room, which is used for an “afterparty”.

The bass roars of club music penetrate the chest with their blows, and a large number of people crowded around the bar where I was sitting. In the darkened space the multi-colored shadows of the twinkling lights of the light chaser reflected on their faces.

A cigarette is smoking between my fingers, and a strange bloke of standard Israeli appearance is found nearby; dark-haired, dark-skinned, with a perfectly selected shape of his beard. A thin gold chain with a diamond pendant in the shape of Mogen David gleams on his hairy chest in the unbuttoned collar of a strict black shirt.

— And she asks me, well, the girl who is sitting in the chair next to you, and do you have anything to sniff? You can’t even imagine who I am, — he says to me in Hebrew, trying to shout down the music, and directly into my ear.

He was twitching slightly with the rattling and wall-shaking even beats.

— I can imagine. A lawyer, — I answer, slightly leaning towards him. — You defended one famous politician in Israel. And in America, you managed to get a swindler, who had conned the state for a decent amount, out of prison. Donovan, Dorian, what's his name, I have bad memory for names. And this swindler has recommended you to the outstanding figure of our country. He offered you a lot of money, so you came back to Israel. — I casually throw an unfinished cigarette on the floor between the seat occupied by me and the adjacent chair where my interlocutor is sitting.

— How do you know ... — His face, killed by heroin and alcohol, suddenly begins to seem clear and sober. — They did not report this to the press, — he continues. — I wanted to show you, they wrote about me in the newspapers. — He throws a puzzled look at the glowing screen of the phone in his hands.

To show off that's what you wanted, I say in my mind, not having the slightest interest in him.

— There's no need to show anything, I've just recognized you. You are a great specialist.

— So, one more chaser? — He offers and, without waiting for the answer, asks the following question: — Did we come across with you somewhere before, in America?

— Yes, yes, in the courtroom. — No such thing had ever happen, and I had not had a chance to go to America by that time yet. My "invisible friend" had told me his story. — I don't want to drink anymore; you'd better go

to dance. — And I point with my hand at the dancing crowd of people next to the DJ.

Having obeyed me, he leaves, disappears in the crowd, which is moving synchronously, slightly changing movements in the rhythm of the music.

— I'm bored ... — I address my "invisible friend."

— Choose whoever you want, — he replies so quickly that I don't even have time to finish speaking.

Once again I'm looking at the people crowded near the bar. I notice a guy, a tall, strong blond wearing a white shirt, standing on the corner of the bar to my right, he is laughing and talking to friends. He rises a glass of beer, sips and cheerfully slaps one of his friends on the shoulder.

It was needless to say who my choice fell on.

"Michael, an American tourist. Recently served his time in army".

I take out another cigarette from the pack lying on the bar and smoke it, not taking my eyes off the handsome guy from the West.

Michael, who was called so by my "invisible friend," catches my appraising look on him. Smiles in response, I smile friendly at him. Then, leaving the company of his friends, he goes around the bar counter and comes to me.

— Hello. Can I give you a treat? — Michael asks in English, taking seat on a chair nearby.

— Yes, the whiskey chaser, — I respond kindly in his native language.

He raises his hand, trying to call the bartender, who is busy beyond all measure, serving a large number of visitors, and leans towards me:

— My name is...

— Michael, — I beat him, shouting his name clearly.

— What? — In the glare of repetitive light pulses, I notice his expressive surprise.

Oh, this one-of-a-kind stupid American facial expression, that can be seen even under the stroboscopic effect. “Civilian guys” (as we called them between us in a strip club), under any circumstances and in whatever condition they may be, they try to shine a Hollywood smile. And for the most cases it works properly, charging people with cheerfulness. In most cases, but not this night.

— How do you know my name? — Michael turns to me, embarrassed, but the smile still does not leave his attractive face.

“Do you want to mop him up?” — After the words of my “invisible friend”, I could not restrain myself and giggled, almost choking with cigarette smoke, lowered my head, trying to hide laughter.

— And your cat’s name is Magdalena. — I limit myself only to the cat’s name, although I already know a lot more. For example, about Michael’s sexual inclinations, which he carefully hides from everyone.

— Who are you? — He’s desperately trying to remember me, carefully sorting his memories, spreading his hands in amazement.

I show two fingers to the bartender, having caught his distracted gaze. He quickly puts the shots in front of me and Michael and pours whiskey into them, then covers them with lemon slices, Michael, in turn, gives him his credit card.

— I can't remember you, — Michael insists.

— It does not matter.

We drank the whiskey, chased it down with lemon and squinted our eyes a bit because of the sourness.

“Maybe you've drunk enough for today? As someone will feel very bad tomorrow. Your head hurts, you feel sick...”

— C'mon you. Actually I'm tired of everything. I'll just find my friend and leave.

— What did you say? — asks Michael in bewilderment.

— I say, — I begin to shout into his ear, trying to shout down music that had already gained momentum and drummed even louder, — I'll go to find my friend, she should be somewhere here. I'm worried about her. And you talk to your grandmother.

— What grandmother?

— The one that will call you now.

Michael pulls his iPhone out the pocket and looks puzzled at the dark screen. In a second it lights up.

Smirking, I get up from my chair and go on my own I don't know exactly where, making my way through a dense crowd of people dancing like in trance, pushing them angrily with my elbows.

“So, we've had fun.”

— Well, I don't care, — I muttered to myself. — As a matter of fact some people fool around with blow-up dolls.

The sounds of music began to subside, the vision dimmed, the crowd of people began to mix up in a black lump.

“Do you want to go back to your room?”

— What room? And what on earth is going on? Is this another dream?

“No, a forgotten memory.”

The music finally disappeared, and a dark spot, reaching consciousness, swallowed me. Everything faded in my eyes, and then the light came.

I was sitting on a bed lit by the rays of the sun that made their way through the open window framed by beige curtains in a small room and looking at my own reflection in the closet door covered with a mirror-film. I was wearing a wide cut white cotton pajamas, and my hair was gathered at the back of my head.

“What do you think exists? This room or the one where you fell asleep in?”

— Of course, the one where I fell asleep, — I said mentally.

“Then why do you see this room now?”

I got out of bed and turned around. The room looked like a single room in a cheap but clean hotel and was furnished with the minimum furniture: a single bed, a bedside table, a plastic chair and a wardrobe; blue painted walls.

— I don’t have a clue. Do you want to confuse me completely? Or do not you know what kind of place it is yourself?

“I know, but I don’t understand how you managed to get here, and even took me with you. Come back quickly.”

I woke up on Misha’s shoulder in his bedroom,

shrouded in twilight. My eyes rested on his chest. I pressed closer to him, thinking: it's all right, just a psychedelic dream.

It turned out that it was not just me, who had psychedelic dreams. Misha's body suddenly shuddered, a nervous shudder pierced him with a wave, like the one created by a defibrillator, making the heart that has stopped beat again. He jumped, and I followed him. Leaning on his hand, he frowned, lowered his head, overcoming the pain, then threw his wide-open eyes on me with a frightening surprise frozen in them, and in a hoarse voice said:

— Do not do this anymore, — he leaned toward me, kissed my cheek and added: “Forgive me if I scared you, — and leaned back on the pillow, rolling his eyes, plunging back into sleep.

— Why, don't apologize, — I said, continuing for a few more seconds to sit in a stupor and look at him sleeping. Then I moved Misha's motionless hand so that it was possible to return to the original position on his shoulder, lay down, leaning against him, and only at that moment understood. I managed to fall asleep without a sleeping pill.

Outside the closed window the midday sun was already shining. The promenade was filled with people again, all the coastal bars opened, beach umbrellas were melting in the sun, the loungers were not empty. And the bundle of dollars (I don't know exactly how I would dispose of them, but still the more pieces of paper with indelible paint, the better) was lying on the table in the hall. It seems to be mine.

What stopped me from taking it and leaving?

Misha was lying in bed with me. I knew that I would be

here with him (not having the exact idea, of course, what kind of bed it would be and where it would be, but the fact was that I would be with him) as soon as evening came. Just I did not imagine that I would prefer to stay in it.

I nestled closer to him, sighed lingeringly and tried not to think of anything at all.

Chapter 8

Day four

Opening my eyes, I saw snow-white pillows and a blanket crumpled under my arms. Misha was no longer around. The bedroom was lit by daylight from the open window. There was a smell of food in the air, and my empty stomach immediately responded to it with its rumbling. A picture of a pile of crispy pancakes and strawberry jam flashed in my eyes. This cherished image beckoned me to get out of bed, and I automatically got up, left the bedroom, entered the kitchen area. On the way, I noticed that I had no clothes on, at all. I sat at the bar table, on its marble surface there were those very attractive pancakes and jam. And also orange juice in a transparent jar and an empty glass. Food cravings turned out to be stronger than anything else, and it was only after I was full that I noticed a thick white envelope lying next to the jar, from which I pulled out a folded sheet of paper with hand-written letters first. Unfolded it and read.

“Anna, I had to leave (by the way, you sleep so funny, on your stomach, arms spread out to your sides, resting on the pillow with your little nose that frowns under the weight

of your head), feel at home. I left the money for you in the envelope, as I said, take it and don't go to work this week. Whatever your decision is, it is yours, even if you leave and you don't want to meet with me."

I put the sheet down and opened the envelope where the dollars, recently dropped by Misha on the table had moved. Holding the envelope, I returned to the bedroom. My clothes was lying neatly on the bedside table. I got dressed, put the envelope with the money in my shorts pocket and left the apartment. Yes, I still took the money with me. So what? He, one might say, insisted on it.

Having already gone down to the lobby, I stopped in the center of its luxurious space, took the phone from my back pocket and for a long time hesitated to write a message to Misha. The events of the last night seemed strange to me, to say the least. I did not fully understand how the guy wearing the red T-shirt had suddenly turned into a rather well-to-do, generous and caring Misha, who even bothered that when I woke up, I would not be hungry. Where did he come from, all so good? And where did my "invisible friend" go again? And where the hell am I running again?

"Misha, thanks for breakfast, I woke up being terribly hungry," — I began to type a message on the phone, but this process was interrupted by a call. The number consisted of unknown numbers and without the name written in the address book, I decided that one of the clients was calling me. One of those to whom "Anna the cheater" had given her number once in exchange for tips, promising to meet in an informal setting and in private. I did not answer and then the notification came — the caller left a voice message,

I decided to listen to it. A familiar voice uttered the words in Hebrew.

— Hello Anna, this is Dr. Sammi, you have missed the appointment and haven't answered the calls for several days. We need to meet, contact me urgently.

Oh yeah, the doctor. I've completely forgotten about him in the light of recent events. He is, actually, a good psychiatrist, interested in my health and giving me prescriptions for pills. As I've said before, I stopped taking them long ago, but I still came to see Dr. Sammi, took prescriptions, and told him how wonderful I feel thanks to his professional treatment. "Anna the cheater" has always expressed appreciation, taking an interest how things are going with the doctor. I decided to call him back, but before that I finished and sent the message to Misha.

"I wanted to have a little walk, where did you go?"

Opening the large glass lobby doors, I went out into the courtyard, the sun blinded my eyes. It was difficult to see anything without sunglasses except paving slabs under my feet. I tried to return to the lobby, but the door had slammed, and Misha opened it with his phone. Covering the screen of the phone from the sun with my palm, I found "Sammy the whoremonger" in the contacts and called the doctor.

— Anna, we haven't talked for a couple of weeks yet, — alarm sounded in his voice. — I have free time, somewhere in an hour. I'm waiting for you in my office. Deal?

— All right, — I agreed, thinking that I'd have time to buy new expensive sunglasses right in that hour.

Walking along the hospital corridor, painted perfectly white and decorated with posters advertising new miracle pills, safeguarding you against any mental illnesses, I was thinking about Misha, about last night, about his words. He never answered my message, the phone was silent.

Coming to Dr. Sammy's office door, I put the phone into my shorts pocket and knocked.

— Yes, come in, — came his familiar hard voice from behind the closed door.

I opened it. The doctor was sitting at a large, brown-painted table, looking at me through transparent glasses, raising his eyebrows.

— You look good, Anna, — he stated, having examined me in a few seconds with his intent and observant gaze.

“Anna the liar”, smiling, with a fluttering gait, entered the office and sat down on a chair at the table opposite the doctor.

— Why don't you take off your glasses? — He tactfully asked, starting to type text on the computer keyboard.

— I feel more comfortable this way.

Dr. Sammi (I don't know what he wrote, in my turn, I will provide a short dossier on him), the full name sounds like Samuel, a man with a bald spot entering old age, a lover of the Israeli national food, such as falafel^[6] and hummus^[7]. This addiction to fatty foods affects its weight. He stretches his hands on the table, as he can't sit close to it because of the interfering belly. Accordingly, he has to stretch to reach the keyboard. A famous psychiatrist in Israel. Behind him hang diplomas and a shelf, where the books written by him stand. The doctor put a bar cabinet in the cor-

ner, an oblong oak cabinet with transparent glass doors. On the shelves, he placed the quaint figurines of awards and collectible bottles of brandy. (End of the dossier.)

I really wanted to ask him what his trip to Ukraine was like. It would be fun to watch the change in his facial expression.

In an instant, such perceived seriousness could be replaced with guilty fright. Respect for people (even knowing who they really are) yes, I have this trait in me.

— You are no longer outdoors, I will close the blinds, you can take off your glasses. — He slowly got up and walked to the window.

I took off my glasses and put them on the table, as well as the phone that did not give a signal.

The doctor returned, sat down in a chair, which occasionally squeaked under his impressive weight, and straightened his tie.

— The last time we met, I prescribed you Assival, how do you feel? Didn't your "invisible friend" visit you, didn't he give you advice?

— No, — I said, and again looked at the dark oblong screen of the phone that was lying on the table.

— I see. Why didn't you keep the appointment?

— I've completely forgotten. I've had a lot to do recently. Yes, and I feel great. I wake up, have breakfast, do household chores, go to work, talk to friends at weekends, and everything is fine, there is no more voice. — Over the past day he really did not visit me. I thought about it when I was speaking. Perhaps that is why my words sounded absolutely believable.

— That’s right, life consists of the usual activities that fill every day for us. — He rested his elbows on the table, slightly leaning forward, the chair under him creaked heavily once again. — It’s good that you understand it.

— Of course I do, doctor, — I said, a little absently.

— Are you waiting for a call? — It seems that the doctor noticed that I was more interested in the telephone than in our conversation with him. — Anna? Are you waiting for a call? — He repeated.

— Just ... — I looked up at him sharply and didn’t know what to say.

— Well. — He pulled the keyboard towards him and pressed the “Enter” key with his short finger. The printer standing on the table squeaked shortly, then there was the rustle of paper going through it.

Taking the sheet from the surface of the printing device, the doctor handed it to me and asked:

— Can you give it to the nurse?

— Which nurse? — I answered his question with mine, being at a loss.

He looked at me squarely, fluttered eyelashes behind the glass of his glasses, puzzled, and laid the sheet on the table. In perplexity, I shrugged my shoulders, because I didn’t know which nurse was being talked about.

Dr. Sammy continued with ease.

— Do you want to go back to your room?

What on Earth room? — I heard a similar question not so long ago. I even had an idea of how it looked, but had no idea what it meant.

He started tapping his fingers on the computer key-

board, without answering. Don't I understand something or is he making a fool of me? Declaring me a crazy is one thing, but insane is over the top, the part of my mind that is responsible for logical thinking, performed its functions quite well.

— Be sure to come to my appointment in a week. Do you know what day it is today? — His eyes remained riveted to the monitor screen.

— Shabbat, it was Friday yesterday. — Sudden awareness of the circumstances that did not fit into the usual rhythm of life plunged me into a momentary shock. I involuntarily opened my mouth and froze with this stupid expression on my face for a few seconds, then asked hesitantly: — Wait, why are you working on a Sabbath?

— It is Sunday today, Anna, — the doctor said absolutely calmly. Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at me and again continued his usual business — hitting square keys.

These brain experts have some strange peculiarity. I have already begun to believe that the part of my mind that is responsible for logical thinking still does not perform its functions as well as I thought. My “invisible friend” didn't come to rescue me either.

I got up, took the glasses and the phone off the table and added calmly as I was leaving:

— See you in a week.

I hurriedly headed for the exit from the hospital building, passing by the familiar snow-white corridors and letting flies mentally toward my “invisible friend.” I clearly remembered: the night I spent with Misha was the night from Fri-

day to Saturday. The only reasonable explanation for what had happened was that I had slept through the last 24 hours. However I could find no rational explanation of how this could have happened, on top of that, without a sleeping pill.

As soon as I opened the glass doors and stepped onto the porch, glaring sunlight hit my eyes, I heard a thread of sound penetrating my head, filling in all its contents; it pinged every cell of my brain causing unbearable pain. I fell to my knees, clutching my ears with my palms, everything around me disappeared into the dark, and then suddenly returned to the usual places.

I was standing on the same hospital porch under the rays of the setting sun. Just as if nothing had happened, I put on my sunglasses, went down the granite steps, I felt the phone vibrate in my back pocket. It was a call from Misha.

— Anna, where are you? — He asked in a worried voice.

— I... well, I'm here, not far from your house," I said perplexedly. It seems like everything was OK, and at the same time it seems like something has happened.

— I'll pick you up and we'll have dinner at the restaurant, won't we?"

— Of course, let's have dinner, drive up to my house in an hour, I've got to change clothes. — If I said so, then I knew exactly what was happening, and everything was really OK.

— Fine, it's a deal!

— What restaurant are we going to? — I asked Misha,

sitting next to him in the front seat. The car, driven by him, was racing along the narrow roads of Bat Yam, past the single-type four-story beige residential buildings on stilts.

— It's in the northern part of Tel Aviv. My friends, my companions and I, completed a good transaction and decided to celebrate. — He took my hand, put it on his knee, felt under rough cotton fabric of black trousers, and covered it with his palm.

— You told me about dinner, I thought, there would be only two of us. To be honest, I'm tired of noisy companies.

— Don't you want to meet people who surround me? — He turned onto the highway that connected Bat-Yam and Tel Aviv, joining the heavy traffic.

— Yes, but let's not stay there for long?

— No problem, he gave a grin of approval, I wish I knew what he was thinking about.

Overtaking cars on the highway, maneuvering in four lines of traffic, he managed to give glances at me, over and over again looking at my half-open shoulders, let his eye dwell on its curves. Especially for the dinner, I decided to put on a clingy black dress, just below the knees length, with a large rounded neckline, falling down on my shoulders, adding to it strict style sandals of the same color on stilettos and a handbag. I put my sleeping pills hoping that I would spend that night with Misha, but this time I would not see those "crazy dreams".

There was a several months long period when I was tormented by nightmares. Strange, creepy, incomprehensible. I saw people, they begged me for help. I saw unborn children, they were stretching their hands to "failed mothers".

I saw boys and girls who had not seen the life yet, those who died an absurd death, they wanted to go home so much.

My dog, who will walk her in the morning, my son, God forgive me, my mother, why doesn't she need me...

It doesn't matter, it's just a nightmare. As my "invisible friend" said — never mind. Having fallen asleep with Misha, I saw a strange dream, albeit not so frightening, but specific. I did not want to see something like that anymore. Sleeping pills switched off the brain, and most often I didn't see anything, only in an intermediate state, before waking up, on the verge of sleep and reality, I met with my friend who still didn't get out of his obscurity. But the recent terrible dream, which made me stay out of bed because of fear, I had just in a half-sleeping, half-awake state. It would be worth thinking about this, but at that time I was thinking about something completely different.

I often looked at Misha myself; that day he looked more than smart. His style has become more conservative. Black trousers, slightly narrowed to the bottom, tastefully matched his figure. Black slim-fit shirt unbuttoned on the top and upturned collar. It emphasized his athletic torso and broad shoulders. The sports hairstyle acquired a new shape due to the elongated strands fixed by the gel. The bristles on the cheeks became shorter — he looked a little unshaven, which made him even more brutal.

— Misha? Did I sleep in your bed all day? — I decided to ask.

Because of the motorcyclist who unexpectedly got ahead, brazenly overtaking us and almost drove into the bumper of our car, Misha frowned, threw up his palm,

showing outrage, but did not shout out anything after him.

— You slept a little less than a day, — he answered in a completely justified tone, glanced at me with a quick glance, and the rude expression on his face immediately softened. — And anyway, I wouldn't let you go to another bed.

— Why didn't you wake me up?

— What for? He shrugged his shoulders vaguely and continued looking ahead fixedly.

— Well, because it is not normal.

— These things happen when human body is severely depleted. With your rhythm of life, when you hardly eat anything, you do not sleep, but you only drink whiskey, this is quite normal. Fatigue adds up. Do you understand?

— Yes, I do, — I muttered to myself. I can't say that his answer satisfied me completely.

We were approaching the northern part of Tel Aviv, passing by the skyscrapers with a large number of office buildings floors with neon signs of world-famous financial and insurance companies ascending to the sky. The shining windows of high houses reflected the glare of lights from the huge billboards, attracting attention due to their bright colors and perfectly shaped girls of model appearance.

— Where did you go for a walk today? —Misha asked me the question when he slowed down at the traffic light.

— Well here and there, to the mall. And I also went to see a doctor. I sometimes go to the psychotherapist.

— What for? Do you have mental problems?

— Well... for lack of a better word, I just like communicating with him, discussing certain topics that you can

rarely discuss with others. I came to see him for the first time about three years ago and I told him that I heard a voice and called it my “invisible friend.”

— Really? — Stepping onto the gas pedal sharply, he thoughtfully knitted his eyebrows, still not turning to me.

— Yes, and I didn’t make him up, — I replied in the affirmative tone, intently observing Misha’s reaction. — Do you understand?

— I understand, he kept his calm manner, but I still managed to notice his confusion. — And what does he tell you? Your friend.

— He can read people’s thoughts and tell them to me. Thanks to him, I got to know that the doctor is cheating on his wife with his neighbor and that he likes having fun in Ukraine in the company of young prostitutes.

Why did I tell Misha about my “invisible friend”? I have no rational explanation. Misha was the second man after the doctor who I told about my “friend”. And I told him with ease, without thinking.

Misha’s next question discouraged me:

— What, are you a psychic medium?

He could well have taken me for a schizophrenic, off my head, but no. Psychic. Indeed, if you think so, then these eccentric mediums who are able to communicate with the representatives of the other world, are commonly trusted and are not considered to be people who have bats in the belfry.

— Something like that, — I said, — but I don’t know what you think about. It’s for the first time.

— Great, otherwise I’ve already got scared, — he

grinned and looked at me encouragingly.

— Do you believe me? — I asked in surprise.

— Yes, and, unlike your doctor, I don't think you are crazy. Do not forget, my work was related to the security service and I was supposed to monitor people, therefore recognizing them as psychos is not difficult for me. You are quite adequate, of course, you have your bees in bonnet, but it is even interesting.

And this answer with his explanation completely satisfied me.

Tel Aviv busy area was left behind. I had already been to this recently rebuilt district of the northern part of the city. It is inhabited by politicians, stars of show business and criminal personalities. Yes, namely the latter for the most part, who are an integral part of our small country, where, despite its devout religiosity, drugs sold per day cost an amount with a greater set of zeros than the number of all the country's inhabitants.

At the sight of insanely expensive prefabricated flat blocks, hotels and villas that were hidden behind high fences, which we were passing by, the memories just could not declare themselves. I and the girls working with me had been ordered to these places a lot of times. Choice clients — all men, born for easy money making and easy spending of large sums of money. They threw crazy parties, took everything and let themselves do everything that came to mind. It was difficult to stay in a world of your own, not to abandon your principles, not to give in to temptation, not to get into a whirlpool carrying you away into a new reality, and not to drown in fun, losing your head because of a wide

range of drugs to choose from, receiving, among other things, so much adored pieces of paper.

Holding hands, Misha and I entered a restaurant filled with the smell of freshly cooked food and loud voices of its numerous visitors. Sitting at the round wooden tables, they were chattering lively, shouting over music. The waiters wearing the same black uniform with long aprons tied at the waist hurried up running by next to them. One of them ran past us with a large tray, holding it high on his hand.

The three guys sitting at a table near the slide glass doors, which opened the view to watch the night surf, noticed our appearance, stood up immediately and hurriedly headed towards us, leaving the girls who were their company behind.

— Hey, why have you been driving so long? — Said one of the guys who approached to us; hugging Misha, he patted his back happily. — We've done it, huh? Everything worked out.

— Yes, and it worked out so well, — Misha replied with the least enthusiasm, tensely hugging him in response.

The guy who spoke to Misha switched his interest to me. His brown eyes, which looked with glitter, caused not only by his joy, ran through my body assessing. He put his hands in the pockets of his cigarette cut shortened pants and, leaning relaxedly on one leg, smiled. He had an unrivaled sense of style, and the model appearance adhered to him produced an impressive effect. A sugary blond, a girls' favorite, who wanted to get them in the greatest number possible and give each of them a piece of his attention, was standing

in front of me.

— Are you just that same Anna? Michael told us about you, he said in a slightly haughty tone.

— Yes, and lots of times,” Misha’s second friend, who was standing opposite us, got in a word. In terms of height and build, he was surpassed Misha by far and dredged up images of a person, who “lives” in a gym who is constantly lifting weights, pausing only to drink a protein shake, enhanced with muscle growth aids. He emphasized them with the appropriate brand sportswear. A diamond glittered in his ear, a few small stones glittered on the pendant of a thin chain and watch face (on a massive wrist), where they closed the circle, lining up in a row.

— I’ve asked you not to say anything. — Misha pushed his fist into his shoulder with a free gesture.

— My name is Denis, — the third introduced himself and stretched out his hand to me. He looked like forty, his dark hair framed a tired face, with lots of wrinkles, and his dim eyes radiated peace. He seemed to be the only one who did not bother with the choice of expensive clothes and did not show off the relevant accessories. He was wearing a black tailored suit and a white shirt with a maroon tie neatly tied at its collar.

— I am a lawyer, attorney and accountant. Rolled into one. I work for these guys, — Denis continued; I gave him my name, and he kissed my hand on the back side.

Misha pulled me closer, hugging my waist.

— These are Dima and Max. — Denis first pointed to the blond and then to the dumpy athlete.

— That will do, that will do, we’ve made the acquaint-

tance of each other, let's go. — Throwing a few short words to his friends, Misha pushed me forward.

Grasping my hand tightly, he walked quickly towards the big festive table. Dima caught up with him and having joined him addressed him, smiling lustfully:

— Do you remember the girls from the “Dolls”, I called them to us. — Having raised one eyebrow, he looked at the girls at the table.

I stopped for a second. Misha was persistently pulling me ahead, dragging me along.

What does it mean, “remember?” This is the first thing that flashed in my thoughts. I happened to work in the above-mentioned club, and quite often, and I was familiar with each of those “girls” (some of them were already in their late thirties, and that's how they were referred to — as “girls”).

The “Dolls” was considered to be the best strip club in our country, the companions of this house had already managed to open a couple of similar places in Europe.

In Israel law, there were no clear rules for such institutions because these institutions made considerable contribution to the treasury and, accordingly, fed those who wrote the rules. Pro forma, to appease the angry public, the representatives of the law often made raids with checks, filmed everything on camera for the news broadcast in order to show that the “girls” behind the doors of private rooms did not do anything unchaste, to put it mildly (of course, lots of them were doing much there). The dancers were interviewed in order to show that their work included only dancing and no one inclines them to provide intimate ser-

vices. Which was true in all: the “girls” were not inclined to do anything — nobody had to, they did it voluntarily, everyone wants to have a lot of paper with indelible paint, and everyone earns it as she or he can.

Soon there would be demonstrations of feminists on the streets of Tel Aviv, soon most of the strip clubs would be closed and the walls of private rooms broken down, and a law equating the dance on the client to prostitution would be issued (I don’t know it, probably those who were being fed could not get enough). Of course, the partners the “Dolls” knew that such things would happen, there were good reasons why they moved to Europe.

Let’s go back to the days when the club still existed. Exquisite club “Dolls” — with an expensive modern interior of two floors — its large, wide stage with gleaming poles to the high ceiling and a full-size plasma screen could be seen both from the first and from the second floor. The club owners had invested well in their house, having worked out the bar, giving the visitors the choice of only the best alcoholic drinks. They created VIP-zones with individual plans for each of them. They hired only those girls who could dance on a pole, beautiful, athletic, such girls that can rarely be met in everyday life. They spent considerable amount of money on plastic surgery, constantly enlarging or reducing something. To tell the truth, looking at them, I myself finally decided to use the services of a plastic surgeon, but I limited only to the mentioned above breast surgery.

Naturally, either tourists or those who earn good money in Israel could afford such a relaxation. And if Misha’s friends invited the strippers from the club to the restaurant,

it was easy to guess how it all worked out before. On one of the nights spent in the amusement facility, we are talking about, they lashed out on drinks and gave a lot of tips to those present at the table. After closing time, they were invited to the hotel, offered an impressive amount of money, to which they agreed, without hesitation, and continued all the fun together until lunch, if not until the evening (and I also thought why Misha should know what was happening at such parties). In my imagination, I distinctly saw how Misha and his friends shoved bills into the “girls’” bras, seated them on their lap, sniffed powder from their bodies, and how they closed in the rooms from time to time.

— Anna, are you still with me? — said Misha, his gruff voice managed to wake me up from being absorbed in thoughts. — What’s happened?

I was sitting at the table. I do not remember how I got there. I got too deep in thoughts. Misha was sitting on my right, and Max, who was drinking vodka instead of a protein shake, sat next to him.

— As if you don’t understand it, — I addressed Misha, and grinned bitterly.

— Honestly, I did not know that they would be here.

— And I didn’t know that you like spending time in the company of, let’s say, expensive women, — I said quickly, and reached for a glass of wine, which the contented waiter condescendingly filled for me.

— As for “these”, I don’t care a red cent for their company, — Misha whispered in my ear.

Looking up, I decided to take a longer view of the girls

sitting with me at the big round table. I expected to see familiar faces, so I was not surprised at all. They did not take the slightest note of me, only showed their interest in Misha's friends (of course, the real bonanza for hunters for papers soaked in indelible paint). Coquetting, these "girls", avid for everything connected with wealth, touched their long hair and smiled playfully with "Botox" inflated smiles. One of them touched the edge of Denis's glass with her finger, looking into his eyes, the other laughed, playfully pressing against Dima's shoulder with her big breasts.

But the third one managed to surprise me — she ran to Misha and hugged his neck from behind.

— Hello, — she cried, happily hanging on him, kissed his cheek, leaving a print of bright lipstick. — I missed you. — Then she raised her head, stared at me with her big amazed, brown eyes and added: — Karina, are you here too? — A few curls of her hair slid under Misha's shirt collar.

I didn't answer her, didn't say anything sarcastic and caustic. But I wanted very much, not only to say, but in addition to break a glass on her red-haired head. I held in my anger, everything was in order with the state of my mind.

— Listen... Mary, — Misha said confusedly (for all clients she is Mary, and between us, girls, just Ira) and tried to remove her long arms politely, but she, unwilling to let him out of her arms, leaned on him even harder and whispered something in his ear.

I urgently needed to go out. Rather, to leave, or to be even more accurate, run far away.

Finishing off the remaining wine in the glass, I stood up at lightning speed. Misha, suddenly forgetting about polite-

ness, rudely tore Mary-Ira's hands from him, pushed her away and shouted hatefully in the direction of his blond friend, having jumped from the chair:

— You mother fucker, you are behaving like a jerk for life, I told you that I would here come not alone!

And now it was Dima's turn to jump sharply from his chair.

— Well, she's just the same as they are. — He spread his hands, forcing everyone pay attention to the obvious fact. He looked around the girls who were sitting in their places being completely indifferent and calm, separating themselves from the situation. — Fancy making all that fuss over.

Misha rushed to him, around the table, but did not have time to pounce on him. The sturdy Max grabbed Misha and wrung his hands behind his back with a powerful jerk.

— Last thing for you two to have a fight. Calm down, what's wrong with you? — He tried to calm Misha down, still holding him tight.

Having grabbed my bag from the table, I walked hastily to the exit, away from their dispute and from the world of rich and licentious people. The feeling of insult and anger drove me stronger than a glass of wine drank in one draught.

When the restaurant door slammed shut behind me, I took off my sandals, took them in my right hand and ran towards the sea. Turned around the corner of the building of the restaurant, jumped off the concrete curb to the cold sand. My legs began to sink into it, slowing my pace, but I tried to go as quickly as possible without turning around. I was put out of temper not only by the fact of this unpleas-

ant discovery connected with Misha's personality, but also by the fact that this discovery should have happened at the very beginning of our acquaintance with Misha, when I wasn't into him, but not in this ridiculous situation.

— I asked you to tell me about him. Why couldn't you do this? Talk to me at last! Damn you! Where are you? I was addressing my "invisible friend," stopped and looked up towards the starry sky, looking for him in the distant emptiness of uncertainty, stood, frozen, and waited for an answer in complete confusion, overflowed with anger.

He didn't answer. Didn't come. Was not available at the moment. How much I wanted to throw my sandals at least at somebody.

— I was wondering where you would run. I see you didn't like my friends. — It was Misha, his voice was heard from behind. I did not have time to turn around, he hugged me from behind and pressed to himself so hard that I lost my breath.

— Neither your girlfriends, — I said in a hurt voice and, loosening his arms, turned around. — I'm the same as they are.

— I don't think so.

— I wish I could believe it...

He ran his fingers over my chin, some regret flashed in his apologizing look. I suddenly forgot what else I wanted to say. Misha's hands once again powerfully wrapped around my waist, he began kissing my lips, running over them with his tongue, which retained the taste of the red wine. He knew how he could cut claws.

— Let's get out of here, — he said, nibbling my earlobe

gently, shall we talk at home? I will order dinner. Did you eat anything other than pancakes for breakfast?

— No, I tried to collect my thoughts so as not to succumb to his manipulations with my slack feelings. — And generally speaking...

He grabbed me, hoisted me on his shoulder — I hung on him, bent over in half — and carried me like a primitive hunter, who was taking the won prey to his cave. He was walking quickly, straddling despite the loose sand.

— Had I refused to go with you, you would have tied me up and threw me into the trunk, right? I'm just asking, out of typical female curiosity. Don't get it wrong, bad thoughts about you never even entered my head.

Misha put me on a concrete curb and climbed up too.

— Why should it be the trunk? There are other methods. — He smiled warmly, clearly realizing that what I was saying was filled with comic sarcasm, and began to shake the sand off his shoes.

Dima was waiting for us in the parking lot. He was hanging around Misha's car, carelessly kicked it on the wheel with his shoe toe, then he lit a cigarette and continued walking with short steps from side to side. As I approached him, I noticed seriousness on his cheesy face (it seemed that either the line was too short and he had come down or hadn't done it yet, but it was Misha who had cut him down to size).

— Before you leave, I'd like to apologize to you, — Dima started to speak confidently. — You and I are really strangers, it was stupid to talk like that about you.

Well, yes, of course, he lumps all the girls under a gen-

eral umbrella of the stereotype set in his brain.

— Did he ask you to do this? — I glanced at Misha standing nearby.

— No, I misunderstood the whole thing, — Dima continued; he leaned on the wing of the car, crossed his legs, took a couple of short puffs and threw his cigarette out. — I just didn't think that it was serious between you.

— OK, friend, have good rest. It was a hard day today. — Misha decided to quit the conversation, without giving me the opportunity to answer. He opened the front door of his car, on the passenger side, and briefly slurred to me: — Get in.

I raised my hand, showing Dima that I was saying goodbye, I smiled amiably (after all he apologized) and got into the car. Misha slammed the door, thoughtfully looked at me through the glass, hesitated for a few seconds and nodded, agreeing, and by his appearance one could easily understand that this agreement was not easy for him, then he turned to Dima, who was leaving, called him and hurried after him.

I couldn't hear what they were talking about; I only saw how, having finished the conversation, they joyfully shook hands, embraced each other and parted.

When we stopped at Bat Yam, Misha turned down the volume of music playing in the car and asked:

— Are you still angry with me?

— Have you just asked it or do you really want to know my opinion? — I thought he would never ask.

— I'm bored, so I asked you. — He paused; responding

his words, I said sarcastically, with the complete lack of emotion. — Of course, because I want to know your opinion.

Well done.

— Look, I can understand the biased attitude of the people with the regard to me because of my job — I tried to give my voice a calm intonation. — A stripper, an instant association — a licentious girl who completely forgot about the rules of decency. The rules that, by the way, do not bother me, as well as the opinion of those who follow them. But that's not the point. I just did not think that you, you ... — I couldn't, — you are one of those who have fun with strippers and prostitutes!

— Actually, I...

— Actually, I immediately had a vision of the two. Of you and Mary, and the vision of someone — we aren't going to point a finger — slapping her on the butt with a zonked joyful expression on his face. — Not only did I point my finger, but on top of that I poked Misha under his ribs. The tone of my voice was a far cry from the calmness as at the beginning of our dialogue.

I imitated Misha with the imaginary girl on his lap. Spread my knees, as wide as the bottom of the tight dress allowed — a man's position, so to say. And grabbing the air with my outstretched palms, as if there were Mary's big round buttocks, I said ironically:

— Oooh, yes, baby, yes, my beauty, you are perfect, keep wriggling on me, go on, go on, you are the best, I am yours, I am only yours... — I threw my head back, rolling up my eyes, and then suddenly felt a sharp tingling pain

in side, where Misha managed to pinch me. — Hey! — I exclaimed.

— You got too deep into the role, slow down. Does it hurt you, are you jealous? — Smiling, with an air of importance, he raised his chin, turned the steering wheel to the right and deftly followed the bend, after which the road running along Ba-Yam promenade began.

— Just it looks weird, — I replied in a hurt tone and, taking a restrained pose, crossed my arms over my chest.

Frankly speaking, the last question he asked recalled an unpleasant memory associated with the very biting feeling of jealousy that had pierced me in the restaurant and made me squeeze a glass of wine in my hand.

— And you were for someone just the one that was slapped on the butt, so we are in equal position.

— You got some nerve! — I said rudely, and pushed him in his shoulder.

By and large, I had nothing more to object. Here he was right.

— Well, stop it, you know. Everyone wants to have fun and relax, some people spend a lot of money, while others make money on it. — Stopping at the traffic lights, he stared at me with his bewitching blue eyes.

No, I won't melt under his gaze. At least not now.

— And there are those who have never seen it, because they relax and make money in the other way, — I said. The anger overwhelming me could be felt not only in my voice, but also in my fast movements. Having pulled out the sealed pack of cigarettes from the bag, I started to tear cellophane from it convulsively, which in no way wanted to peel off the

paper box.

— But we don't belong to this group, — Misha said in a wise philosopher voice with the smile hidden in the corners of his lips.

— So you've decided to be smart? Well, yes, you are ten years older than me, you are more experienced.

He leaned so close to me that I could feel the warmth of his lips.

— Actually, four. — He touched my cheek with the tip of his nose. He wanted to kiss me, but did not have time — the signal was heard from the car behind us, reminding Misha that he had not noticed that the color of the traffic light had changed and we could go further.

— Have I told you how old I am? But no, don't answer, I, apparently, told you, when I got a good kick from alcohol, so I forgot.

He had already managed to step on the gas heavily, with lightning speed the car raced off, causing me to press the back of the chair.

— Exactly, — Misha confirmed. Playfully, he was maneuvering between the cars, overtaking them. — And do I really look thirty-four?

I pressed the button on the door panel, and when the glass lowered smoothly, I threw out the cellophane. I lit a cigarette, looking at the palm trees flashing along the promenade. I wanted to quibble, but quickly changed my mind.

— I was joking. Not only do you look the best of those who I have ever met, but you also make me feel what I have never felt to anyone. — That's right, what's the point

in shirking. Let him dodge, portraying his maneuvers, twisting the steering wheel, and I'm already tired of such nonsense. — And yes, I was jealous, but, apparently, I didn't have enough prudence not to show it.

He seemed to steady down, released the gas pedal, slowing down, and took a relaxed pose. A bear who sat on his hind legs obediently.

Jumping ahead a little bit: he knew all the words without words. Actually he knew much more than I could imagine, and much more than he was saying. He used to provoke me deliberately, just for fun. He used to be sad deep in his heart, looking into my eyes, knowing that everything would be over soon, but he was smiling. The words, I said that time, caused mixed feelings in him, because he had reconciled himself not so long ago with the fact that it would take him long to hear those words live

I was looking at his masculine profile, where the light of road lanterns slid changeably. At the collar of his shirt. I was tempted to unbutton it, to open it and nestle against the warm neck. And I couldn't really grasp what kept me close to him. How he managed to get so firmly in my thoughts, which being disobedient to logic, were drawing plans for the future, rejected the principles invented by me and grew into obsession.

He put his hand on my knee and sighed. I threw the unfinished cigarette out of the window and heard it from him: — I adore you. — And what deep feeling could be heard in his words.

Going up in the mirrored cabin of the elevator, we were

staring at each other silently, having silently grasped a similar desire to do the same. But I decided to take the first step and, grabbing the shirt cloth on his chest, pulled him to me. He flung himself on me like a dog that had been unleashed after long waits. He pressed me with his body close to the mirror wall, pressing his hips to my stomach, and began kissing my lips, fragile neck, shoulders with unquenchable passion. His rudeness and confidence aroused a strong desire, which echoed by warmth and pulsation between my clenched legs. I stroked his tight hard back, feeling the elastic relief of the muscles under a thin shirt, touching his stiff short hair at the back of his head with my fingers.

The elevator reached the last floor, its doors slid open, we walked out, never opening embraces. We continued kissing when Misha took the key out of his pocket and tried to insert it into the keyhole.

When we were in the apartment, he lifted me by my butt, and I jumped on him, clasping his waist with my legs. Holding me with one hand, he reached the kitchen area, sat me on the tabletop with my back to the kitchen drawers and opened one of them.

— There's only Chivas left, — he said, towering over me and trying to look into the depth of the box.

— Quite a good whiskey, — I noticed, continuing watching him, without taking my eyes off.

He took out a bottle and placed it next to me, then dropped to one knee, took off my sandals and shook off from my feet the sand that remained there after a walk on the beach.

— Shall we order a pizza? I haven't eaten pizza for

a long time. Or sushi? Or both? — He decided to consult with me, however I had no thoughts about food.

— We can have both. — I jumped to the floor, picked up the bottle from the tabletop and, going into the hall, added: — Bring some glasses and ice.

Having eaten (both of them), Misha and I went out onto a spacious balcony, framed by glass partitions of the railing. We sat down on one of the small sofas, holding the glasses of whiskey in our hands. The view from the fortieth floor (that is, from the forty-first) was mesmerizing. From the height, the city seemed like a toy, a randomly moving mechanism consisting of countless house lights, flashing traffic lights, road lights, and cars hurrying up to unknown destinations. On the night surface of the sea could be seen slowly moving flickering reflections of yachts and ships lights.

The cool wind was dragging my hair, now and then it touched Misha's face, which he paid absolutely no attention to. My eyes were looking forward, to the lone where beyond the horizon the sea touched the dark sky.

— Wow, that might be great to sit here having woken up. Drinking coffee and watching the sun rise? — “Anna the dreamer” asked and turned her head, switching her attention to Misha.

— It is what I see now, next to me, that I like much more. He took the strand of my hair that fell on my forehead and tucked it behind my ear. It seems that he still felt tired of feeling my hair, swaying from a strong wind, every now and then tickling his cheek or touching his chin with it

tips. — Will you go to Eilat^[8] with me tomorrow?

— Maybe. — I almost said that I was ready to go with him to the ends of the earth. — Unless you wake me up early in the morning, because I'm not going to sleep for a long time.

He took the glass of whiskey from my hand, put it on the table next to his, then moved up, shortening the centimeters separating our faces from touching, in a kiss he began to lean on me, pushing me with his whole body, lowered me onto the sofa and lay down on top.

Leaning on his elbows, he clasped my face with his hands, gazing into my eyes, saw the pleasure that filled me, and, slightly touching me with his lips, kissed me on the cheek, neck, bare shoulder over the neck of the dress, then rose again to my lips. He was kissing me and smiling. He was smiling, experiencing the unspeakable joy, as if the world around him became something right for him, as if everything had happened exactly as it should be, as if he managed at last to get to the place where he had wanted to be for so long. I could not believe it, that's why I added "like", but in fact it was really so.

I hurriedly began to unbutton the buttons of his shirt. He stood up and, hanging over me, said:

— Come with me? Let's get down to what a guy usually meets a girl for.

As soon as I and Misha got to the room where I wanted to return to just a few hours ago, he pressed the button of the switch on the wall, and the dim light of the lamps above the head of the bed spread around, hiding the distinct

shapes of the surrounding space.

He pushed me against the wall, then, as if teasing, started kissing me, taking off his shirt. I reached for his trouser belt and deftly undid it. Misha's palms slid along my thighs, lifting the border of my dress, I threw up my arms so that he could take it off. Having thrown the dress away, he made one step back and took his trousers off. I imagined how very soon I would feel good and pleasant with him, under him, sitting on him... our thoughts once again crossed in a sole desire, and we synchronously slyly smiled at each other.

He picked me up and carried me to the bed. He bent down slowly, putting me on a soft blanket, lay down on me and, squeezed my breasts and sucked into my erected nipple with a kiss. My heart pounded with terrible force, my fingers pressed into his skin on the back.

— Please don't stop, — I whispered. — Do not stop any more. — *“Off we go, all hell broke loose”*.

— And I even won't be able to, — he replied, taking the last piece of clothing off me.

He cast a blurred excited look over my naked body, a little bit wild and so deep, frozen in anticipation. It was the moment when Misha had to say something mind blowing, he obviously wanted to. But he did not say anything, just sighed with ecstasy and silently, clasping the sides of my waist, bowed his head, kissing my belly and spreading my legs. His short kisses were going lower and lower. Having felt his warm breath, which touched that place — the very place where I wanted to have his tongue for so long, well, and not only it — I groaned, having arched my back, and

clutched the wooden headboard of the bed with my hands.

Feeling his warm lips, my body shuddered, as if by the impact of an electronic pulse, another loud moan escaped from my chest more powerfully.

Misha raised himself, continuing to pet me between my legs with his fingers, lay on me with his ear against my lips listening to my moans. Then, with one hand, he squeezed my wrists, pressing them harder to the headboard, leaned on his second hand, and finally, I felt him inside. Looking at him, I saw his eyes full of passion and experienced carnal pleasure feeling him fully and completely in me.

I wrapped my legs around his butt, arching under him even more and moved forward to his movements. He put his hand on my neck. Squeezed it a little and whispered in my ear:

— I wish you would remember this. — His movements became tougher, I clung to him tighter, embracing and felt how tense the muscles of his body were.

And I remembered.

I was looking for him in the others. His fingers pressed into my neck when I was with Efe. He was there when I thought he was far away. He had to sit next to me on the seashore — I did not see him, but I could imagine. The past, separated by the abyss of years. What was happening now had already happened, and had happened to him more than once. It had and should have happened a long time ago, but it did not take place.

I could feel and remember everything, but I could not recognize this.

— Anna, you're driving me mad, — Misha said in a sti-

fled voice.

— And why not to go mad. — He's like a drug, that's for sure. I was affected by the drug, I tried it and experienced new stupefying sensations. And then, when this obsession would be over, I would think that it was only the effect of the release of hormones that clouded the mind and opened the boundaries for violent fantasy. Hidden desires that, came true (yet Dr. Sammy had influenced me, such a description of what happened is keeping with his spirit, and I could easily recognize such a more rational "given").

— But now it was still going on. Seconds, minutes, hours — ceased to be subject to the account in my understanding, hiding behind the feeling of pleasure. The pleasure, which was new for me, the real one.

We reached orgasm at the same time. It was not just good and pleasant for me to be under him, my soul really seemed to be in a new place, where it returned from, having reached the highest point of bliss. I felt the cramps running over Misha's back, and I heard his deep groan. He buried his head in the pillow next to my neck, leaning over it. His body went limp and relaxed.

— That's not all, — he said, lifting his head up from the pillow, rested his forehead on my cheek and added: — Don't get up, I'll bring it. — Then he rose heavily, staggering a little, went to the shower room, brought a towel, silently threw it to me and left the room. He returned so quickly that I did not even have time to think about anything, I was trying to recover myself. This was the very moment when evanescent obsession has finally ended, but still...

I got up and, using the towel, wrapped it around me, and Misha sitting on the edge of the bed, handed me the glass with the whiskey.

— Misha, I hesitated for a second, before taking the glass from his hands. — I also don't want you to leave.

He was sitting with his shoulders slouched, his head bowed with his hair tousled — the dimmed lamp-light was reflecting from his tanned skin, and was looking into my eyes from under his brows with the drunk look, still breathing heavily.

— I'm not going anywhere yet, — he reassured me and lit a cigarette.

— Unnecessary habits, Misha, which sooner or later, you will have to get rid of. — I took the cigarette from him, quickly made a couple of puffs and threw it into my whiskey glass.

— I want you even more, — he told me, — as long as I have enough strength (he had plenty of strength, it was even a little scary, but not for long).

Leaving the glass on the bedside table, I playfully threw the towel off on the floor, sat on Misha's lap, facing him, pushed him into the chest with my palm, and he lay back on the bed, his hands behind his head. Hanging over him, I looked down at his face, noticing a blissful smile.

— You can do with me whatever you want, I don't mind, — he said.

I leaned to him and gently kissed his warm lips, clinging to his body. Not only me, both of us did everything we wanted together. For the first time for me, sex became something more than that, something endless in terms

of feelings and desires, which became even stronger after satisfaction.

We went into the shower room, soaping each other and pouring all the contents from the bottles of shampoos. We were laughing and having fun without noticing how the day was dawning. We ran around the apartment, sliding on our wet feet on the floor, playing our favorite songs full blast, throwing pillows that had been so neatly laid out on the sofa. Having scattered them, we fooled around with teenage carelessness and fought jokingly. During all this time, Misha's face didn't even have the shadow of the sadness that was hiding deep inside his soul, his eyes were shining with unabashed joy, and I felt so easy and freely next to him as I had never felt before with any other person.

Having risen above the horizon the sun reached the upper floor, sending its direct rays into the large windows of the living room, and only then Misha and I returned to the bedroom and fell onto the bed. We lay, embracing, and looked into the tired eyes of each other.

— I'm going to stop loving summer nights soon, — his voice was heard feeble.

— Why? — My equally weak fingers were stroking his hands, shoulders, hair, and were actually sliding on his body chaotically.

— Because they are too short. — He sighed, leaving his moist warm breath on my lips. — Too short.

After making sure that Misha had fallen asleep, I slowly released myself from his embrace, got out of bed and covered him with a blanket, which I had to pick up from the

floor. I don't even remember how it got there. He immediately pulled it off, crumpling it in his arms. He flinched a couple of times and frowned. What is this guy dreaming about? Although who will answer me.

Misha's shirt was lying under my feet, I put it on and sat on the edge of the bed. I reached for the button that closed the blinds, they sank down, and the room became completely dark, without a single flash of light. Moving along the wall by touch, I left the bedroom and went to the hall, to my bag on the table. I needed my sleeping pills.

In the hall there were small sofa cushions on the floor. Empty glasses, the unfinished bottle of whiskey, sushi boxes and the ashtray were on the table. But the bag was not there. I clearly remembered that I had left it on the table. Looking around at the mess we had made, I tried to find the bag and noticed it in the corner by the window. Once again, I don't remember how it had got there. I took out a package with the pills and sat on the sofa. I felt giddy because of fatigue, I needed to take a pill. It can switch off my brain, so as not to see "crazy dreams."

What can be said, in ten minutes the tablet switched it off perfectly well and took me God knows where.

Having chased down one pill with whiskey remaining in the bottle, I went to the toilet. There were two of them in Misha's apartment (Michael's, to be precise). One in the bedroom, the second in the other bedroom, for guests. I decided to go to the latter, as I didn't want to wake Misha up, who slept, as if he heard strange sounds.

Having opened the door, I immediately felt the smell of freshly washed bed linen. In front of me I saw a large

floor-to-ceiling wardrobe. It reflected the silhouette of my body in Misha's loose shirt. Noticing on the right a slightly open door leading to the toilet, I moved toward it. I found a button that turns on the light and went inside, slamming the door behind me.

The lamp light spread in the closed space, reflected from white glossy tiles.

I was standing with my hands on the wash basin, and looking at me in the mirror hanging above it. The effect of the tablet could already be felt, so I was teetering a little. For a moment I fixed my attention at my reflection. My hair was disheveled, lips are red and swollen due to long kisses, eyes misty and half-open. I lowered my head and, sniffing the air, breathed heavily and was already about to go back to bed to Misha, even imagined how I would lay down with my back to him and throw his big heavy hand on me, but lifting my head to look at me, I shuddered with fear.

The background in the reflection of the mirror has changed, the color of the walls got a different shade, they have become blue. I turned sharply around, the cramped room surrounded me with the familiar minimalism of objects, everything was exactly like from my recent dream. I turned back to the mirror, closed my eyes hoping that everything that was happening was only my imagination and was just a phantasm of the addled mind, and the situation would be the same again, but alas. Something completely different appeared before me. Not a mirror, but a mirror film that coated a high cabinet door. Did I fall asleep? So quickly turned off, in the toilet? Or could I have got to the bed, lay down next to Misha and fell asleep there? The only

thing was that this dream was filled with clarity of realism — a clear understanding of the fact that everything was happening in reality.

It's strange, I thought. Strange — this is an understatement, my “invisible friend” should have added, but he did not add anything. And basically, he should have done that. After all, this is a dream. The fact is that he was having a dream of his own (which I wasn't one hundred percent sure, but still somewhere in dark alleys of my subconscious mind, such an assumption was born).

I did not budge, standing in front of my reflection. I was no longer wearing Misha's black shirt, which reminded of him with its smell, only uniformed white pajamas, and it smelled as if it was washed with the cheapest powder, well, or with laundry soap. It was a strange dream nonetheless.

The door of the room opened, and, crossing the threshold, a top heavy Russian woman with cropped short blond hair and round face went inside in quick steps. She was wearing white pajamas, similar to mine. On her breast pocket you could read the word embroidered in Hebrew letters — “abarbanel”. The woman looked at me, her lips pursed up, as if saying: “How could it all be so awful?” But in fact she said something different:

— Aren't you going for breakfast today either? — Her cold voice sounded loudly in the cramped surroundings of the room.

— Breakfast? — I said puzzled.

— The one where your favorite pancakes with jam are served. You'll pine away to skin and bone soon, you did not come to dinner yesterday. You are just standing at this im-

provised mirror and looking at nobody knows what. Let's go, — she insisted.

— OK, let's go, — I agreed (I got interested in understanding what was happening) and followed her.

We walked along the lengthy corridor that resembled the hotel rooms, with the pile of carpet under our feet and rows of identical doors on both sides. But unlike the usual furnishing of hotels, where the visitors locked the doors behind them, putting “Don't disturb” signs on their handles, they were open wide.

Walking along the corridor, I tried to look into the rooms, which were filled only with essential furniture: beds of the same type, somewhere one, in the other rooms two, beige panel cabinets without mirrors, a high chair and a white plastic table drawn to the window without curtains.

“Abarbanel” fatty and I (and how could I address her if she did not bother to introduce herself) stopped at the end of the corridor near the elevator, and while it was slowly crawling up in its dark tunnel, I continued peering into the rooms nearby. Suddenly, in one of them, I noticed a boy (a minute ago he was not there), a teenager, he was sitting on a narrow single bed and drumming his thin fingers on his knees, moving his fingers so fast and swiftly, like a pianist. He looked at me with a frozen, imploring glance of his huge round eyes, then jumped abruptly, smiled broadly, waved his hand, and inaudibly uttered the word “hello”, which could be read on the lips.

I knew neither him nor the place where I was, answered the guy with a frown and, turning to the opened silver elevator doors, came inside the cabin. The elevator went down

and stopped with the words of a computerized Hebrew voice: “Lobby, coma efes”^[9].

“Abarbanel” fatty took me to a small dining room filled with lots of people in white pajamas.

— I have to go. Take some food and have a meal, — she said, lowering her voice to a soft and trusting tone and throwing a glance at the empty food distribution line, with a couple of counter-girls on the other side who were standing there vigorously discussing something among themselves. — OK? — She called attention to herself, having said just one word very theatrically-benevolently.

— Yes, yes, of course, — I agreed grudgingly.

After these words of mine, she left, she looked at the level of “I’m sick and tired of it all, but I am proud of myself, because I did everything that I was required to.”

I found a vacant table, it was in the center of the dining room, took one of the four chairs and looked at the people around with probing look. Most of them, focusing on food, were picking it up with white plastic forks from plastic plates. But I also managed to spot a few individuals who stood out of the others.

A young dark-haired girl of short stature, with the face spiked with red dots of acne, bent over the table, knocking on the upturned plate with plastic utensils, was singing an unknown song in Hebrew, and was off key, shouted incoherently. She might have seen her as a singer on the stage, beating on the drums.

A lean old woman was sitting at the next table but one from her, hugging a greasy rag doll; she zealously pressed it to her once-existing breast. She lowered her fork into

a plate, strung green peas on it (diligently, one by one, small peas) and poked her greasy doll in the head, right into the place where the improvised mouth, either embroidered or painted, was located. An unpleasant sight.

A quite young man, cut off all hair, clasping his head, stooping and moving in sync with the extravagant singer's rhythm, was swaying back and forth, repeating the sequence of the same figures, quickly moving his lips.

That's all, there was no one else who caused a desire to pinpoint my interest upon. I lowered my head and stared at the white tablecloth covering the table. Let's sum it up.

— It feels like a madhouse, — I whispered very quietly. And then it came to me, then the light came on me, it suddenly dawned upon me. It wasn't the name of the woman accompanying me not so long ago that was embroidered on her top pocket. Abarbanel ^[10]— Yes, it was Abarbanel, the name of a looneybin, which was somehow lost in the dark alleys of my memory.

— Hey, pin-up blonde, — there came a squeaky youthful voice, pronouncing Russian words with a French accent.

I looked up, opposite me the guy from the room next to the elevator was standing. He stared at me with his dark round eyes, open so wide that his forehead got wrinkled. What is he staring at? That would be the thought of the one who saw him for the first time. Perplexity mixed up with madness — I made my own inference and tried to take his look for granted. A typical representative of such places.

He seemed to be about sixteen years old, and maybe even less than so. He was thin, of short stature, the dense fabric of his pajamas stood on his thin shoulders, and the

bony fingers of the pianist stuck out of the long sleeves (I can't say for sure that he is a pianist, but back in his room, sitting on the bed he was quick at moving his fingers on his knees like on keys). His dark hair was disheveled standing on end, as if he had been running to meet the wind, disheveled it, picked it up and left it in such a position with frozen on his head.

— How are you neighbor pin-up blonde? — He said giggling, and briskly jumped into the chair, squatting.

— Who are you? — I asked rudely, looking at him with an icy look.

— And why do you answer me like that? We are friends, don't you remember how we stole cigarettes from thaaat lard bucket? — As if unnoticed by others, he raised his long thin finger and pointed out to a girl of impressive size, who was sitting at the next table on my left. She didn't seem to be interested in anything, but for a piece of cake, that was in her dish.

— You're really insane, — I replied. Stealing in league with him? Cigarettes? But... it's perfectly acceptable if there was absolutely nothing to do.

The expression on my interlocutor's face got insulted and sad. He lowered his eyes and hid his hand behind his back, with his finger pointing at the fat girl. He hunched up, tightening his knees to his chest.

— I'm not insane, — he said, still not raising his head. The look of his wide-open eyes froze at one point on the table.

— Then what are you doing here?

— I'm having a rest, this is a sanatorium.

— For madmen if you didn't know that.

— It isn't so! It isn't so! I'm having fun here! — the boy shouted fully convinced that he was right.

He clenched his second free hand into a fist and hit it on the table. Right at the point, which he was looking at so closely. I involuntarily jumped up because of a harsh sound and did not notice the appearance of the girl at all — she made me scared and startle again.

— Well, bitch, did you think that you would get away with it? — She said in a low voice bending down and cautiously looking around. She was wearing white pajamas, as all of us were, her black hair scraped back into a ponytail, and her face could be quite sweet and pretty if you removed the angry grimace and lilac yellow bruise from under her eye.

— I'll wait for the right moment, you'll be sorry about it, — her lips curved in a hostile smile, no doubt, she was assertive.

I looked at her, frowning. All these new characters began to confuse me completely.

— What moment? If you want to sort it out, go ahead — I turned my eyes to the kid, who was looking at us in surprise, or this is his usual look, that you have to get used to. — Do you know who this is? — I asked him.

— And who are you talking to this time? — Schizophrenic, — she laughed and stepped back.

— I wonder what problem brought you here? — I snapped off her nose.

— Fuck you ... — She straightened up and crossed her arms over her chest with an air of importance, adding: —

Screw that!

— Weeell, — I began to lose my temper and answered her: — And now you turn around and run off so fast that I could only see your heels fleeing and disappearing in the distance. — By the intonation of my voice, I tried to express an aggressive contempt, but my words only made my cocky evil-wisher lower her hands and knuckle them. Desperate girl she is, I'm not just saying so, she wasn't stopped by the opportunity to get a slap on her face. Moreover, she knew that she would get precisely on it if she gets into a fight with me. As I would recall later — the bruise under her eye was the work of my hands.

— What are we waiting for? — I looked at the tense face of the evil-minded black-haired girl, looking at me with anger that was about to break out.

— I'm here, I'm here. — The guy sitting opposite picked up a stack of paper napkins and threw them into the air, they scattered in different directions, some fell on the table, and some fell to the floor.

The girl was seriously scared, but still managed to say a farewell speech:

— I'll take revenge on you, got it, mind it, — she turned around and ran off to the exit from the dining room, flashing the scuffed heels of her white trainers.

The boy shrugged his shoulders, smiling in delight.

— Oh, — he breathed plaintively, making a mouth, and giggled, he put his head on the table and began to laugh heartily. — Ufff, — he exhaled lingeringly and eventually calmed down. — We're friends after all.

As soon as he raised his eyes, his look changed, he was

fascinated looking over my shoulder, having suddenly ceased staring and wrinkling his forehead.

— There’s an angel standing behind you, — his youthful thin voice faltered, and his hand came back from behind, along with the raised index finger, as if he were holding it there up all the time.

A crazy kid, a crazy girl, another crazy thing that stands behind — I did not turn around.

— Why did you decide that he is an angel? Does he have wings? — I asked, for the sake of interest.

— No, he emanates light.

— Is he wearing white pajamas?

— No, he is so tall and big. This is your angel.

The look of the crazy kid froze, piercing me through, and the warm touch of a heavy hand dropped on my right shoulder.

— Now the light is coming from you too, — the crazy lad said happily, clapped his hands, jumped off his chair and jumped, — “light, light.” The angel, well, finally, the angel.

— Anna, and how did you manage to get here again? — I heard the familiar voice of my “invisible friend.” His words gave me a shiver that ran down my back.

— I’ve got to wake up, and as soon as possible, — I said in amazement, and began to turn around.

— That’s what I came for.

Chapter 9

Day five

Having opened the toilet door, Misha saw me sitting on the floor with my legs pulled up to my chest. My hands fell on the tiled floor. My head was resting on my knees, disheveled hair covered my face. Misha squatted in front of me, pulled the hair out of my face and raised my head holding my chin, shook it, my neck's muscles were completely relaxed, my eyes didn't open.

— *Hey, pin-up blonde. — I was still there.*

— Anna, wake up. — There was no response to his words. — Anna, wake up, I've been looking for you all over the apartment! — now he began to shout.

That's what I've come for.

The first thing I saw when I sharply opened my eyes was Misha's face blurred outlines. I tried to focus on him and caught an angry look.

— Misha... you're my... — fumbling muttering came from my lips. — I saw...

I saw what? The madhouse where I was one of the patients, and my "invisible friend" came to me as an angel. I didn't have time to get a good look at him. Moreover,

everything was so realistic and clear in this dream, too realistic.

— What a... what a strange dream.

— You can't imagine how you scared me, crazy thing. How did you get here? — Misha said angrily, continuing to look at me indignantly.

I stretched my hand to his cheek, he quickly grabbed it and squeezed tightly in his palm.

— Why? You? Left? — he said slowly, stressing every word and, without waiting for the answer, added: — You were falling asleep next to me.

I looked at him and in no way could I figure out what he wanted from me, the dimness of consciousness went off the scale, my eyes began to roll up, for a second it seemed that I was falling asleep again.

He caught me round the middle and lifted me off the floor. Standing on weak legs, I leaned my back against the wall. He silently began fastening the buttons of his shirt on me one by one, and inserting them into buttonholes. Holding my head down, I was watching his fingers, trying to concentrate, catching the details of his movements. Gradually, the images around me began to get their proper clarity.

— Have you come to senses? — He asked, buttoning the last button under my very throat.

— Yeah. And I'm glad to see you too, — I replied sluggishly, — I couldn't sleep, that's why I left. I don't understand why I fell asleep here.

— That's why. — He took out foil-sealed tablets from the pocket of his sweatpants, demonstrating his finding.

— Left them on the table, right?

— You are not going to take them anymore, — he said succinctly.

— Yes, no problem, — I agreed with him with ease, knowing that the second blister with the pills left in my bag, and unbuttoned the last button on the collar.

— You mix them with alcohol and don't think about the consequences at all. (This combination could really lead to disastrous consequences, because being switched off and no longer controlled by consciousness, the brain thinks that it's sleeping, but actually I could be in a state of wakefulness under the influence of whiskey and absolutely not realizing what I was doing.) -I woke up, but you were not around. — He put his hands on my shoulders. Continuing to speak, concentrated, with a little frown he looked in my face, as if something was wrong with it. — Your things are spread across the floor, and you are nowhere to be found. I've completely forgotten about this room. — He stopped looking at me — it seems that everything was “like all right” with my face — and added: — Come on, I'll make you some coffee.

— And haven't you forgotten where the coffee machine is?

— Very funny, young lady who has forgotten the way to the bedroom. — He even smiled.

— Come on, I've just crashed out on the floor in the toilet, stuff happens.

— Breakfast, I must make the breakfast, — Misha, lost in thoughts, was standing in the middle of the kitchen.

— Anything but pancakes. — I was holding an empty

mug in one hand, feeling how the invigorating drink consumed a short while ago was warming me from inside, and the cigarette not smoked to the end in the other, a couple of puffs provoked a wave of nausea.

— You didn't like them? They were cooked by the housekeeper, she told me that she was good at cooking and would make some special pancakes.

— I liked them very much, they even appeared in my dreams, and she guessed it right with jam. — I had to put out my cigarette in an ashtray.

I was still swaying, I leaned on the edge of the high bar table, which separated the kitchen from the living room, in an attempt to gain a foothold. Misha went to the fridge. I was watching him, not taking my eyes off his naked torso. With each movement when he was leaning, taking a package of eggs from the shelf or shaking a box of milk, this or that muscle got tense on his arms, shoulders and back. His body was bound to admire, but it was he who admired me more, because in order to achieve such a form, you need to have considerable will power and a lot of patience. Gray sports trousers were hanging on his narrow hips, his oblique abdominal muscles stuck out above the wide elastic band of the trousers. The lust for this guy was stronger than hunger.

Taking the eggs out of the carton, he looked at me, noticed my devouring gaze, heard me giving a short, barely audible moan and sigh. For a few seconds he froze with a pair of eggs in his hand. Perhaps he imagined my naked body under the shirt and how he would rip it off me. In any case, I really wanted it: the fantasies born in his head, and then

the action.

His hands tensed up, and the eggs cracked in his palm. Spreading out, they slipped on the table between his fingers.

— What are you doing? — He opened his hand and threw the remnants of the crushed mass into the sink.

— Just looking at you, you are jazzing me up.

Standing with his back to me, he turned the iron tap handle and began washing his hands under a water stream.

— I got you. — Looking half around, he squinted slyly. — You look very sexy in my shirt, but soon you won't have it on you. — Having said that, he pulled a small towel off the hook, turned around, slowly wiped his hands, smiled playfully, which caused a light smile in response, and threw the towel away. He approached me, grabbed the shirt collar and violently pulled the flaps aside, spreading his arms. The buttons scattered cracking, the fabric slipped from my shoulders.

His eyes were riveted on my half-open lips. He ran his hand into my hair at the back of my head — they slipped between his fingers, — twisted them into his fist, lifted it up and said in an excited, deep voice filled with low notes:

— Let's start the morning as is right and proper, as usually, baby. At first...

— Blowjob, and then omelet. — I don't know how it happened that such a phrase came off my lips, which subsequently deftly fulfilled what had been said, but everything happened so right, instinctively, just breathtaking.

Misha brought me a new shirt with buttons, no less elegant and nice to the feel. As for breakfast, we cooked it af-

ter all.

Misha took over most of the duties, and in general this work was clearly not a burden for him, but a joy (well, since he is so helpful, let him do it for pleasure, for us).

He was diligently cutting vegetables for salad, cooking an omelet, adding seasonings, cheese and mushrooms to it. He consulted with me, studied the jars standing in the fridge, tried their contents — olives, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, cubes of Bulgarian cheese — as if everything was new for him, although it was in his own refrigerator. How did he say that about me? Weird. Oh well.

When I was looking for plates, I came across a bottle of Krug champagne with a black label. It stood alone on the shelf. Misha said that we were going to drink juice, I wanted to argue, but he snatched the bottle out of my hands, and it flew into the dustbin under the sink, cracked, and hissed. A considerable amount of paper impregnated with indelible paint should have been shelled out for possessing it. I had to hold myself in check in order not to clutch my head.

— Tell me about your dream. — Leaning over the plate, Misha was parting the omelet into pieces with the fork ridge.

We were sitting opposite each other at the bar table (at the very table, where on the corner a few minutes ago we experienced lascivious sensations) and were enjoying the breakfast — Misha's handiwork.

— The dream... I don't even remember now what there was, you quickly made me forget everything, — I tried the omelet cooked by Misha, it was just melting in my

mouth. — Mmm, well done, it's delicious.

— Thank you, the merit is yours, you've helped me a lot, — he said lustfully and poured some more juice into my almost empty glass.

— I can also help you in many ways. With lunch or dinner, for example.

— I will always be glad to accept your help. But don't you sleep in the toilet any more. — Having finished, he casually smiled and put a few spoons of salad on his plate. — Does my bed fit you?

— It fits all right, and indeed any bed will do if you are in it. But will you just stop teasing me, you — the guy who can't get a sense of the TV remote control. — After the words I said, Misha smiled good-naturedly and continued eating his salad slowly. — I take these pills because they help me not to have dreams, but recently something has gone wrong. I think you understand what I mean. There are dreams that you don't want to see. After all, you yourself sleep, as if you're experiencing the same nightmare.

— I often dream about entering the ring, I try, but I lose the fight. I try to change everything, but I can't. Everything repeats and doesn't change like an endless circle, — he said with regret, without raising his eyes.

— Did you often lose?

— No, during my nine years in the ring — just a couple of times. The result is always equivalent to the effort invested in it. I was always pushing myself up, I knew that I could do more. That I can become stronger and better, I only had to work harder. More training — more stamina, more punch practice — more advantages over the oppo-

ment. I was getting stronger, victories gave me confidence, and I already started to think that no one could break me. No one and nothing. But life can break anyone ... — Raising his eyes, he suddenly stopped talking. His gaze met my gaze, frightened and frozen.

Crazy kid. Yes, exactly he. His blurred translucent image appeared from nowhere. He was standing on the right side of Misha's shoulder and pointing at him with his long finger, giggling with bulging eyes, covering his mouth with one hand. Fear gripped my body for a few seconds.

— Anna? What's going on? — Misha turned around cautiously, assuming that someone was standing next to him, then shook his head, because he didn't find anyone there (in fact, he didn't find anything disturbing about who he saw there). He leaned back in his chair, picked up a pack of cigarettes from the tabletop, lit one, dragged on and exhaled heavily with smoke.

The boy vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

— Nothing to tell. It was just a feeling, — I said, perplexed.

— You seemed to have seen a ghost.

Barely noticeably he squinted his eyes to the place where my dazed look was directed a few seconds ago. I had completely forgotten that, according to Misha, I am a psychic talking to ghosts.

— There is no one there and there was no one.

I emptied the glass of juice to the bottom in sips, my heart took a steady pace (it happened to me for the first time to encounter something like this — the personalities from my dreams remained only in them).

— Have I scared you?

— Well, it's just ... — He hesitated a little, put the cigarette in the ashtray. — No, you haven't scared me. Come here.

I got up and walked around the bar table, got so close to Misha that my breast touched his chin (still could not get used to the feeling that I have it, my breast, I mean), he immediately pulled me to him and locked me in his arms.

— I have nothing to fear, and you shouldn't pretend that nothing had happened. — He ran his hand across my back, looked up at me, sitting on a bar stool. — If I asked about your dream, it means that it's really important and if now you tell about the one you've just seen...

— I don't want to talk about this. Forget it, OK? — I said flatly, interrupting him.

— OK, — he agreed, and frowning and being puzzled.

My mental protective barrier (it's easier to provide access to the body than to the world that is hidden inside the body) — yes, for the first time this barrier cracked, Misha was confident in breaking it, and I was clearly aware of it, but still thought that I and this guy who burst into my life by chance, don't know each other so well to trust him completely. Misha managed to break much and many, including himself, and his words differed from the truth only because he could not tell me. Life did not break him, only once he followed the circumstances, he was in despair. Now he was with me, here, smiling and enjoying what he, in fact, had been striving for. But I still didn't know all of this.

— Should I better clear the table, — I suggested, and reached for his empty plate.

— Don't do it, — he stopped me, — the cleaner will come soon and clean everything up.

— You are a baller. — I gently smiled at him, hugged, kissed on the cheek over the stubble line. Resting my forehead against his temple, I ran my fingers along the barbed hairs along his cheekbones, buried the other hand in the hair on the back of his head.

— My friends are already on the way to Eilat, will you come with me? — he mumbled having his head on my breasts and buried in them.

— Yes, I just need to take some things, swimsuit, sunscreen, I don't know what else. — I continued massaging his head, standing between his legs bent at knees.

— I'll buy anything you need. Go, and get dressed. — He raised his head and lowered his hands.

Slapping his already tousled head after a restless sleep, I went to the bedroom, but lingered on the threshold, turned around (I managed to look around just in case, I made sure — the crazy guy finally disappeared into the place where he had come from) and asked Misha:

— Can I take your toothbrush?

— Yes, — he answered shortly, and lit another cigarette.

— And your comb?

He nodded affirmatively, looking at me, exhaling cigarette smoke.

— And your razor?

— Take whatever you want.

— You are a generous guy, Misha, and... it turns out, that you are so caring.

He gave me a kind smile, specifying:

— Not for everyone...

— ... but only for pretty girls, — I continued for him, ironically shrugged my shoulders with a faint grin on my face, which I was given a reproachful look for in return. — OK, OK, I'm a very special pretty girl, — I said, and proudly disappeared from his eyes into the bedroom in order to smooth my rumpled feathers.

The road to Eilat should have taken a little more than four hours. Last time I visited this colorful resort city about three years ago. It is located on the shores of the Red Sea in the southernmost point of Israel, on the borders with Jordan and Egypt, surrounded by high red-brown mountains. After long kilometers of the monotonous desert landscape, you rejoice at the meeting with it, as if meeting a blooming oasis. One can only wonder how the Jews managed to create such things on the lifeless desert land.

The city is created for tinsel luxury. Most of it is occupied by hotels for every taste and budget. Yachts ply coastal waters, with noisy parties thrown on board. Beautiful beaches stretching for several kilometers with many bars, restaurants and night clubs are open 24 hours a day. Eilat is filled with a special life, the life of those who have fun day and night. You indulge in such an atmosphere, forgetting about all the pressing problems, and it's good, if you wake up to find yourself in your own hotel room.

Before we left Bat Yam, Misha stopped the car at a gas station. He brimmed the tank of gas, went to the store, located there and bought some chips, beer, nuts, a couple of bottles of water and cigarettes. When he returned, he

asked me to turn on the music, opened the package with the nuts and handed it to me. I refused, he emphasized that I eat very little, tried to scold me, but gave up and didn't start a senseless argument.

We were driving past the park that stretched along the road on the outskirts of the city. It was filled with people in black and white clothes of the same type. A crowd of religious Jewish families who decided to arrange a so-called kosher picnic with barbecue on single use iron charcoal grill. The change of the traffic light signal that was too long made us observe the improvised action of their family idyll.

— Do you know what I think, looking at them? — I gently turned to Misha, who was chewing nuts. Feeling the pleasure of how they crunched in his mouth, periodicity, he replenished the stock to have the crunch going on.

— That these “penguins”¹ have a screw loose in their heads?

— They can't be all like that, but most of them for sure. In a strip club, I often saw such “men of faith”. They hid the kippot in their pockets and tucked their sidelocks in their pants.

Slang, used by Russian-speaking citizens of Israel, who gave their own definition to orthodox Jews, associating them with penguins because of their black-and-white outfit.

— Everyone has his own philosophy of life. What is that to you? Why do you care? — Misha threw the empty bag of nuts that were once in it in the back seat, opened a new one and, holding the steering wheel with his elbow, and sharply stepped on the gas pedal. The car speeded off.

— It's just an association, when you see the truthfulness

of the intentions of people hiding behind their faith. It ceases to be significant for them in the dark rooms of the hotel or empty corners of strip clubs. When I started working at private parties, I came to the “haredim” several times (yes, they also have parties), now I refuse such orders. In a word, imagine: a husband and wife — the ideal of religiosity, a rented hotel room, they look, stroking each other, at how my partner, Lena, and I are performing for them a long ago practiced “lesbian act”. Their strokes turn into kisses, and then they get excited and undress, take everything off. She, the wife, tears off her wig, under which, according to their faith, there should be no hair, breathes the air with a full breast, and the hair falls on her shoulders, feeling freedom, just like she herself. The husband takes her in different poses, without any sheet with a slit, which, in theory, should be thrown over her body.

— I’ve lost my appetite. — Misha threw a half-empty bag of nuts into the window.

— How do you actually eat this salty stuff? — I gave little a grimace, showing disgust.

— As easy as you are talking about this “pervert shit” of the religious. — He briefly looked at me with a bit of reproach and continued monitoring the road.

— You don’t want, I won’t speak. I’ve just told you what I saw.

On the touch screen of the dashboard, I chose an hour long track of one of the popular Russian DJs that was smoothly flowing from song to song, turned up the volume, took off my shoes, threw my legs up so that my toes touched the windshield and, relaxing, threw my head back on the

headrest.

We were driving further and further away from Bat Yam, leaving kilometer after kilometer behind. The familiar city became a dark line in the reflection of the side mirror of the car. I imagined that my “invisible friend” stayed there, in our small rented apartment, where we often returned in the morning after work (I found such an excuse for his absence, being afraid to reconcile with the “bad” one, thinking last of it). I recalled how I threw my bag in the hallway, hung the keys on a hook hammered into the wall, threw off the clothes smelling of the smell of unknown men and sat on the sofa. My knees ached, my legs were humming with fatigue, and my head was spinning. My friend sat beside me and said: “Everything will be fine” (Jewish favorite expression, which is a part of their philosophy). For some reason, he always had confidence that everything would be fine, and even if it wasn’t then, he still thought that what we had was already good, because it could be worse taking into consideration my stupidity. No matter how you slice it, everything that will take place will be good.

When I turned on the music and one of the lyrical songs with a soul-penetrating rap singer, who wanted to convey his anguish from lack or loss of love, started to sound from the TV, my friend asked me: “Find that club track with low bass and plain phrases in English”.

And I played “that track.”

When I, got undressed completely and was sitting on the couch, drinking whiskey before going into the shower, I made my worn out speech: “Creating my appearance and

working out hard, I tried more for “Him”, but not for these customers expressing their admiration. Touching some of them, I imagine that I’m touching “Him,” and don’t understand why “He” has never existed and still doesn’t exist? Why are there many others, but not “He”? I don’t want to go to the shower without “Him”, and I don’t want to go to bed without “Him,” and in general I don’t want anything without “Him,” my friend usually replied: “Change the music and your own record to a more positive one. And when you are in the shower, turn on the hot water stronger, it will relax you”.

I usually did so, but that morning, which was already beginning to grow into a day (a week before the meeting with Misha), I still continued to delve into the topic that my friend usually avoided.

— It’s so weird, — I said thoughtfully, running my fingers over the label that says Jameson, — I miss him.

— Feel like you’ve lost a loved one? — my friend suddenly asked, surprising me with his desire to keep the conversation going.

— You’ve got it on the head, — I replied beyond a shadow of a doubt.

— But you’ve never even had such a person.

— No, I haven’t, but I’ve got a feeling that... I used to have “Him”, and we had a house on the lake, we loved night walks, and when we swam in the lake, the stars shone brightly over our heads. Many, many stars. — I smiled bitterly and, taking a few sips of whiskey from the bottle, continued: — We used to go to bed late and get up early in the morning because we tried to spend as little time as possible

sleeping. And every morning before breakfast on a log porch...

— I've been always telling you that you have a rich imagination, — my friend's voice that became even lower and rougher, interrupted me in mid-sentence.

— Of course, it's a fantasy. The fantasy itself. But you can fantasize as much as you want, anticipating that the fantasies will come true, everything is different here, I feel as if it has taken place, — I said confidently, trying to convince him.

— Has it? Have you lived these moments?

— Yes, they are like a memory. They give me a feeling that they existed in distant past, which echoes in the memory. And "He" was there, but he is no longer with me, because... Because he no longer lives on the earth.

— It turns out that all of this has really happened, but in fact it hasn't and it never will. Some kind of paradox. — Even though notes of sarcasm could be heard in his voice, they were no longer filled with swell-headed intonation, which I was used to.

— Right, it sounds crazy. But I feel it and I can't do anything about it. At first, I didn't understand why "He" stuck so hard in my head. Why you don't want me even think about it. And now I understand, and you can hide the truth as long as you like or push me to taking pills that block my brain, but I will still think about "Him". This is a subtle connection. Thoughts about "Him" give me warm memories, and I feel good there, everything was completely different there, not as it is now. It was some other life, full, interesting, and so, so... real. — I put the bottle of whiskey on

the glass tabletop and got up from the couch, adding: — And now it is empty. — Then I sighed shortly and decided to add something else: — Therefore, it's becoming more and more indifferent to me. OK, I've got to go to the shower, because I smell expensive male perfume. The smell of those who sometimes can replace "Him".

— Hold on a sec. — I responded to my friend's request, but didn't turn around, as there was nobody to turn around to. — Anna, I'm very sorry, but if I tell you everything, you will never hear me — never.

— You can tell me nothing, I've already understood everything myself. Paradox, you say? You are this paradox. It all started with you. — I turned around, naturally, no one was sitting on the couch. I had to imagine the opposite. — And it seems to me, that even if it sounds as crazy as it gets, that you are this "He". You are the one who is somewhere, but not here. You are the one who seems to be so far away, but at the same time so close that I can touch you if I reach my hand out. You are the one who was with me, who loved me in memories, that's why you are helping me now. We were together, my friend, but then you were not my friend. You need me, just like I need you. You can't leave me, just as I can't leave you, right?

— Right. — His voice — a whisper, low, rough, almost muffled. — It's all like that. You don't understand what you are doing now.

— For sure, it is better to do something than to stay here in this very place where we have to be! — I cried out in anger: it is difficult to take as a given something that cannot be changed. — It's better to let something change, albeit

for the worse, but that there would no longer be what exists now. I need you here!

— Anna, calm down. — His voice teetered on the edge, a little more, and he could flare up himself.

— Why, what’s wrong with you! As if your invisible brain has been washed!

— I will soon change everything myself, don’t do anything and say nothing. The conversation is over. At least from my side.

No, my friend is still a die-hard, he didn’t fly off the handle.

I raised my palms up with the words: “I love you, my dear, and sweet dreams. If you are able to have dreams at all”, — waved off and, before entering the bathroom, threw the bottle with the remnants of whiskey in the waste-bin.

Taking the shower alone, standing under the thin jets of water that pleasantly warmed my skin, I relaxed and only then realized how chilled I was.

For the recent few months I’ve been desperately chasing the money, considering it the last value in life, it seemed more real, more tangible than the feelings that many creative people have sung. I managed to earn a lot of papers with indelible paint, but these earnings still did not bring proper satisfaction, and I lived like a squirrel running along the wheel in my small cage. The squirrel — a fur machine that spins the wheel according to the course of events. The faster she paws over the perches of the wheel, the faster things change. She can do it indefinitely, there will be no right end, she won’t reach it. The end will only appear to be the “end”, and there’s no “end” ... in its wheel.

Misha interfered, or rather, burst into my circulation, making me believe in the existence of a “praised feeling” (after realizing who my “invisible friend” is, I finally lost faith in the fact that this would happen to me), he managed to change the world surrounding me, I don’t know, whether it is good or bad, I understand only one thing: it won’t be the same. With Misha, I didn’t have any pangs, because I’m betraying someone, being in the same bed with a person, on whose expense I try to satisfy the need while the other is absent

Could I know that everything would turn out the way that Misha would be for me not just a guy in a red T-shirt? I could know it at that moment when he first approached me on the beach, but my “invisible friend”, who decided not to talk about anything, made an interesting move. After all, he said that I myself should feel everything and understand that I must enjoy what I have. And I was angry with him and indignant because of his absence. There are only two options. Either my “invisible friend” started a new game, or...

The ringtone of the phone call interrupted the music and brought me back to reality. Misha’s phone was connected to the speakerphone. I opened my eyes and, raising my head, saw how he swiped across the telephone screen attached to the panel.

— Well, where are you? — Dima’s familiar voice sounded from the speakers.

— We’ll have arrived by the evening. We are in a loud-speaker mode, — Misha answered him.

— Yes, I’ve got it. We have already rented the houses.

By the way, our friends from Eilat also promised to come. Anna, you are no longer taking offence at me, aren't you?

— Of course not, it's your wife's duty, — I told him jokingly.

— Do you know that I have many wives? — he asked in a voice full of pride and laughed slightly audibly.

— I didn't even doubt it. I feel sorry for you.

— Did you hear that, mormon, that's all, see you in the evening, — said Misha sharply and hung up, once again he didn't let me finish the talk to his friend, who he wanted to introduce me to. — We are approaching the mall now, shall we pop in?

If there's one thing I can't stand, it's shopping. All this fuss of people in pursuit of newfangled things or discounts on them put me out of temper. But I had to buy the things necessary for rest, and Misha wanted to give me pleasure, as well as for himself so, I willingly agreed demonstrating him my joy.

I often purchased expensive dresses, shoes, bags and accessories, because I had to decorate myself, the "goods", in beautiful packaging. Actually, I didn't need all this junk, from which my wardrobe was bursting (we accumulate a pile of junk, respectively, we buy an even bigger wardrobe, an even bigger pile of junk — and here we already need a dressing room, and so on), the less you fill your apartment with it, the easier it is. And the fewer expensive trinkets you hang on you — too. Minimalism is so practical, why bother. For me, life without the junk is much easier.

Misha and I went around the many shops in the mall.

He bought a bunch of necessary and unnecessary things. He found pleasure in planking up large sums for unpretentiously stitched pieces of fabric and labels with the names of famous fashion designers, he swiped his card and signed his checks with such importance as if he had been a poor man all his life and has just recently won a large money prize. He easily managed to lure me to McDonald's, where he devoured a couple of large hamburgers with French fries. I limited myself to nuggets only — the chicken is still the chicken. It's not so fattening, albeit roasted in oil. Misha said that I was faffing around and hamburgers with potatoes, if included in the diet at least a couple of times a month, would only do me good — they would be deposited on my buttocks, which would be nice to add in volume. Thin strips of potatoes flew in his direction with the remark “at night you didn't complain, but only caught hold of the very buttocks without cholesterol deposits.”

Israeli kids, lovers of “Happymeal”, who were sitting at the tables nearby, laughed at us, although they had no idea what our playful argument was about, and their parents, fixated on the rules of conduct, threw condemning glances at us.

We didn't make much of what was happening around — two laughing adults, who were not in a hurry, as if they had become children again, living in their own world. Children grow up, and the world that was once so simple, without prejudice, seems to be incredibly difficult, with a bunch of problems that fall on your head over and over again (as from the shelves of a closet — you open the door, and the things stocked — bang! And fall). It was easy with Misha. It

was possible to throw potato at him and start the morning with a blowjob, not an omelet, and be crazy psychic, “Anna, the perfect girl, don’t understand why”, “Anna the shy”, “Anna the jealous”, “Anna the whatever you want” and not become obsessed with the pieces of paper with indelible paint. In fact, with Misha it was not necessary to become obsessed. He had long ago thought it all for the two of us.

— You know, food has become much tastier over the recent years, — said Misha, leaning back in his chair, relaxed and laid his hands on his belly. — Chemical progress.

I shrugged, being completely unaware of what he was telling me about, and continued picking up thin slices of potatoes from the table, chewing them with the hope that my butt had already begun to grow.

A girl with a tightly tied dark chestnut oblique matching the color of her eyes approached our table. She looked like she was about eight years old. Her blue dress reached to the knees uncovered by white trouser socks. Filled with joy, she shyly patted her eyelashes, hesitated a little, and then nevertheless made up her mind and put the drawing, which she was holding in her hand, on our table. She looked at Misha with the hope for his decency.

— When you come back, tell him that I remember him, — she said, her voice was no less hopeful than her eyes. — Deal? As I don’t hear him any longer.

In the drawing, made with pencils, I saw a male figure. The pictured character was sitting under a crescent, dangling his legs from the roof of a panel house. On his pajamas, I noticed stars that were not in the sky.

Misha answered the girl with an understanding smile and lifted his thumb up, but he showed me with all his appearance — she is just a soul lost in the world, but still it is necessary to treat the child with compassion. He leaned over to her face, winked and whispered a few words in her ear so that I couldn't hear them (later Misha would tell me exactly what he'd told her).

The girl spellbound hang on every word:

— He is with you, and those poems that lie under your bed, refine them, creativity must be developed. He will tell you to listen to yourself and you will hear him. You're growing up, so you can no longer talk to him as before. And don't tell anyone about what you can see. You'd better draw or write about it in your verses.

The girl's eyes became glassy, filled with tears, they swept along the round cheeks with thin paths, but, despite the tears, she was smiling, jumped for joy and opened her arms wide to embrace Misha, reached for him.

— Elinor! — A tall Russian woman in a colored sundress who ran up to us picked up the girl in her arms and held her close not letting her embrace Misha. — What did you tell her? — She demanded bitterly, threw up her head to throw away a strand of bleached hair from her eyes, and briefly glanced at Misha and me.

Actually, watching what was happening, I was in a state of utter bewilderment, so I could not quickly find my way with the answer. I was still holding a half bitten piece of French fries between my pinched fingers.

Smiling enthusiastically, the girl wiped away her tears with her palm and buried her head in the neck of her frozen

mother. As soon as Misha looked at her, she suddenly became embarrassed and said in an excusing manner:

— I'm sorry, my daughter is so irrepressible, she can easily address strangers.

The girl's drawing was lying on the table, the girl herself, just like the women in the bright sundress, was no longer there, relaxed Misha was sipping Cola from a paper cup painted with bright colors, and I.. yes, I actually realized that the guesses, involuntarily originating in my head, are beginning to prove to have a basis. However, it is impossible to explain this, if you rely on common sense. But here, everything contradicts the common sense.

I can't hear him anymore.

— How strange, — I finally spoke, and having thrown the piece of potato on the table, wiped my hands with a paper napkin, — I, can't hear him any more either.

To which Misha answered me:

— Do not worry, now you have me, — he smiled, put the bright cup on the table and added: — Come on, we've driven only a part of the way.

As we were driving along a winding narrow mountain road, going down meter by meter to the lowest land area on Earth, the sun was already drooping. Here and there along the way we happened to see road signs with figures engraved on rocks, they indicated which mark below sea level we had crossed. Having passing the last one, with the inscription "422", and leaving behind the mountain road, a panoramic view of the Dead Sea opened to us. The huge lake, called the sea, surrounded by mountains, which got bright bur-

gundy color because of rays of the setting sun. The sea was fascinating for its unspoilt beauty. In the distance, on the opposite shore, the buildings of neighboring Jordan were disappearing into the hilly massifs.

I was looking at this huge picture with admiration — eye could not take it all — and felt a sense of insane joy from the fact that at last everything happened like this.

Leaving the Dead Sea behind, we drove to a flat road separating the desert. On the sides of the road lifeless trees with twisted bare branches dried by the scorching sun stuck from the dark orange ground. The touch screen of the car above the speed sensors displayed figures showing the temperature outside, namely 43 degrees above zero.

— So who did you see in the kitchen today? — Misha decided to inquire once again.

— You won't leave me alone so easy, right? — I took out a pack of cigarettes with a lighter from the side pocket of the car door and opened the window. Hot desert air flooded into my face.

— No, so tell me.

— It was the guy from my dream, in the dream he pointed his finger at the angel standing behind me. And in the morning in the kitchen, he pointed to you. Aren't you an angel? — I didn't want to mention the crazy kid. Who knows, he might suddenly appear again from nowhere and will be sitting in the backseat, giggling. To my delight, he did not appear there.

— No, baby, I'm not an angel, but many people believe in angels.

I thoughtfully looked at the straight road, narrowing

into the distance, to the horizon, where the orange strip of sunset was slowly fading and said, exhaling cigarette smoke:

— My doctor says that all of this doesn't exist — it's just sick imagination of a sick brain.

— But, unlike the doctor, you don't think so?

— What do you think yourself? — I asked a counterquestion.

— I think our world is not limited to what is in front of our eyes. For example, I believe in a God that no one can see.

I would like to make a note here. The majority of the population of our planet believes in God. They believe in someone who wasn't seen by anyone, in someone who doesn't speak at all, but despite this, they listen to him, and my dear doctor Sammy thinks that I'm crazy just because I can find out what only God alone knows. It turns out that even if we don't see something, but are confident in its existence, it means that it actually exists. As well as my "invisible friend."

Let it be so, even if I was convinced of the existence of the creator, but I don't know why, I had a grudge against him and his team. On the subconscious level.

— You know, if I were you, I would definitely lose faith in him completely. — I threw my cigarette out of the window, there was nothing interesting outside — still the same type of landscapes of a desert plain with sparse vegetation, lifted the glass letting air flow from the air conditioner cool me. And only then did I realize what I had blurted out. Definitely I shouldn't have uttered these words. To anybody

but him.

— But you are not me, — Misha replied with cold calmness.

An awkward silence.

He was looking at the monotonous sequence of the road, thinking about something unknown to me, and I was looking at him, restrained and thoughtful.

— Misha, I'm sorry, — I said, feeling sincere regret. I leaned toward him, laid my head on his shoulder and my hand on his knee, raising my eyes, looked at his face.

— Apologies are accepted. Don't sweat it. Maybe now you will drive the car?

— Do you entrust this beauty to me? — I quickly raised my head from his shoulder being delighted. I immediately bought into his tempting offer.

— It's you, who is a beauty, and this is just an expensive piece of metal. — He pulled to the side of the road, slowly decelerating, stopped the car, opened the door and got out. Standing on the road, he stretched and swayed to the sides, flexing his back.

I climbed into the front seat and put my hands on the bulky steering wheel, covered with a leather case; it still kept the heat left by Misha's fingers. I have already imagined how I push the gas pedal sharply, and this expensive construction would rush off.

Misha got in my former seat, pressed one of the buttons near the seat I was in, and it automatically moved closer to the steering wheel, the back gradually raised. Turning the steering wheel to the right, as I had planned, I sharply pressed the gas. There was a sound of sand particles hitting

against the rear bumper, a few short seconds — and the car immediately raced off, the needle of the speedometer began to climb quickly, and my heart pounded in my chest.

— You even manage to drive a car in an incredibly sexy way, — Misha noted, trying to get a pack of cigarettes from under the seat, it fell out of his hands at the time of my quick start.

— I've never been in the driver's seat of such a car. What a sportive one! — I exclaimed, holding the wheel firmly.

— The road is straight and empty, speed it up, — suggested Misha.

Following his advice, I stepped on the gas pedal, pressing it into the floor. When the needle of the speedometer reached the mark of two hundred kilometers, the car began to shake. The dizzying feeling of speed swept over me, the images of trees along the sides of the road rushing on both sides began to merge, turning into dark walls.

— Are you scared? — I addressed my question to Misha, smiling defiantly.

He reached for a transparent bag, which lay in the back seat, putting it on his knees, took out a bottle of beer and, pulling the bottle ring, said:

— If only for you.

— You haven't even asked if I have the driver's license.

— And don't you do not have it? — there was not a drop of surprise in his question.

— No, I failed the exam.

— Well done, — he took a sip of beer from a bottle in big gulps, lit a cigarette and threw the pack into the empty compartment near the gearshift lever. — Apparently,

your examiner decided that you feel too confident on the road. If you want to, we'll change back before entering Eilat.

— What, did you get scared?

In response, he quietly grinned, moved the seat back and relaxed continuing drinking beer. I slowly released the gas pedal, returning to the speed acceptable by all the rules.

The Bedouin settlements flashing on the sides of the road slightly changed the dullness of the landscape. Their little houses are made of galvanized iron sheets which already looks crazy. Perhaps I don't understand the principle in the basis of their construction, but I can definitely say that iron is heated up by the scorching sun, and it's a scary thought even to imagine how unbearably hot it gets inside. The genes of dark-skinned Bedouins are endowed with a distinctive feature — the ability to endure the heat with ease, it's a well-known fact. But why should it be artificially maximized in your own house, in theory, it should be the other way around? Everyone in our country, including the government with the police under their command knows, what the Bedouins live on. They might be creating a new kind of drug in their houses, which requires a certain temperature. Nomads-chemists, who cut themselves off from society, kind of living according to the obsolete traditions of their ancestors, but they manage to make money regularly. They can definitely be a necessary link in a long chain of drug trafficking, and not to attract the public's attention by their meager lifestyle.

The young guys, who said that they come from these

desert places, often went to our strip club and, being not embarrassed at all, pulled out weighty bundles of money from their pockets, showing them to girls. And they hedged them with due attention and care. I asked my “invisible friend” not to tell me anything about the real thoughts and intentions of the representatives of the Bedouin youth. I didn’t want to deal with them. It only happened once that I asked the one who I danced for while sitting on his lap:

— Aren’t you afraid of going around with such a sum of money? — He pulled a wad of money out of his front pocket and put it in the back. It separated us from contact with each other. That is, prevented me from fidgeting on his manhood.

— It won’t be there by the morning anyway, — he answered, slightly rising, drawing the bill out of his back pocket. He was smiling broadly, waiting for me to take off my bra, and when he saw my bare breasts, he thrust a piece of paper under the elastic band of my panties.

What did Misha say, “everyone has his own philosophy of life”, right? So, that’s the whole philosophy of the Bedouins.

Near their quaint houses with a number of parked brand new jeeps, they built curved wooden fences for livestock. Apparently, from the branches of those trees that flashed along the road. Donkeys and camels grazed behind them, eating food scattered on the ground, and goats of both sexes were slowly wandered along the track, looking for remains of dry bushes. The Bedouins themselves could not be seen, apparently they were busy with their important business.

I glanced at Misha: lounging on his seat, holding the al-

most empty bottle of beer between his knees and holding it with his hand, he was sleeping peacefully (so beautiful and tangible), with his head back, under scraps of light from roadside lanterns, causing me to feel tenderness.

There was no more than half an hour before arriving in Eilat. The night finally asserted itself, benighting the desert plains and sandy mountains: and the sky, believe me, it is something incredible. It is strewn with billions of stars. Bright, large, small, slightly visible, randomly scattered, making up the constellations known and unknown to me. They glittered as brightly as diamonds scattered on a black tablecloth. It's understandable why tourists who like to admire the starry sky are brought to these places. Fascinating spectacle, but somebody fascinated me much more.

I patted Misha on the shoulder, pressed the button on the steering wheel, which turned off the volume of the music, and said:

— When you sleep peacefully and do not twitch, you look very nice.

He slowly opened his eyes and raised himself up.

— C'mon, — he murmured in a sleepy voice, stretched his neck and looked around. — I didn't even notice how I had fallen asleep. I won't call you a girl who lost her way to the bedroom anymore. Have we arrived yet?

— Almost, and I don't know where to go next.

Eilat met us with the fullness of its nightly beauty. Clean and well-groomed streets with palm trees illuminated by colored lights among them. Luxury hotels, hiding a lot of intoxicated people behind their rooms' windows. The sil-

ver smooth surface of the Red Sea with yachts sailing on it. Passenger aircrafts, flying airspace approaching the landing at the local airport. And these neon signs around — very bright, making you feel dazzled sometimes.

I parked the car in a spacious parking lot near a small hotel complex consisting of wooden houses surrounded by a massive high fence of natural stone. Despite the late evening, dry desert air still kept the heat of the midday sun. In this southern city in the summer you can feel the night coolness only a couple of hours before sunrise.

At the entrance of the complex we were met by an elderly man. He was standing beside a perfectly trimmed shrub and hosing the lawn, divided by paths of paved with flat concrete tiles. Having put the hose on the lawn, he approached us.

— Good evening, — he greeted us in Hebrew (then goes, the word for word translation, as the Israelis greet each other). — How are you, Michael? I have not seen you for a long time.

— Everything's fine. How are you? I've just been swamped with work. — Misha cordially handed him a free hand, not busy with packages.

— Me, too, thank God, everything's fine (greeting and exchange of information how well everything ended). And you are not so gloomy today, as usually — the man said with kindness of a person who had seen lot of people in recent years; he shook Misha's hand and added, looking at me: — And I think I can guess why.

— My name is Anna.

— Daniel, — he said to me. — Your friends are already

having fun by the pool.” He took a key on a wooden tag with the number from the pocket of shabby jeans and handed it to me. — Feel yourself at home.

— Should I get you something? Or maybe I can send you a girl to visit? — Misha asked him, smiling.

— I’m just too old for such things, — Daniel laughed hoarsely.

— Well, you’ll recall your youth than.

— No, with such a fun my old age might suddenly come to end, — he patted Misha on his shoulder with a trembling, sinewy hand. — But still thanks for the concern. I didn’t expect it from you, to be honest. Good night to you both.

— Have a good night too, Daniel, — Misha wished him goodbye.

Misha’s friends rented the entire hotel complex, which included twelve small, but tastefully furnished, wooden houses. They formed a circle with a large pool with a bar in the center.

The house rented for us turned out to be very cozy, divided into three zones. A bedroom with a massive double bed and a wardrobe built into the wall, a living room with a small beige sofa and a wooden tea table to match the color of the walls, as well as a separate small kitchen located right behind the entrance door.

Having left the bags with the purchased items unpacked and thrown on the floor, we went to Misha’s friends, who were sitting at a bar with the roof made of palm branches. The party atmosphere was created by loud music and half-naked girls having fun dancing around the pool.

— I’ll pour you a drink, — Max said happily as we ap-

proached the bar, and got up from the chair.

He was once again fortunate enough to “break free of the gym,” and, proudly showing off his skillfully worked out massive body, covered only with bathing shorts, he walked around the bar counter.

Misha sat on the vacated chair, drew me to him and sat me on his lap. Max put the shots on the counter, took a bottle of Dalmore whiskey from the fridge.

— How was your trip? — Dima, who was standing next to him and who had already managed to get drunk, but stood firmly on his feet, decided to inquire. Leaning on the bar, he held a half-empty cocktail glass in his hand.

Heat, stuffiness, intoxicated twist in his sobriety, even the apocalypse is not a hindrance for stylish guys like him. His hairstyle has not lost its impeccability, the T-shirt with the imprinted letters of a well-known brand fell freely on its thin, dried torso, skinny jeans perfectly fit the model figure, dark glasses were also present, even if not used for their intended purpose — they were hanging on the shirt’s collar. And in addition to this was his haughty look.

— We’ve arrived perfectly well, I even managed to sleep while Anna was driving, — Misha answered, keeping his hands on my waist.

— Let’s drink to success and let our efforts always bring profits! — exclaimed Max, raising a shot of whiskey.

The chorus of men’s voices shouted: “To the success!” — and they began clinking glasses making sounds of glasses and shots.

— Have you brought your wives today? — I asked Dima.

He broke into a blissful smile, putting his glass on the bar counter. It seems that apart from the upcoming night, filled with the caresses of the charming girls who are under the influence of cocaine, nothing more worried him. Anyway, what can worry a young, prominent guy who is well-heeled for the rest of his life? Who, if not him, can fully afford to take any liberty today?

— Of course, I've got everyone together, — he replied proudly, and headed, dancing, toward the girls by the pool.

— Let's sit a little more for the company, — Misha said in my ear. — OK?

— Just don't forget to take a bottle of whiskey with you, — I agreed, filling our empty shots.

Misha sighed sadly and looked at the shot held forth by me with hostility:

— I want you to know, I've already got tired of boozing.

Having returned to the house, I felt the long-awaited coolness (a working air conditioner had created the necessary climate) and silence. Misha sat down on the bed, gave me a bottle of whiskey and put a plate with small sandwiches strung on cocktail sticks on his lap. Of course, he couldn't help grabbing a snack with him.

— I'll bring the glasses, — throwing the bottle on the bed, I took off my dress and headed towards the kitchen.

— Come here, — Misha stopped me in a commanding tone; obeying him, I returned and sat opposite him. — Shall you eat something?

— Oh, no, I've already eaten a lot of them at the bar.

He put the half-empty plate away from his lap and

pulled me to him. He hugged me, put my head on his chest and buried his nose in my hair, which still smelt of his shampoo. Immediately I felt good and comfortable in his arms.

— Misha, thank you for taking me with you, and generally for being here and now, for these moments. I missed this, missed you, — I said swept away by emotions overwhelming me.

— If I could, I would spend all my time with you.

Lifting my head from his shoulder, I reached out to his lips and kissed them.

Misha's hand slipped along my back, his fingers felt the knot tying the straps of the bathing bra, which he then deftly and quickly untied it (I had put on this swimsuit in the dressing room in the shopping center, as I liked it so much that I didn't want to take it off). Pressing my bare breasts on Misha's chest, I enjoyed the warmth of his body that had become so familiar, his hugs that seemed kindred. His movements, well, I could foresee them. Hastily, he will take off the bottom of the swimsuit, and his bright eyes will become clouded after a glance at my naked body. Then, spreading my hips, he will lay down on me, press me to the bed, resting on elbows, as if covering me from the outside world. He will surely say a few pleasant words in his voice wistful with anticipation.

— Anna, you are my darling, my baby, — and at the same time he will be kissing every part of my face, cheeks, chin, nose tip, forehead...

He will lay back on one side, squeeze my breast with one hand, bend down and, sliding his nose on the skin, take

a deep breath from the smell coming from it, touch my hardened nipple with his lips, and then begin to kiss my belly, hips, knees... He will look at my excited face with the look of a man who has known me for many years, he will smile so mysteriously in his own manner, clasping my face with his hands, and I will smile back at him. We will make love, losing the sense of time and space, feeling only how our bodies merge into one. He will stop for a while, resting his forehead on my forehead in order to prolong the pleasure. I will only feel him my big and strong bear.

I had to wait a few minutes to make sure that Misha had finally fallen asleep. By this time, the dawn rising was penetrating the rays of the sun through the white and transparent curtains of the house window, illuminating the space of the room. A round stained-glass clock on the log wall showed seven in the morning. I got out of bed and turned around, it was impossible not to hold my look at sleeping Misha, I was tempted by this feeling of tenderness that he caused in me. Throwing his hand behind his head, he kicked the blanket and muttered something in addition.

I grinned and went to the kitchen, on the fridge there lay the bag I had left. In its inner pocket there was a blister with pills. So not found by anyone, they were found in the right place. I took out one pill, filled a plastic cup with water from the tap and swallowed it, washed it down with big gulps. I threw the empty cup into the sink and returned to sleeping Misha.

He had already managed to push the blanket off the bed, it was lying on the floor. I lifted it, carefully covered Misha,

trying not to wake him up. Then I sat on the edge of the bed opposite the wall cabinet with mirrors on the sliding doors. I began to peer into the reflection. In the background I saw a window covered with long transparent curtains, and the wooden walls of our temporary house. Continuing to peer at the mirror reflection of me sitting on the bed, I looked at sleeping Misha, noticed how he turned on his side and began to fidget on the bed, as if he was looking for something. When he stumbled on my side, he grabbed my waist and pressed to it.

I felt how my eyelids began to grow heavy as effected by the pill, but still could not tear myself away from the reflection, because I wasn't alone in it, Misha followed me, rested his head on my thigh, hugging. I continued staring at the reflection created by the mirror, until the verges of understanding began to slip away, becoming blurred.

At first, the foggy mist before my eyes prevented me from seeing clearly, but very quickly the images were no longer blurred, and I was able to see my mother's face, it looked younger, just like in old photos from my baby album so diligently made by her. With her head tilted slightly, she smiled sweetly and swayed. Her big hand touched my head, and she began to whisper the lullaby about the wolf, the edge of the bed, and something else, I don't understand what it is all connected with. Her singing stopped suddenly, and she said in surprise:

— My God, what big and smart eyes you have. What are you constantly looking at?

— You are back. — My “invisible friend”, that's what

he's like.

Mom turned around, she did not see him, but he was standing there, near the old wardrobe, in the room that later became mine. Sadness froze on his face with recognizable features, sadness could be read in familiar light-colored eyes as blue as the sky. How could I fail to recognize these eyes before? He was near, he was so close, he had been talking to me for several days. My "invisible friend" has not disappeared anywhere. He became real. My recent guesses were confirmed.

— Forgive me, Anna, forgive me for being lonely and for your feeling that something important is missing in your life. At least in a way, but I managed to become the one who will always be with you. I will help, I will take care of you, baby, and I will also come to you in dreams.

I saw the outlines of his tall and strong figure there, behind my mom's back, and the light came from him. Light — the crazy lad spoke about it, my miniature children's little hands rose and reached for my "invisible friend."

— I will do everything to return, I will definitely find a way out.

Chapter 10

Day six

— I’ve recalled it! — I exclaimed, opening my eyes wide, which is why Misha, who was lying next to me, woke up with a start.

— What, another bad dream? He mumbled, raised himself up, looked around sleepily, then lay back on the pillow and stretched out, the duvet cover slid down his chest, revealing the elastic muscles of his torso.

— Aaa-weee-sooome, — I said drawlingly, slowly got up and sat up, pulling my knees up to my chest, my arms wrapped around them.

Misha got up calmly, leaving me in an empty bed, picked up his trousers lying on the floor, put them on with the words: “Don’t worry, it’s just a dream,” and went to the kitchen.

Seeing him with a glance, I whispered in a hoarse voice, putting my palms on my forehead: “Incredible.” Why is he afraid to confess to me who he is? During the last days he was good at misleading me, and I believed that next to me there was a completely unfamiliar person. What for? He could have told me immediately, still on the beach of Bat

Yam, that he is my “invisible friend.”

Incredible? Yes. I have no idea how that is possible, but I can’t have been mistaken, my dream is a memory lost in the consciousness of an infant child. It can’t be refuted.

Misha quickly returned, sat on the edge of the bed and handed me a glass of coffee, leaned his elbows on his knees, slightly stooped, took a deep breath and looked at me. Still sleepy and a bit lost. I looked intently into his eyes, trying to collect my thoughts. I didn’t even know what to start the conversation with. I had been swallowing the coffee, still keeping my eyes on him, until the glass was empty. For a few seconds, maybe a minute, we were silently looking at each other.

Finally, Misha asked:

— Anna, why are you looking at me in such a strange way? — Then he frowned a little and lowered his eyes to the wooden floor.

— You know why.

He shook his head briefly, expressing refusal.

— And if you think well? — I tried to push him to the answer.

Once again he shook his head, expressing refusal, on top of everything else he only shrugged. He seemed to be even more off.

— OK, — I sighed and put the glass on the bedside table. — Perhaps you are right, and it was just another bad dream, that meant nothing (no way, nothing would shake my conviction). How about having dinner? After all, we’ve slept through breakfast and lunch.

He reached out to me, kissed me briefly on my lips and

whispered in my ear:

— You're right, something's gone wrong.

Oh, really.

— Do you want to talk about it? — I asked, hugging his neck.

— I do, but not now, I'll hold back my confession and arguments until dinner.

Misha and I went outside at sunset, but the southern city of Eilat still didn't get cool after a hot day. The heat was coming along the sidewalk from the street tiles, cars parked on the sides of the road and concrete fences of hotels. A lively promenade stretching for several kilometers was decorated with colorful lights. Palms, decorated with garlands created the atmosphere of holiday, and the twinkling neon signs of shops, souvenir shops, restaurants and bars were tempting with the offers of lucrative discounts.

The white silk dress I was wearing was gently and pleasantly touching my skin and let the dry wind go through the almost weightless fabric. Misha put on a light black short-sleeved shirt and loose denim shorts. Any clothes looked perfect on him, even though the shirt's short sleeves tightly gripped his biceps, and denim shorts hung loosely on his hips.

Misha's friends invited him to spend a night of fun on a rented yacht. Their stocks of booze, all kinds of herbal narcotic mixtures and chemical powders impressed even me, who had seen a large number of parties in all their diversity. But Misha persistently explained to his friends that he wanted to stay with me without the presence of a noisy

company. And when he had to return to the house for his forgotten wallet, Dima told me unpleasantly: “I don’t know what’s going on between you, but I can’t recognize my friend.” Then he shook his head and left.

— Shall we pop in? — said Misha, pointing at the coastal bar-restaurant under the open sky, tightly clutching my palm in his hand. The tension, growing in him could be felt.

When we’d sat at a table with the Red Sea view, a young waitress came to us and took the order. The sun almost hid behind the horizon, and the first stars began to light up in the sky. The sea froze in tranquility, in the distance there were yachts, plowing its waters. The semicircle of beach line stretched for many kilometers, and on the left you could see the lights of neighboring Jordan.

— I’ve already forgotten how beautiful it is here, — I said.

— And I’ve already forgotten what it is like — to experience pleasure, contemplating the beauty of earthly life, — dully said Misha, who was sitting next to me; he frowned looking at the sea fixedly.

I put my hand on his shoulder and put my head on his neck, warm and tangible. As for me, there was absolutely no reason for sadness. I wanted to cuddle with him for a long time, to touch him, to feel his skin under my fingers and drown in serenity. I didn’t want to run away from him at all; on the contrary, I wanted to return to him from the first day of my acquaintance with him — how could he be sad?

At this time, the waitress brought our order, put on the table a large plate with the salad of cucumbers, tomatoes

and greens, sprinkled on top with small cubes of white cheese, two servings of ravioli and two servings of whiskey.

Misha didn't touch the food, lit a cigarette and took a few sips from a glass of whiskey. I pulled the plate of salad to me and began to impale cheese cubes on my fork.

— Well, so will you tell me how this can be? — I wondered.

— Do you remember our recent talk in your rented apartment? — In response, I silently shook my head, expressing agreement, and, continued giving our dinner the status of “joint,” I began to eat salad in relaxed manner, although my pulse was racing faster and faster because of excitement. — You listened to your feelings and made the right conclusion. Do you want to see our house and the place where we used to live? I can show you.

Continuing chewing cheese, I looked at Misha with interest.

— Lean back and close your eyes. Just for a second, a part of the memories will fly by before you bat an eyelash, — he said.

I followed his instructions, and when I opened my eyes, I saw the endless sky strewn with small twinkling stars.

— The Ursa Major constellation, you can probably see it from anywhere in the world, — I heard Misha's voice familiar low timbre.

We lay side by side in the wet grass, leaning shoulder to shoulder. The air was clean and fresh, like after the rain.

— Russia, fifty three years ago. Our past life. — Having finished, he got up and gave me his hand, I took it. Having stood up, I looked back.

The clearing we were standing in was surrounded by a dark forest, sprawling treetops in the light of the full moon were swinging in the wind and far away on the right, the lights of a large one-story wooden house on the shore of the lake could be seen.

I looked at Misha, the stubble on his face was no longer so short, the hair on his head became longer, the strands fell on his forehead, even the facial features changed, they became coarser. He was wearing a loose white shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, casually tucked into worn out brown trousers of strange cut. Then I lowered my head, examining myself: the hem of a long blue dress with a wide belt at the waist was fluttering in the wind, my blond curly hair was falling on my chest.

I glanced at the house again, there was a massive wooden table with chairs at the wide timbered veranda. A picture flashed in my mind, as Misha, who had once existed and now newly found, is putting plates on the table, and I am putting glasses next to them, and we... we are happy, free and happy.

— I remember, — my voice trembled thrillingly.

Misha approached me and gently kissed me hugging. My eyes automatically closed. As soon as they opened, everything became the same. Eilat, the beach, a table in the coastal restaurant and the air, which became stale and hot again.

Misha was sitting with his head aloof, resting his elbows on the table. I put my hand on his shoulder and asked:

— Why were you... Why were you only an “invisible friend” for me all this time? What happened then?

— First you died. Drowned in the lake, at the age of twenty-six, — he said in a firm tone. — Your name was Maria then. Your body was found a few days later, it got tangled in the grass, so it did not surface immediately.

Once I imagined for a second my swollen, blue body, which was wrapped by the long leaves of dark green algae, as the cold ran down my back, despite the heat. And my joy gradually began to disappear.

— I couldn't continue living without you; my life lost its meaning. I hated everything, refused God's gifts, and partly believed that it was me myself who was to be blamed for everything. I shouldn't have let you go to the lake alone at night. You march to your own drummer, you rarely listen to anyone, you constantly do everything in your own way, but I thought that it was my fault that I had not insisted on getting my own way. — He lit another cigarette and drank the remaining whiskey from the glass. — After your death, I started to go crazy. For several days I almost didn't get out of bed, didn't sleep, but only lived on my memories.

Yet still when I went to the first date with him real, the thoughts that flashed in my mind were right. His look — he seemed to have seen in me a long time familiar person and couldn't believe that we met again. Intuition is a strange thing; you accept it for a fact only after you receive an obvious confirmation.

— You died in an accident, so you were able to return. And I ... — He hesitated a little, but continued after a couple of seconds, quickly uttering the words. He tried to suppress his emotions, but still when saying some sentences, emotions appeared to be stronger than he was. — I couldn't

resist. I succumbed to pain and despair. I slashed wrists on the porch of our house with the very knife with which we had cut the wedding cake a few months ago. I couldn't know that we would meet again, and if I had known that, I would have waited, even if it took my whole life. I went a short way and saw what happens when a person encounters death. Believe me, it is so terrible for suiciders that all the words are not enough to describe that fear. It is limitless, incomparable to anything. We have no right to dispose of our lives; it is not for us to decide who should live and who should die. I doomed my soul to torment in the madness of fear. I ended up in hell. But you know, even there a part of you did not leave me. You addressed me and thanks to you I managed to escape. And even if I could not be a human any more, I could be next to you, I could become the one who protects, the one who helps, when there is no one to hope for, the one who inspires faith. Those like me, you call them angels. You could see me a few months after you were born, until you realized the essence of the things around you.

I leaned closer to him. I covered his palm, which he laid on my knee, with my hand and only then I realized how cold and wet my fingers had become.

— And how did you manage to become a human again?

Not that I've made sense of everything utterly and completely, I just tried very hard to take this situation for granted, with complete peace of mind, although I was already beginning to fever from the inside. I was ready for my "invisible friend's" confession, but didn't assume that his confession would be like that. Well, like this... frightening

frank.

— I was allowed to return for seven days, seven days that I can spend with you. This is not my body, but the body of a guy who we are very similar with. And his name is the same as mine — Michael. I made a deal with him and fulfilled his wish. For a long time he had been developing his business with his friends, I contributed to the fact that they entered into an agreement with the state construction company for several years in advance. And now he can earn the money he had dreamed of. The creatures like me are forbidden to enter the body of a person without his consent, but still one time I could not restrain myself. Do you remember Efi? Later I got it in the neck, but it was worth it. — Of course, I remembered that incident with Efi that blew up my mind, but so far I couldn't say anything. — Each world has its own rules and laws, it is forbidden to violate them, and each world rests on them. Our acquaintance should have happened in usual and simple way, in accordance with the events that happen in ordinary earthly life, and everything was to end differently. — The last sentence he uttered quite annoyed, cursed almost audibly and put out his cigarette.

I was so glad that we managed to meet in real life, and not in my imagination, that I didn't think at all about everything else. Even about the fact that all of this can end as suddenly as it had begun. I felt good with him, and it felt like this “good” was here to stay. That it would last and last... because everything went so well, so easily and so quickly. Just the way things are.

— Anna, listen, — continued Misha, — you were able

to keep love for me even in the life where you didn't have me. You heard only my voice and considered me a friend, and I could only become friend for you, because I was assigned such a role. And I was forbidden to tell you about everything, otherwise I would come back. — He squeezed his fingers under my palm into a fist, then opened them and sighed heavily: — Damn, my hands begin to shake just at the bare mention of hell.

— But now you told me everything, it means ... — I gave him a pleading look, showing: “no, just don't tell me that you will leave.”

— So, I will have to go back there soon. I ignored the order when you realized who I was and didn't leave. Yes, I was joking, calling you a psychic, but this is partly true. You can feel and understand too much, you are a person of penetration, Anna. Tablets should have blocked your brain, respectively, and our connection, as well. But despite this...

— ... I chose you, — I finished the sentence for him and added: — My life is connected with you. I don't need anything else, all the rest — trifles that can be achieved. Together with you I feel confident that everything will be fine. I want to live every day with you.

Misha looked at me as if he had already heard the words I said, and it was more likely that he had; he'd heard them in our past life. Pretending to be a new acquaintance in recent days, he knew absolutely everything, remembered everything, understood and didn't look for meaning in what was happening. In spite of everything, he was just enjoying the present.

As someone who returned from hell once told me: “You should treat life as if you had lost everything, but you were given a second chance. And you should do it every day”.

— I wanted to fix everything, obeyed all the orders, “they” knew that I would go above and beyond, and I agreed to take people’s souls, these people did not die at the mercy of fatality. And your dreams — unborn children, teenagers who didn’t see life, or terminally ill people who prayed for the heavens to prolong their life — this is my present. I want to be here with you, but I’m sorry, I don’t know how to do it yet. After all, I once returned from hell, and believe me, if they send me back there, I will come back again, but I will not carry out any more orders. And when you find yourself in your room, don’t do anything.

My room again? At the moment it was not so important, I was scared because of Misha’s last words. I was afraid for him and beyond all measure offended, because he had to suffer for the sake of someone’s interests, in the name of maintaining the correct operation of the system. Everything has been arranged. My death pushed him to suicide, he made a mistake that led him to hell. Freedom and the opportunity to be with me — in exchange for complete submission. So there you have a perfect soldier.

— I could have left, obeying the order, and erase your memories of past days spent together, but it seems to me that this does not make sense. Even if there are no memories, the feelings will remain, and you will suffer again and won’t understand why you are attracted to a person who in fact was not there.

Then what can I do? Accept it and continue living on

after he leaves? Yes, yes, no problem, I will dutifully wait, hoping for a miracle. And what if everything will settle?

Is it possible?

— It seems that you don't understand what you are asking for. You suggest me waiting patiently for you to return not knowing what's going on with you and how you are?

— Yes. Will you promise me? — He was looking into my eyes with a fixed stare, as if trying to hypnotize and inspire something.

— No.

— Anna! — He is demanded in a tone that brooked no contradiction.

— No, — I replied in a tone, disgraceful to his objections.

— You must promise. — He knew that I wasn't the one to throw around idle promises. We are similar in this.

— I won't promise anything. Let's go back to the house? I don't feel well, — I said, being afraid to lose grasp of his hand.

Each of us has already planned his own moves.

I only needed some time to understand how everything works. Just some more time.

Yet another morning, pushed the rays of the dawn sun through the window, they fell on the bed, where Misha and I lay naked, covered by the empty duvet cover.

I was looking at the face of my once "invisible friend", casting a shadow on the pillow, and deeply hoped that this was not our last morning with him. He was able to give me happiness by being close in physical appearance, filling my

thoughts with joy. He opened the boundaries of previously incomprehensible sensations, and he... He is still here, even if only for a short while. He's looking at me, patting on the shoulder. Smiling, enjoying the moment together with me.

— Misha, do you know how our world was created? — I decided to ask him.

— Yes, — he answered shortly, running his hand over my cheek and reaching for my lips.

— And do you know about the one who created it?

— Yeah, — he wanted to kiss me, but I pulled back a little.

— Does God really exist?

— Yes, he does, — he said calmly. I was looking at him with interest, anticipating that he would tell me about something so unbelievable amazing. — God All-seeing, sits in heaven, on an iron throne, and observes people. With special attention — such beautiful young girls like you, managing to enjoy his creation. — A barely perceptible stinging smile flashed on his face.

— Very witty. I asked you seriously. Can you answer? — shoving him slightly in the chest, I demanded in a hurt tone.

— Yes, I can. — He reluctantly stood up, leaned on his arm bent at the elbow and spoke seriously: — Just everything is arranged so that those who live in the earthly world will never find the answer to the question of how their world really works. Human brain was created with certain peculiarity, and it lies in the fact that it is impossible to see, realize, explain and prove the existence of those who created the world. Cultivated minds of scientists can put forward

theories, there will be lots of them, but they won't have a one hundred percent confirmation, supported by evidence. After all, there can be no proof itself. It simply doesn't exist. You can believe in any of the theories you like. I won't find the words to explain; so respectively, even if I understand, I cannot tell you so that you would understand. Everything that surrounds you is your clear model for understanding reality. Partly, this reality is formed by you, gradually, step by step, day after day, in a clearly calculated sequence of time allotted for life. This is how your world works, the world where time, although it goes ahead, has a countdown. The world where life flows measuredly, but if you look back, it is only a short moment of memory. My world has no boundaries, there is no time and space in it, there are completely different principles. It is a world created to maintain order, so that your world won't plunge into ultimate chaos, a place where the soul gets after the death of the physical body, and can remain there. Like mine, for example. Just as you obey the rules and order of your world, I obey the rules of my world. But you can be sure that the creators had something to do here. And just for you to know the world where I could feel you, touching, — this is exactly the place which I want to be in. I began to deny the world without you even before I died. How did you say about it? Your life became empty? Well, for me, it became empty too. I thought death was the end, but it turned out to be completely different.

He fell silent, looked at my deeply thoughtful face. Being silent he was waiting until the information received would be finally processed in my head; he didn't wait for an

early response, nevertheless decided that this process would take a long time, and asked:

— Do you have any more questions on this topic?

— No, I... understood. — I can't say that I understood everything, but I understood the main thing: wherever each of us is and whatever side we are on, we will always feel each other. Sighing heavily, I eagerly embraced him, in fear that he would disappear. — I'm so tired, Misha, my eyes are closing. Before you appeared, I worked almost every night like a crazy, I had time to train and go to clubs and run to meaningless dates. I was constantly in a rush somewhere, just not to stay on the same place. I didn't know what to do with myself. Now I understand why, and only now I begin to feel how tired I am. But... I'm scared to fall asleep.

— Do not worry, I am with you, — he answered, his warm breath next to my ear was as intermittently warming as the phrases he uttered from time to time, like the one he has just said.

— I mean that you might not be here when I wake up. You'll return to your world — without boundaries, without time, without space.

— Everything will be fine, have a sleep. — He got out of bed, went to the window, pressed the button that lowered the blinds, then turned on one of the dim lamps on the bedside table and climbed under the thin duvet cover. He hugged me by the waist, pulled me close and pressed his chest against my back. He seemed to have said something, but I didn't hear it anymore, tiredness won the field, and I fell asleep.

Chapter 11

Day seven

I opened my eyes, stretched out, groaned asleep and, sighing heavily, rolled onto my side, trying to focus on what was happening around.

— Misha? — I said with fear. This fear was caused by the blue wall against which my gaze rested. I didn't expect to see it, because I hoped to wake up at least to be the last time with Misha. With the one who, without a red T-shirt, looked better off than in it.

— Hey, blonde? — I heard the familiar slightly mocking voice behind my back.

Holy shit! Does my dream continue?

I lay on my back, turned my head and saw him squatting by my bed. I was in the familiar room with the wardrobe, its doors were covered with a mirror film. The boy's hair was disheveled, just like when we met last, his eyes bulged, and a broad white smile appeared on his face. His long bony fingers lay on his knees.

— You?! What the devil are you doing here? — I stared at him, being afraid to move. I shouldn't have done that. It would be better to say: "What the devil am I doing here!"

— Devils are the lowest creatures, feh. — Wrinkling his thin nose and twisting his mouth in disgust, he moved to the edge of the bed. — Don't tell anyone that I came. By the way, I heard a talk here. You haven't left the ward for several days, that's why I've brought you something to eat.

He took several oatmeal bars in a transparent package from a wide pocket of his pajamas and threw them on my pillow. I looked at the candy bars, then at him, then looked around the room once again — and that was all. I've got it. This is not a dream. Having jumped up from the bed, I clutched at my head and swore loudly.

The boy got up frightened — his eyes became even wider (to be honest, I thought that he had already opened them to the limit), he took off and ran out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

— Hey, wait! — I shouted after him and ran after him, crossed the threshold of the door, looked around — there was no one in the long corridor. Only rectangular ceiling-hung lamps, open white doors and a carpet on the floor.

— Misha, my “invisible friend”, where are you? And if you've gone why am I here? Answer me. Could it be that I'll never see you again? How can I call you?! Should I pray God? What is this place, why do I always come back here?! — Come to think of it, these are quite suitable shouts for a person staying in this institution.

I circled around, looking at the empty corridor in the hope to see Misha, called for him. He wasn't there. Neither in reality nor in my head. I moved forward, made a few steps, each step got more and more difficult, making my legs cotton. I could no longer go through an orientation,

I realized that I was falling down, at first I bumped into the wall with my shoulder, and then I hit it with my head. After the impact everything suddenly went black, and my consciousness switched off.

I regained consciousness. The brown ceiling beams of the familiar log cabin froze before my eyes. Still gripped by fear, I raised up, crawled back sitting, bumped into the bedside table, which made it swing, and the unfinished bottle of whiskey that was on its edge fell to the floor.

Misha woke up because of the sound of breaking glass, jumped in bed with the words:

— Just go to hell yourself! — Dumbfounded, he started looking around, and when he noticed me, who was sitting frightened next to the bedside table, he heaved a sigh of relief, adding: — Great, we are still here! — Then he grinned and asked: — Anna, did you sleep on the floor again?

I got up without answering him and hurried to hug him, sat down on his lap, pressed against him, wrapped my arms around his big neck. He also hugged me, stroking my back.

— I was so scared, you can't even imagine it. I thought I wouldn't see you again and wouldn't hear you. Mental health facility... is it... isn't it a dream? Everything is so realistic there, just like here. Two realities, but different ones. — Sharply lifting my head, I looked into Misha's face and was deeply surprised at what I've just said. — Misha, then what is the present?

My "invisible friend," who knew the answers to most of the existing questions, could make it clear, he was even going to do it, but I stopped him had he only opened his

mouth.

— The more I begin to understand, the more difficult it becomes. That's enough. You'd better not to explain anything. We are here, I refuse to accept another reality. I'll take a shower, — I said quickly, and purposefully moved towards the bathroom.

Standing under the cold jets of water that were falling on my head, and resting my forehead against the tiled wall, I stepped with my foot on the iron plug hole, closed it so that the bath could be filled. I will say this: five minutes, spent without the existence of Misha, shocked me, I was willing to do anything, for him to return. It was shock, similar to the one you feel at the sound of a siren, warning about the bombing. It is then that you remember about the existence of God. And after all, at that moment in the hospital corridor I, believed and was ready to beg for help like never before. What a queer thing! God is one of the creators of all things which are real and tangible — you turn to Him for the last service, remembering about Him in moments of despair. And His existence is justified when He helps.

Now I can understand more consciously what it was like for Misha, who was sitting on the porch of the house and holding the knife in his hand, which in addition to everything was evocative knife. If I were him, I myself would have acted in the same way, and without thinking. So, I don't blame him for this act, but he himself considers himself guilty.

I didn't know what to do next. I was standing, shaking under cold water, like a gopher in a pouring rain, and

couldn't understand what... what to do next?! Where will I return? Where am I? No answers, no explanations, no common sense. And in general, everything doesn't agree with common sense for us. And life is a complete absurdity, consisting of contradictions.

Perhaps this common sense is understandable only to those who live by the rules, and my friend and I are protesting against the rules for no good reason. Perhaps, indeed, it would be better not to violate them, but simply to live. I thought about that, but later my action would be completely opposite.

— Anna, is everything alright? — I heard Misha's voice. He was standing on the threshold of the bathroom and looking at me. In his eyes, I noticed a slight arousal.

— You have no idea how good it is with you. Come to me. — Why should he stand there when there is an opportunity to be together in a refreshing bath.

On the way, Misha pulled off his shorts and threw them away. Before his arrival the bath was already more than half full. He climbed into it. I sat with my back pressed to him, my head thrown back against his chest.

— When I was your “invisible friend”, when you said, sitting on the couch, drunk and tired: “I miss him”, I really wanted to tell you that I also miss you. — He pulled back the hair stuck to my neck, and buried his forehead in it. Hugging, squeezing my breasts in his palms.

— Show me more of our past.

— There's no point in living in the past, baby, — he said in a hoarse whisper, without raising his head.

— But I want to go through it. Again.

— If you want it so much, close your eyes.

Fresh grass. My little feet in dark brown shoes worn out on the toes, put on white socks, were sinking in it. Lifting my head, I began to look around. I noticed a group of children; they were running and having fun playfully. Well, I myself was a child. Sunlight was flooding the glade, surrounded by tall birches with short black lines of stripes on white trunks. The orchestra on the wooden stage, located in the center, was playing an unfamiliar, classical style, entertaining music with distinguished sounds of the saxophone. On the right side, at the long table filled with various dishes strangers in old-fashioned clothes sat.

Someone patted me on the shoulder, and I turned around. A child wearing a bear costume, made of coarse burlap, was standing in front of me, waiting. His thin, pale legs stuck out from under the tight fabric of his shorts. He stretched out his hands to a huge round mask — his head — and took it off.

I was immediately enchanted by his sky-bright blue eyes.

— Hello, — he said in trembling voice, being childishly naively embarrassed.

At that time he was about twelve years old.

— Michael Serovski! — I jerked out, pursing my lips, bent my elbows, putting my fists on my hips. — Why are you constantly following me? Why are you bothering me?

I wasn't going to say this, because I couldn't even say a word, I was only an observer in my own body, but I realized that I liked it when this boy appeared next to me.

— Oh, come on. Why are you so cruel? Let ‘s play. — He threw me the soft bear head. It hit my baby’s chest, bounced off from it and fell on the grass.

— Hey, you! — Shouted irate “Anna the girl” from my past life, and the boy Michael, laughing, began to run away.

She quickly picked up the primitive semblance of the head, which, crumpled, lay at her feet, and ran after Michael.

— Stop, you won’t make me play with you if I don’t want it! — She swung and with all her strength threw the crumpled quilted bear head in the back of the boy, however, missed a little. The head just grazed his shoulder and bounced away from him, like a ball.

The boy, still running, turned around. Laughing fervently, he was carrying “Anna from the past life” away. He rejoiced so innocently and she ran after him in a clear glade, not noticing anything, shouting expletives in a childish way. Having overtaken him, she tapped lightly. Then ran away. And when he caught up with her, she, having beaten him once more ran away, knowing that he would run after her. In fact, we did this until evening. And then we climbed a tree, sat down on one of its large long branches, with our skinny children’s legs with sharp knees dangling, and kicking our legs up. The boy Michael in the costume of a bear and I, “Anna from the past life” wearing a big, carefully straightened round rag mask on my head, resemblance of a bear head.

We looked from the heights at the children’s party, listening to music, and enjoying the saxophone solo. It should be admitted that he played the magic tune with feeling, its

notes printed on the pages turned into waves of sound and spread throughout the clearing, shrouded in red light of the paper garland lanterns.

— Shall we play some more tomorrow? I have a wooden horse, big, on wheels, — the boy Michael distracted me from contemplating the holiday.

— A wooden horse is great. — My voice sounded muffled, struggling through the thick cloth of the bagging of the round mask of the bear head.

— Mom will bake chocolate cupcakes, she always bakes them on Fridays. I will definitely share with you.

— Oh, cupcakes are great, especially chocolate ones, — I encouraged him — as “Anna the girl”.

— Yes, my mum’s cupcakes are excellent. — He smiled so familiarly, his eyes sparkled, he brought his thin palms together and, lifting his shoulders, put them between his knees.

— And I’ll draw you as a big bear. When you grow up, you will become as strong as a bear. And I will give you this drawing tomorrow.

— Will you be thinking about me in the evening and drawing me? — his youthful voice rang out loud.

— Yes, — I said briefly and confidently, as if there could be no other way.

— I’ll take all the cupcakes from the house, I’ll give you everything. And I will give the horse, honestly, — he said sincerely and resolutely. Leaning, he looked at me, peering into the narrow slits for the eyes of the bear head.

Suddenly everything disappeared.

How much I liked it sitting, dangling my skinny little

legs in sandals on a tree next to the young Michael (he didn't even suspect what a man he was to become and was so kind and naive), feeling confident that the next day would be filled with joy. Cupcakes, games, grateful surprise from the already beloved boy for the drawing given to him. And then... then we could think of something else that would continue to the next day, filled with our fantasies.

I returned to Misha, who, when he had grown up, became as strong as a bear, slid slowly down his chest, on which I leaned my back, plunged into cold water and drowned in it with my head. He quickly grabbed my shoulders, pulled me to him and hugged me.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to regain my lost breathing. My breathing restored, and a short chuckle broke out of my chest, at first completely quiet and muffled, but as soon as I took more air into my lungs, it turned into a high pitched laugh, echoed from the tiled walls of the bathroom.

— Misha, even at that age you were so, — I tried not to laugh again, — so good, so generous ... — But I couldn't control myself, and Misha laughed with me.

— I can still ride you on a wooden horse, in the same glade, — he said cheerfully. — I already loved you then.

— I know, and I loved you too, — I said, taking a deep breath. Suddenly it was not at all funny, but on the contrary, it was insulting and painful, so much that my heart ached. Everything could have happened again in this life, but it didn't happen again, we could... We could have done a lot of things, but instead I lived in search of someone who was always there, just outside my world.

Russia

One of the records the day before the New Year 2018

My “invisible friend”, being careful, never spoke about himself. And now the need for caution has disappeared, it no longer made sense to follow the rules whether they will be violated or not, in any case he will return to the place from which he came before he became my “invisible friend.”

He dipped me into a reality which was already familiar to him, it was enough to close his eyes. He showed me the days when I went to bed in the morning. How he saw them for his part. He was with me, separated by the border of the worlds, was tempted to take on flesh and feel the touch of my body, having buried his head in my hair. He could have breathed in its scent, hugging me tightly.

I saw the past nights where he had to share me with others with his eyes. I remember them in fragments, like broken pieces from a film. They periodically rush like memories, and, most likely, will not fade in my memory, regardless of the number of the years passed. Lustful touches of the customers’ hands, face to face or when I was on the warm up for couples of all stripes. In those moments, my “invisible friend” fell silent, my imagination drew him sitting on the edge of the bed, in which the people hiding their true nature were having fun with me. Luxuriant imagination and intuition, they are so similar and connected. As it turned out, my friend had actually sat there, being angry down to the limit. Resting his elbows on his knees, he watched frowningly, without saying a word, because his persuasions had already ceased to affect me.

He reminded me of a quiet beach in an elite village, with a pile of stones tumbled down on the sand (on the second day of our acquaintance, he — the real one looked at them thoughtfully, tapping his fingers on a glass of champagne when I asked him about his past life). Painfully familiar place for him. Recently, he used to transfer there at dawn. He sat obediently on the stones, unable to see how I, falling asleep, was squeezing the pillow and feeling the need for him, without knowing it. He was not able to change everything, no matter what powers he possessed.

Early Israeli morning, pierced with cold dampness. Just over three years ago. He peers into the waves, which run over each other and hit the bottom of the pile of those same stones in white furrows. He is sitting on one of them and looking down. He wants me wearing a white, light dress that suited me so well in his past life to come to him, sit beside him. My light curls would fly in the wind, touching his cheek a little.

“My darling, why are you sitting here? I can’t sleep without you. Come with me”, with a thrill in my voice, I would call him with me, putting my hand on his shoulder. And he would follow me into any bed, whatever it would be. But the days were passing. Week after week turned into months, and the thing that we both wanted, did not happen. Morning, the morning that followed it, the new morning, the next morning... Actually, all of them looked like that. Listening to the sound of the waves, he watched the dawn, announcing the beginning of the day. He was waiting for the order, not knowing yet which of the people would not be able to start the day at sunrise. I slept and met my “invisible

friend” only before waking up. He came to me as different characters. For example, the guy who was sitting with me on a cloud or a faithful dog, knocking off daisies with his tail.

It hurt him, and I could feel his pain when my mind recreated him, bringing him to existence in my world, endowing him partly with human flesh. Being on the border of our realities, he tried to talk to me. But everything that came out of it caused me feel wild fear, turning the whole thing into a complete farce.

And then I met him “real” on the beach under the scorching rays of the midday southern sun. I was looking at him, feeling awkward. Yes, of course, the stupidity of my behavior worried him very little, he was happy to return. Happy to run on wet sand, happy to inhale the humid salty air again, excessively happy to be in the material world with me, to look into my eyes, knowing that soon he would finally be able to touch me and feel how I touch him.

Israel. Eilat

2016

In the early twilight of the seventh day, the soft yellowish-pink light of the sun going beyond the mountains enveiled the Eilat marina — an artificially created harbor surrounded by elite high-rise hotels of various forms. Each built in its own individual style, they clearly reflected the genius of the architect who designed them. Shining signs, adorned on the facades of the buildings, shone with names that raise their status by means of historical figures names. King Solomon, painter Leonardo da Vinci, founder of the

Jewish dynasty King Herod. The latter is an evil genius who, according to legend, killed many citizens and his own family. But despite everything, he is popular, and the hotels named after him, for many years are considered to be the most elite in our country.

Pleasure crafts, private sailing yachts with neatly folded sails lined in smooth moored rows, forming a parking lot on the water. Swaying, they creaked, the splash of calm, barely noticeable waves hitting their sides could be heard.

The day was even hotter than the previous one. To be precise, the temperature in the shade was 42 degrees with a plus sign. I did not want to leave the air-conditioned walls of the house, but the desire to be with Misha on a yacht drifting in the sea was stronger. After all, I dreamed about it a few days ago, when I was dancing for the Arabs.

— I'm so hot, — I said, my voice was befuddled by the exhausting heat, Misha was looking at the moored yachts at that time.

— Do you want freshness and rain? — he asked.

— Very much. — I sighed with annoyance at understanding that this is impossible.

— And if it is possible? — He turned and looked at me, a slight smile touched his lips, and slyness flashed on his face.

Suddenly, I felt a fresh stream of wind. Looking up, I noticed how the clouds, which even a minute ago were so weightless and motionless, began to get dark, increasing in size. They were growing quickly and covered the sky, shielding the remaining rays of the sunset. Everything was quiet around. The darkness of the night enveloped the city

and the narrow lanes of the pier. Our ears popped on. For a short time silence hung in the electric atmosphere. And then there were peals of thunder, originating somewhere far beyond the mountains.

Looking back, I saw how people who had previously been sitting in restaurants along the pier began to go outside. All of them were enthusiastically looking in the sky with their heads up.

Misha approached me and took my hands. The wind blew harder, it waved the hem of my dress, began to tangle my long hair, picked up the grains of sand that lay like a layer of old dust on the concrete floor, the roofs of restaurants and cars. The peals of thunder became even more powerful, they sounded with a deafening force, and rain fell on the ground. It banged on the street tiles of the pier, hitting them with massive drops. It was making noise, merging into a melody consisting of millions of particles of water that miraculously appeared in the desert. It filled every crack of the thirsty soil.

People around us, both adults and children, began to run, jump and sing, rejoicing at what was happening, calling it a miracle. Of course, the thing that happened was exactly this phenomenon.

Misha and I stood opposite each other, still holding hands.

— Has it got cooler now? — said Misha being happy but sopping wet because of the pouring rain.

His wet T-shirt stuck to his body, showing off the relief of his chest, the fabric of shorts stuck to the muscles of his legs. I peered into his face, excitingly beautiful, with eye-

brows frowning a little. His look was calm, small drops of water were falling from his thick eyelashes, hair, flowing down the bristly cheeks, making small paths down his big neck.

“And how will I live on? — I mentally asked myself a question. — How will I do the usual things, knowing that he could be near?”

— Don’t be sad, we’ll think of something, — said Misha encouragingly.

— As for me, I haven’t got a clue, what you can think of here. — Mournfully I lowered my wet head, but after a second I raised it and continued speaking in amazement: — Can you read my mind? — Actually, I could have guessed before, he had always known how to do it.

— No, — said Misha shortly.

— Just don’t lie, — I said, trying to recognize the truth in his eyes.

— I didn’t dig in your thoughts, everything is clear without it. We have to go, I’ve found the yacht. — He released my hands, turned and headed in the direction known only to him, I dutifully followed him. I was walking beside him, when he walked silently, with his hands in his wet pockets, lifting his shoulders a little, as heavy rain pounded on them.

— And can money pour down from the sky instead of rain? — Having taken off my shoes, with bare feet I was stepping into warm puddles.

— Are you crazy?

— Well, I just asked. However

He stopped and looked at the people who were a few meters behind us, who were having fun in the pouring rain.

Suddenly he began to peer at them with alert fear mixed with anxious silence — there's such a look of a cool-headed predator who has noticed the approaching danger. I saw this emotion on his face for the first time.

— Do you see them? — he asked.

— Besides the crowd of people, I don't see anyone else there, — I answered, confused.

— It's good. Let's go faster. — Having said this, he grabbed my elbow and pulled me to a white, bright finished yacht of medium size. On the forty-foot sloop along the starboard you could read the name in capital letters — AS-TRAL.

Having got hold of me in his arms, Misha moved over the stern aboard and, while I was standing on the deck, examining the yacht, he untied hurriedly. He climbed the stairs to the wheelhouse. I heard the sound of the engine, moving in reverse, the yacht sailed off from the pier.

I went up for Misha, stood beside him, holding his hand. The rain was over, leaving behind coolness, the clouds scattered completely, and the stars glittered in the dark sky.

We were moving fast away from Eilat, a high-speed motor yacht, cutting through the oncoming waves, was carrying us into the dark waters of the Red Sea, and after twenty minutes the coast of the city turned into a semicircular strip of lights behind us. In the distance there were hotels, people, life with its familiar pace, as well as our cozy house, where we were not destined to return to.

The interior of the yacht was equipped with everything

necessary for long parties, which seemed to have been quite frequent here. In the spacious galley there were water reserves, boxes of alcohol, all kinds of snacks, canned goods and soft drinks.

The galley itself was located under the cabin, on the lower deck, closer to the bow of the yacht. I found Macallan in one of the boxes under the table (drinking this whiskey could become a tradition, if it were not for one well-known circumstance), then I grabbed ten fifteen-gram shots from the kitchen drawer. I arranged them on the tabletop in a straight row and sat down next to Misha on the sofa at a spacious table for several persons.

— Look, we pour the whiskey in all the shots, and you start drinking from the left side, and I from the right. The one, who can drink more shots — wins. — I opened the bottle and started filling up the shots.

— And what is the prize? What's the point of the competition? — Misha asked, watching the deft movements of my hands.

— A wish. One of us makes a wish, and the second fulfills it.

He grinned. Of course, it will not be difficult for him to win, to surpass me as an ordinary mortal person. But Misha, so to speak, is a “gentleman”, so, most likely, he will give up. Unless he is not reading my thoughts at the moment, of course

— On the count of three. And... one, two, three, — I said, giving the start.

I quickly picked up the shot and drank it, throwing my head back and sharply put it empty with a bang, on the

table, then quickly grabbed another one, doing the same thing. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Misha was following me. Then, even more quickly, I picked up the third, with the second hand the fourth, having emptied it, threw it on the table, took the fifth, swallowing its contents, quickly pulled the sixth to me.

Feeling my victory, I proudly put the empty shot on the table. Still he let me win, a thought instantly flashed in mind. I gave a long breath, and only then the drunk alcohol hit my brain, and so powerfully that everything began to go blur around.

— Actually I won, — I said quickly, trying to hide the tipsy voice. I tried to focus my attention, but it was in vain.

— Is that all? Have you “snapped”? — The expression of my Misha’s charming face hardened in a snide grimace. He tried to hold his emotions, although it was hard not to notice that laughter lurked somewhere inside him and it was about to break out.

— No, five shots is nno... no enough... not enough, in general, for me to get drunk. — I was even more tongue-tied, and on top of that, the hiccup that appeared unexpectedly finally knocked me off balance.

— I hope your victory was worth it. — Placing the upside down shots on the table, he looked up at me, and when I once again hiccupped after the phrase “so much”, he laughed in full voice with his gruff low laugh.

— Shut up. — I pushed him in the shoulder and sighed lingeringly. — Let’s go, we need to freshen up.

Having run quickly out onto the deck, we jumped off the yacht, holding hands, and dived into the deep abyss of the sea. There was no fear, because Misha was with me and didn't let my hand go.

More than six years ago, we were diving from the bow of my father's rusty small iron boat, and in those moments I couldn't even think that my "invisible friend" would be able to hold my hand for real. That he would be next to me — as a man. A man with whom I can feel free and happy, the real Anna, a lover of doing everything she pleases, sometimes even stupid, but passionate and unrestrained, burning with the lust for him, and he would love me exactly like that. He, my Misha, is one in whom sexuality is implicated, reflected in his appearance, and a special attraction, expressed through a strong-willed character, restrained behavior and of promises only supported by the actions.

— Well, and what is your wish? — Misha decided to ask me.

After the swim in the cool waters of the Red Sea, we went into the cabin and in an attempt to warm ourselves, we went to bed, covered ourselves with a blanket, firmly clinging to each other. The silence was broken only by the sounds of calm waves beating on the sides of the swinging yacht.

— Show me death, — I said, expressing my wish.

He frowned and chuckled loudly.

— It's impossible.

— Why?

— You can only see this reality. You are still alive, and if

I take you there, it is likely that you will not return. And if you come back, you won't remember anything. You won't be able to realize here what is happening there. — After a short pause, he added puzzled: — And in any case, I don't understand why you need this?

— I want to know where you'll return. Show me what you've seen. Make an interpretation. Like in a movie.

— Don't be silly, I've told you that it would not work. — His eyes widened for a second because of insight that came to him. — What are you up to?

— Nothing. Just show me. You've lost the wish. So do it.

He leaned back and, with his arms folded across his chest, turned his gaze to the dark ceiling of the cabin. Sitting up in bed, I tucked my legs under me and, leaning over him, continued saying:

— Everything is fair.

Yes, I used the situation to the best effect a little bit, knowing about his noble nature. I uttered the words that emphasize its significance on purpose, referring to the fact that he is my “gentleman,” if only he would give in, in case he still wants to read my thoughts. He agreed to play the stupid game and as a result of the loss he promised to fulfill any desire. And if he promised, then he would fulfill it by all means. These are his own principles, which he will never compromise.

He turned his head sharply to me and said in an angry voice:

— Well done. You've won, I've lost, everything is fair. Come here.

Having returned to Misha's cozy arms, I began to fall asleep, completely eluding the feeling of reality. I was drawn down by darkness, alluring darkness. And then came the new awareness of reality.

I saw an endless world, a cosmos with millions of planets and stars, twisted in zero gravity. Here you understand that you are part of it, and your role should soon be performed once again, intertwining with the fates of people, while pushing them towards certain deeds and actions. And having returned once again, you could play another new role, mixing with this vast and boundless world.

The incommensurable tranquility suddenly enters the soul, erasing all thoughts and memories, nothing's left. Our thoughts always move in chaotic action, and it is so chaotic that it is impossible to decide which of these thoughts is more necessary and correct. But they aren't here anymore, there are no problems and worries, there are no sounds. There's nothing. Only peace — dead peace.

Then everything begins to narrow, the boundless Universe narrows down to a cramped corridor. And then there is the sound of silence, a quiet hum in the ears, as if someone pressed one note, the highest one, on the piano key. This sound does not disappear, it only lasts and lasts. Involuntarily you make step by step, following the corridor. You already begin to feel your body by moving your legs. At the end of it there is no light, you fall into a cloud where you can barely see some shadows. Faceless shadows with outlines of human figures. You look around, turn around, do it over and over again. You understand that you are in a circle surrounded by shadows that stand close together. This is the

first circle, and behind it — the countless number of similar circles. And suddenly you are pierced by a feeling of fear, merging with internal pain. The only thing, inhabiting this place.

— Now you'll become one of us, you'll wait for sinful souls that join our ranks. — The flying chorus of voices of dark creatures echoes in infinite space.

— I have to go back... — you say in despair and fall to your knees, without finishing your speech. There is no compassion here, any of your words calling for compassion won't change the essence of what is happening, the shadows won't let you go. They are not subject to such feelings.

— Your soul now belongs to us and this place, — go on the creatures around.

They lock you into a tight circle and begin to tear to pieces — not flesh, but everyone takes away a part of your soul, they take you apart in small pieces. There's no limit to suffering and pain. Even ranking with them, returning to integrity, your pain does not go away. It continues to exist, and from now on it will forever be tearing you apart.

You begin to see the constantly arriving souls of sinners, and therefore, as you have already become one of these creatures, you yourself tear apart the new arrivals in order to alleviate your pain for a moment. After you greedily squeeze through the crowds of fellow brethren who have already become related to you in order to grab your piece and swallow it up quickly, the pain disappears for a moment. But it comes back with a new power, and so on ad infinitum, everything goes in a circle, like in the circle where you stand in the form of a shadow.

It's all over. For me. And the world in front of my eyes became earthly. I returned, the pain went away, leaving behind a small tremor that ran along the spine like an after-taste.

— Well, did you like the trip to hell? It was my hell, and yours, if you make a mistake that I had made, will be even worse, because it will be based on your fears. — Misha was hugging me, and his face was so close that I could feel the heat coming from his lips.

For a few seconds I looked into his eyes, my heart was pounding uncontrollably at a frantic pace, and only when my heartbeat became quieter I asked:

— Isn't it the one?

— There's an infinite variety of options. Make the right choice, and you will not go to your own hell.

— I... not... I don't know what choice to make, without you everything becomes meaningless, I can't imagine how I will live without the real you, without you, my "invisible friend", who I've already got so used to (like this, a double blow). — Over the last couple of days my jaded psyche finally failed. Tears filled my eyes, and I blinked rapidly in an attempt to stop them. — How come, Misha? There must be a way out. Why can't you change everything? Stay with me! Dash it all! — I got silent. It was impossible to argue with this reality.

— Stubborn you, I didn't want to show you anything. — He himself was upset, ran his thumb along the corner of my eye and added after he kissed my trembling lips: — Hey, stop, we'll think of something.

— It was like this before. — I don't want to say that

I gave up, but I got scared at the thought what I would have to go against.

— It's always been like that, — he said affirmatively. He, who had been to hell and managed to break his own fears. He, who was not willing to abide by the circumstances. He, who knew that once again he would soon have to find himself in the place where he would be torn to shreds, — still continued fighting.

I will return and I won't follow orders any longer.

— Come on, it's time for a new fantasy. Start thinking up of what will happen next. I will already know where to come back later. — The words said by Misha involuntarily caused the stream of new images and desires, I remembered the past years when we were inventing various circumstances, some kind of dreams, which we believed could be fulfilled. He lay back on the pillow and threw his hands under his head, waiting for the beginning of the presentation of my imaginary future events. — Just move closer to me, as you lie far away.

Putting my head on his arm bent at the elbow and pressing close to him, I threw my leg over him.

— Do you remember, once I dreamed that I would dance on stage? It's a pity, of course, that in reality this stage turned out to be a pole, in a strip club, — I said. — The next time we meet, I will be performing for the first time on the stage of the Opera and Ballet Theater, I will become a ballerina. That evening you will be sitting in the auditorium, I will see your eyes and immediately understand everything... — I don't even remember what else I thought of. Misha was listening to me and not interrupting me.

A few minutes later, he began to doze, and meanwhile the predawn hours were replaced by the dawn, the sun was rising from behind the mountains of Jordan, illuminating the clear sky. Its morning rays began to penetrate the round windows of the cabin.

Soon I will stop enjoying the summer nights... because they are too short...

I got up and lowered the curtains. Then I returned to bed and lay down next to Misha. He turned on his side, sighed sleepily, pushing one hand under the pillow, nestled his forehead against my temple and said:

— Thank you for reminding me how great life can be. — Then he pulled me to him and hugged me, without opening his eyes.

In the gloom-shrouded cabin, Misha's breathing, touching my ear, became intermittent, and his strong embrace began to weaken.

— Misha? — I raised his face in my palms. — Misha?! — I slapped him a little on the cheek. Everything clamped inside me.

— What do you want? — He grunted in a muffled, sleepy voice, unwilling to wake up. — What's happened? What should be done? I'm getting up... I'm getting up. — His attempt to get up did not bring results. His body shuddered and relaxed again.

— You can't leave, — I said bitterly.

— I'm with you... with you... we... I'll be back, — his words turned into indistinct fragments of phrases, and they were the last words I heard from him.

Suddenly, behind the closed door of the cabin, heavy

footsteps thundered. They mixed with the lighter and smaller ones, mincing on the wooden floor. The sounds I heard stopped as suddenly as they began. I was listening cautiously, suggesting that they were only my imagination. It turned out, that they were not. Not my imagination. After a few seconds, the tinkle of broken tableware on the floor sounded, and I startled of fear. Steps resumed in more powerful way.

There was a galley in front of the cabin, shots and the unfinished whiskey bottle of remained on the table. The sea was calm, the yacht was swinging very slowly, so they could only fall off the table, only if someone dropped them. Dropped? Except for me and Misha, there was nobody on the yacht. There didn't use to be, and now, apparently, there is.

— Misha? Can you hear me? There's someone came. — I started to shake him, pushed him in the chest, but he did not react, he was somewhere else I didn't understand where (it's just clear that he was leaving my world), and something terribly frightening was behind the door.

— Come on, Misha, get up, wake up! — I don't know why I was desperately trying to wake him up, perhaps I thought that by some miracle I would succeed. A lump of pain rolled up to my throat and burst out in sobbing. — Please wake up. Come on, come back now! You can come back, you won't leave me, I can't stand it, do you hear! I can't do without you, I don't want anything else without you! — My cry, filling the small space of the cabin, was accompanied by sobs. Tears flowed uncontrollably from my eyes with despair. I sat down on my knees, legs tucked un-

der me, and nestled my face wet with tears against Misha's shoulder, who didn't react to my cries. He seemed to have fallen into a lethargic sleep.

The screech of the opening sliding door rolling wheels made me stand still. Out of the corner of my eye, without lifting my head, I looked through the lowered eyelashes toward the outgoing sound.

The light was illuminating him from behind. The oblong shadow reflected on the floor ended at the foot of the bed, surrounded by small tailed spots and shadows, they were making a rustling sound, like a herd of rats, hastily stepping their thin legs. A dark, slim figure with long, hands reaching to the floor froze in anticipation, never crossing the threshold, and in the shock of his hair, which reached the shoulders, they were really swarming — rodents. Some of their representatives began to crawl through the body. His eyes shone like red dots on a dull, black image of face (why an image? Just it was supposed to be in that place, but it was not there, only a blurred dark spot), the fingers of his hands hanging down to the wooden floor were tapping on it with nails.

The picture I saw caused dizziness, then numbness of my hands and feet and a sharp attack of queasiness. The clarity of view began to disappear, a little more, and fainting was granted.

— Anna, — I heard his gruff low voice through the perception that was sailing away, closed my eyes, without lifting my head from Misha's shoulder, who was motionless on his side, sighed heavily, appealing to the remnants of self-control.

Creepy guest slowly sat on the edge of the bed. He sat down next to me.

— Do not be scared of me. — His voice softened, became steady, and the quiet notes of his subsequent speech automatically caused confidence. — It was you, the people, who started using fear as a mean of influence. I don't need to scare you, talk to me, please.

Self-preservation instinct pushed me — it's time to run as fast as possible. But no. Misha. I couldn't leave him. Although he didn't move, he hadn't gone completely yet.

I had nothing to do, I had to face the fear, and, having opened my eyes, I stood up. A gray-haired old man wearing worn-out clothes was sitting at arm's length. A shabby T-shirt with spots on the dark fabric that looked as if faded, hung on his lean and dried shoulders. He put his withered hands, pierced with bulging veins under thin skin, on his knees. It was not a fear, just a wretched old man with a white rat stupidly blinking on his shoulder. She was moving the pink tip of her nose sniffing.

— What do you want? — I asked in a broken voice, knowing perfectly well whose soul he had come for.

I put my hand on Misha's wrist and squeezed it with my trembling fingers. My nails dug into his palm, my heart began to pound.

— Let him go, — said the old man. The dim light coming from behind the door fell on his good-natured face, hiding deep wrinkles, but reflecting the essence of facial expressions. He theatrically performed a pitiful semblance of a smile.

— Is that all? Yes?

Tears rolled down my cheeks again, the old man laughed in response, exposing a yellowish but even row of teeth, then abruptly stopped his laughter, narrowed his eyes and, pressing his lips, pulled his bony hand to our hands.

— Are you a harbinger of death?

— No, I am one of his kind and he has long been dead. Give him back! — the “time-worn fear” cried out, his thin fingers wore between our with Misha intertwined palms and, leaving the cold, tore them apart.

I tried to cling to my Misha’s hand of to the end, desperately searching for it, plunging into darkness, carrying me into another reality. I grabbed for such ghostly remnants of hope, those bright and kind ones, which I wanted to hold on with all my might.

Part 3. Dedicated to Oren



“A child who’s loved by nobody ceases to be a child: he is just a small defenseless adult”.

G. Cesbron

“Spare your children’s tears, so they can sprinkle them over your grave”.

Pythagoras

Chapter 12

Israel 2016

“Abarbanel” mental health facility

The space of the hospital ward, or it would be more appropriate to say — of my room, was suppressing with its silence and emptiness. The blue wall next to the bed on which I was sitting reflected a misty ray of sun breaking through the open window in the glossy painted surface. On the pillow, covered with a white cotton pillowcase, lay oatmeal bars brought by a crazy kid, and in the mirror film of the closet my own blurred image froze — a blonde girl in white

hospital pajamas.

— Misha, are you here? — I said, somewhere deep inside me, hoping to hear the voice of my “invisible friend.” I heard nothing more than the noise of the chainsaw motor, which the gardener was using to trim miniature trees growing on the edges of the yard.

— And Misha is not here, — I replied condescendingly to myself and, reflexively, reached for my back pocket in order to get a pack of cigarettes. There were no cigarettes either. — So, you need to settle in a little and start acting.

The door to the ward swung open, a nurse, the “Abarbanel fatty”, came across the threshold, and stopped. Claspng an impressively large folder with papers to her bosom, she gave me an arrogant look.

— Medicines first, and then pancakes. — Her orderly tone left me no choice.

She approached, threw the folder on the bed and put her hand into the square pocket sewn on the pajama-uniform trousers.

— Dr. Sammy prescribed you an injection. Lie down and drop your pants. — Having taken the syringe, she took the cap off the needle. From the other pocket she pulled the alcohol wipes packed in a sealed plastic bag.

I gave her a scornful look.

— This is my job, get down. I have no time to mess with you, the place is full of people like you. — Holding the syringe at the ready, she waited tensely.

I lay down on the bed, turned on my side, lowering my pajama pants. The “Abarbanel fatty” made the injection with a quick practiced move, apologizing for the inconven-

nience.

I grinned to myself, hissing with the pain caused by the needle entering the skin.

— That’s all, let’s go to the canteen. — The fatty nurse wrapped the syringe in the napkin, with which she’d asepti-cized the injection site several times and put it in her pocket. She lifted the folder from the bed, walked to the door and stood waiting.

I got up. Slowly, but I did it. It seemed to me that she hadn’t made the injection, but had put on me an astro-naut’s spacesuit, which created certain pressure density. With such a round glass helmet that you can look through, feeling like an aquarium goldfish. And behind my back I felt a heavy square satchel, filled with oxygen, which pulled me back. And my steps, so weighty steps, were slowly advancing on the surface of the Moon, and maybe Mars, or Jupiter, whatever you want, the main thing is, that they were the steps of an inspired discoverer.

— Cheer up, it’s quite a normal reaction, — said the “Abarbanel fatty”, who had turned into a talking alien won-der-snowman with twisted, spiral-shaped lines instead of eyes.

So in the gait of astronaut, I followed her, walking up a long corridor, dragging ahead, trying not to give in to the heavy load of the satchel. The fatty nurse suddenly stopped at the elevator door, my round helmet hit her in the back of the head. She turned around, stepped aside a little; natu-rally, she didn’t miss the opportunity to award me with her reproachful look once again.

— I beg your pardon, first lieutenant, I am nervous be-

fore the start. I hope all the engines are working properly and the samples collected on the planet have already been delivered on board. — It seemed to me that the tone of my voice was clearly pronounced, with a business-like accent, coming through the microphone on the helmet.

— Our spaceship is in good repair. The co-pilot Oren is at your disposal — there was a caustic squeaky voice behind me.

Well, of course, you can't do without him in such situations.

— Are pancakes served on board in tubes? — I enquired of the crazy kid who jumped out from behind. He wasn't wearing the spacesuit, the same image of a disheveled lean teenager in white pajamas, some sizes larger than he himself.

The nurse grabbed my hand and pulled me into the elevator.

— That's it, finally you'll have breakfast, — she said coldly, pressing one of the buttons on the holographic panel that appeared in front of her face.

In the elevator, she didn't say a word, as she also did later, and the familiar crazy boy was hanging around, jumping and dancing being joyfully elated. At that moment I couldn't understand what caused such a strong fit of delight.

On the way to the table that was in the canteen hall filled with extraordinary people, the sensation of the weight of the astronaut's spacesuit began to disappear. I thought that the boy would disappear too. But no. He sat at the table opposite me, put his hands on the tabletop, and tapping his fin-

gers, said:

— You didn't bring pancakes, pin up-blonde. — He gave me a questioning look with his huge eyes, involuntarily batting his long eyelashes.

— If you got hungry, then bring them yourself, — I addressed him my brief answer.

— And don't you want to bring?

— No.

— And what do you want?

— Why do you care?

I was trying to concentrate (I was settling in). Yeah, the "Abarbanel fatty" had injected me something incredible, the chemical cocktail, which formula would make "drug lord" or "nomadic chemists" ante up not only all their savings, but would barter away their souls for gain without thinking.

— What's your name? — I asked my companion.

— I've told you. I'm co-pilot Oren, — he said proudly, and straightened his back, haughtily lifting his fine chiseled chin.

— My name is Anna.

— I know.

— Where from?

— Have you forgotten again, that we are acquainted with each other? Shame on you! — He sighed sadly — By the way, in case you forget your name, you can read it on your pajamas.

I lowered my head: on the right side, on top of my chest in Hebrew letters embroidered with black threads, my name was spelled out with the surname added.

— Why isn't your name embroidered on your pajamas?

— Well, I don't suffer from memory loss. — He smiled shyly, spread his arms and shrugged.

— And I don't suffer from loss of memory, I remember you, but I don't know your name. Just someone knows how to block memories and, apparently, this "someone" forgot to unblock them.

Behind us we heard a slam-bang clatter, I turned around and saw a fat, short, bloke lying on the floor. He was awkwardly trying to stand up, a middle-aged dyed blonde, sitting nearby, laughed hysterically and her laughter was echoed by her surroundings. An old woman I saw here not long ago stopped her usual occupation (she once again was feeding the doll) and began throwing green peas into the laughing people. Swearing, she asked the restless public to shut up. Several grains flew to the table where Oren and I sat.

— Do you still think you're in a sanatorium? — I asked him and swept the peas from the table to the floor.

— No. This is not a sanatorium, but a hospital, but I think I won't stay here for a long time. Soon I will leave this place at last.

Meanwhile, the laughter and howls of the patients stopped.

— Progress is evident, well done. — Raising my hand, I stretched out an open palm, waiting for a clap. Oren vigorously jumped and slapped it, then sank back into the chair and leaned back, taking an imposing pose. — I have to go back to my room. Come at night.

— What we are going to do? Play cards? Or should

I bring checkers? — He leaned his elbow on the tabletop, put his head in his palm and began to roll his fingers, lightly tapping them along his cheek.

— No, we'll entertain in a different way, — I said, squinting slyly.

— Really?! — Delighted surprise flashed on Oren's youthful face. — I am so glad, so glad, — he said enthusiastically and started fidgeting in his chair. — We will finally do our dirty business. — He rubbed his palms quickly. — We can steal some weed from some old man, he is constantly prescribed it for treatment. Or steal hidden chocolates from the lard bucket. Won't she be upset when she wakes up, gets under the bedside-table, and there won't be any chocolate bars? Well, or we can put some soporific into the security guard's jar of coffee.

He got silent and dreamily looked up, apparently casting about in his mind the options for the upcoming nightlife, and after a few seconds he looked at me and said with seriousness that is not typical for him:

— And for the moment you'd better go to sleep.

I couldn't fall asleep, so I sat on the bed for a long time. The night came quietly, enveiling the ward with the darkness of shadows. Holding my knees up, I was peering at the mirror film on the closet doors and calling for Misha. I begged him to talk to me, although it was quite reasonable to expect that that he wouldn't answer. But I didn't give up trying, I continued arguing out loud, imagining that he can hear me, even if he is somewhere beyond the limits in the space of another world that is incomprehensible to my

mind. He might have already been sent to hell, but he said that even there he could feel me.

— You understand that the expectations won't be over and in the next life everything will be the same again, don't you? I will be looking for you, not knowing that you don't exist. I can't just sit and wait! I don't see the point! Will you come back at all! — I grabbed my pillow and threw it into an improvised mirror. Silently, it struck its glittering surface, jumped back and fell to the floor. Memories of not so long ago past days began to emerge in my memory as fragments. I was on the verge of tears. — Forgive me too. You know why I couldn't promise you. — The idea that my mind instantly clung to at the moment when Misha told about everything, still seemed true to me. It was the idea that provoked the subsequent act.

There was a light knock on the door.

— Well, blonde Anna, you said about the night, I came. — Oren's head, with disheveled hair on his forehead, squeezed through the open crack of the door.

— Come in, — I said faintly, wiping tears with my pajamas.

— But don't call these shaggy ones, whose names start with the letter "d". All right? — He slammed the door behind him, ran skipping over to my bed and sat down beside me.

Shaggy? Looking at his pale face, which had a frozen question facial expression, I grinned a little, and then stood up, rubbing my red eyes, and sighed heavily.

Let's get started

With full concentration, I started snooping the room.

I looked into the bedside-table, under the bedside-table, lifted a thin mattress which Oren was sitting on (even without paying attention to the fact that the mattress didn't get heavier), I looked puzzled at the wooden rack bed bottom, lowered the mattress, then went to the plastic chair and turned it upside down.

— What have you lost? — My newly made friend asked the question, scratching his nape.

— The pills that I've stopped taking. — Knowing myself, I would have definitely hidden them somewhere. But... — I didn't finish and thoughtfully put the chair on the floor.

— You forgot where you'd tucked them in, — Oren finished the sentence for me. He got up on the bed and began jumping on it, throwing his hands to the ceiling. Because of his frisky and fast jumps the boards began to gnash plaintively.

— You are acting like a child, and you must be thirteen years old, if not more, calm down! — With the rudeness inherent in an unkind mom who decided to scold her disobedient son, I blurted it out towards restless Oren.

— Fourteen. As a child I was not allowed to have fun, but now that's all I can do. — He jumped off the bed with his offended face, sniffed and adjusted the hem of his pajama shirt.

Standing in the middle of the room, I looked around, looking at every corner, trying to remember where I could hide the pills. My eyes fell on the closet. I came to it and called Oren.

Having pulled the closet aside, we found a crumpled

piece of toilet paper on the floor near the wall. I squatted down, picked it up and smiled triumphantly.

— Why do you need them now? — Oren, kneeling down, stretched out his long fingers to the multi-colored pills in my palm.

— In order to have fun, — I explained, and quickly threw the whole handful into my trouser pocket. — Now we need to get into Dr. Sammy's office, he has a great collection of cognac there.

— Well, this can be arranged easily, — pleased with my idea, he jumped up and clapping his hands exultantly, made a clumsy dance movement.

Oren took me to the doctor's office. As we were walking along the empty corridors of the hospital, the patients who had been so noisy in the canteen were already asleep, whacked out by sleeping pills. We didn't meet any medical staff. The silence was broken only by the sound of our steps, mostly mine, because Oren tried to step on the floor silently, he was sneaking like a thief, getting into character.

I pulled the shiny door handle of Dr. Sammy's office.

— It's locked, — I remarked, pulling the handle automatically once again.

— Let's open it from the inside. Wait a few minutes. — He quickly ran down the hall and quickly disappeared from my eyes.

“Misha? — I addressed him mentally, standing in front of the white door — My darling, my beloved “invisible friend.” Where are you? — then I sighed sadly and confidently added: “I will find you anyway.”

Oren opened the door from the other side, and I went into the office, which looked empty without Dr. Sammy. Light from a street lamp passing through the glass window fell on the desk, illuminating the shelves and a bar cabinet in the darkness.

After Oren had run across the small office and sat down in the doctor's chair at the massive desk, he croaked, clearing his throat, giving his thin youthful voice some rudeness, straightened up and said:

— Hello, Anna. How are you today?

Having answered him with a snarl, “wonderful,” I went to the bar cabinet and started looking at the cognac bottles, listening to Oren's mocking phrases imitating Dr. Sammy.

— Our life consists of things familiar to everyone, breakfasts, lunches and dinners, with breaks for a cup of coffee during the working day. I am all within the limits of a discreet, exemplary doctor who seizes his monotonous life with cakes at night, making forays into the refrigerator.

— Secretly dreaming of touching the young bodies of prostitutes, — I added, as if by chance. Still standing still, not daring to get a bottle.

Oren was inspired by my remark and continued with great enthusiasm:

— Oh, harlots know it, but don't dare to laugh at the fact that my big belly prevents me from seeing my own cock. They will say nothing, they love me and my dick. Thanks to him, the girls get a lot of money from me. Girls love money, but yet I try to think that they really love me with my dick, that's what I want. After all, I have achieved great heights in this life, I can say, I've made a breakthrough

in psychology! — He jerked up his index finger and giggled softly. In the swivel-chair, he turned to me, threw one leg over the other, and watching me with bulging eyes with pupils dilated in the dark, added: — So many awards, recognition of colleagues... Yes, it's all me, it's all about me! — And giggled again.

— Devil, how lame-brained you are. — Having chosen a bottle labeled Hennessy, I headed for the table, before that I had time to smack Oren on the back of the head a little.

— How many times do I have to tell you not to mention the devils? — He made a reverse turn on the chair, said: — Oh-oh, — and carefully covered his mouth with his hand, looking around.

I sat on the edge of the desk, facing him, not fixing my attention on the strangeness of his behavior. I tore off the plastic tape around the neck of the bottle with my teeth and pulled out a tight cork with my fingers. Then I reached into my pocket, grabbing a handful of pills. With one quick movement I threw them into my mouth and washed them down with a large gulp of cognac, after which handed the bottle to Oren.

— Have a drink with me," I suggested to him.

— I do not drink. — He took the bottle out of my hands, put it on the desk and asked with disappointment in his voice: — Why have you done it?

— I want to see the devils too.

— They've already come here. One of them is sitting in the corner, stretching out his shaggy legs with orange heels — Oren said, with complete seriousness, without

flinching.

I froze in a position with my hand outstretched, as I intended to take the bottle from the table. I pursed my lips, trying not to let a smile appear on my face, looked at Oren, who was seated in the doctor's chair. His watchful gaze was fixed on the dark corner of the office.

For a few seconds, frightening silence hung in the air. I broke it, grunted loudly — and still being unable to control myself, I laughed picking up the bottle. My laughter was breaking out of me with loud noises, taking possession of me, grew into a rollicking one. I went off at a tangents, it made me laugh hysterically. I couldn't stop, stifling with laughter, choking with it. Pulling my legs up, I bent over, holding the bottle between my knees, and suddenly, losing control of my movements, I slipped off the desk, fell on the floor, landing on my not-so-soft ass. I moaned sluggishly of a short pain. Misha was right, it lacked some volume.

— Yeah, you can laugh at it again, but they do exist. — A chair creaked, and Oren's face looked out from the edge of the desk just by the floor.

— Devils can't have heels. They have hoofs. — I got up, climbed on the desk, a fit of laughter receded, and made a few sips from the bottle, which I carefully held falling from the desk.

— What makes you think so? They have no hooves, but they have heels, and for lower representatives they are of orange color. For a long time these rascals didn't appear here. — Being relaxed, Oren sat down in his former place, leaned back, but he was still ready to dart and pounce on the one who, in his opinion, sat demonstrating his orange

heels. — Just look at him, he doesn't want to leave.

— Who else inhabits this hospital? Tell me.

I considered it meaningless to impose my beliefs on “a crazed friend”, even if he's crazy, you should take into account the statement — if I don't see something, this does not mean that it doesn't exist.

And Oren started his narration:

— There used to be a lot of ghosts here, but I drove them away. They left, I think, to the neighboring buildings. They need the energy of people. They get into dreams, they can feel alive there. You know yourself what special dreams patients have. So, there used to be a lot of these parasites here, but they are afraid of me and will never come back, they won't disturb anyone. They are angry, I could see them since childhood and always wanted to be a “ghost fighter”. Can you see how peacefully all patients sleep? I drove everyone away, each and every, even a dog. We had a dog here in the yard, a security officer killed her. — He took off running to the corner and in my understanding kicked the air. “Get out, I say!”

— Oren, come back to the desk! — I demanded. No, this guy could easily bring you to hysterics more than once with his madness. — I liked your ghost story. What happened next to the dog? — Having breathed out and suppressed another fit of laughter, I pulled at the bottle.

— The security officer shot her in the head for biting him. Like this. Bang! — Putting his palms together, he showed a handgun, with his index finger stretched forward and pointing to the floor. — I was standing on the porch that day and saw a piece of, well, this, a part of the flesh

flew off the head of the dog. And then she was walking around, with a hole in her head, yelping, apparently wanted to find her owner. I don't know, really, who he was, but I was sick to death of her nagging. I had plenty of trouble with her, because she was also stupid. However, what can be said, half of her brain remained on the grass.

He walked over to Dr. Sammy's chair, plonked on it, the chair responded with a gritty creaking.

The effect of the tablets was too slow. For the amount which I'd thrown into my stomach, I should already see the world double. That would say about the first stage.

— So, you were sent here because you can see ghosts? — Sitting on the end of the desk, with my head down, I was turning the half-empty bottle in my hands, looking at the label.

— My parents left me here, and then they went to France. My father comes from that country and my mother is Russian. She used to read me bedtime stories. I liked stories about Winnie-the-Pooh the most. The donkey was a mongol there, but a funny one. And then the tales were over, and I was alone. I didn't do anything bad to anyone. On the contrary, I wanted to help people so that they would not be disturbed by various lost souls. It's my gift, blonde, a gift that turned out to be a curse. Nobody believed me. No one. — He folded his arms across his chest, the darkness of the night couldn't hide the seriousness reflected on his youthful face. — Do you know... — Oren, the cranky boy, abandoned by everyone, got silent and sad. But not for long. He sighed at first, and then giggled maliciously. — You're right. Yes to hell!

Smiling arrogantly, he raised his hands, spread them, imagining a handgun in each of them, and shouted: “Bang! Bang! Bang! You won’t get to us!” — Then, he brought his palms down with a smack on the table and pored at me.

— I can see something that you don’t even know about, and I’ve also seen your angel. — Angels are good, they can do a lot. He promised to help me.

— He is no longer able to help you. You are special, Oren, and in our world it’s easier to live for those who are no different from others. And the angels aren’t all good. That old man frightened me a lot; he seemed to have spent ages wandering and picking up sinful souls. You definitely wouldn’t like to meet such an angel, believe me.

Oren became thoughtful, sank deep in his thoughts, frowning his forehead slightly covered with a slanting strand of hair, and after a few seconds gave his conclusion:

— Stubborn blonde. I told you that there was a light coming from Michael, I know about other angels, one of them was taking me from the tree. Well, as for taking off, he was messing about, twitching at my toes, until I broke the rope, I thought my head would come off. Imagine, then I could also think... — He stopped abruptly and embarrassedly put his palms on his mouth. Lifting his shoulders, he shrunk, pulling his neck in like a tortoise hiding its head in armor. — I’m not about that, — he said, making an excuse after he put his palms down. Poor Oren really wanted to speak out, to share the pain that no one shared with him, in fact, like his views.

He braced himself, sniffed, assumed a relaxed position, folded his arms over his chest, and continued speaking

without focusing on himself:

— Michael warned me that he might not return, but he promised to help. Maybe he had everything under control? How do you know? And anyway, I think you are making a mistake.

I lay down on the desk, it seemed a soft bed to me, and the ceiling was a dark sky, pierced with the uncountable number of luminous points of stars. Without experiencing the first stage, I immediately moved to the second.

— What are you talking about? What mistake?

His last few words — I attached importance only to them that time. He shouldn't have been so scared when he ran his moth about.

— Yes, the one that he committed.

— I know his fears, and I know where he might be, — I said with firm conviction. Yes, a few minutes ago I was in doubts, standing in front of the bar cabinet, but now I was completely convinced that I would manage to find Misha, one way or another, even in hell.

I actually strongly believed it, and if a few minutes ago I was in doubts, standing in front of the bar cabinet, now I was fully convinced that I would succeed in finding Misha, even in hell.

— Oh, and you kind of aren't afraid of anything? — Oren asked and grinned bitterly.

— No. What should I be afraid of? I have nothing to lose.

— Blonde, you know, what you're talking about now and what you're doing is so stupid. You won't be able to find him there. You'll only make it worse. He'll have no

reason to return. You see? And they will get what they want. Do you think you're acting against the rules? No, in fact, you take cues from those who are building our world according to their own rules.

Of course, the arguments of Oren didn't bother me anymore, I just gave up on him.

— Enough said, — he said conciliatorily, I'd better play some music. Especially for you.

— On the piano? — Continuing to lie on the soft desk, in the light of many bright stars, I smiled protractedly, turning my head to him.

— Yes, used to have my own piano. I love music. — He bent down, pressed the handle, lowering the chair, took a relaxed position, stretched his hands forward with his palms down, his elbows hung loose, his fingers rested on a flat tabletop, and began to “play” the tune whistling.

He seemed to have gone on the rampage. He smoothly threw his palms up, drumming his fingers, deftly fingering an instrument, it seemed that the music was beginning to sound in my ears with ringing high notes of the sensual melody that he was “playing” swaying and accompanying his performance with whistling. And memories washed over me, bringing me back into the nights with Misha. The entrancing moments when his lips were sliding over my body, touching the skin lightly, at first so gently and slowly. Gradually intermittent kisses became more greedy and passionate, and the movements of his body more impudent. He got horny quickly, had I only given it to him, moving with him in the same rhythm...

— “I can feel it everywhere blowing with the wind

of change”^[11] Scorpions. Do you like it? — Oren asked after he had whistled the final chord in a long drawn-out manner, having interrupted himself, the piercing gaze of his huge eyes froze waiting for praise or criticism.

— Very much, — I said, amazed by his imaginary play, which affected the very strings of my soul that would have been better not to touch.

And he began drumming his fingers a little louder, shaking his head, his disheveled hair jumped up and his eyes rolled.

Lying on the table, I was looking for the constellation Ursa Major, and I wanted so much to be picked up by the wind of change, be taken somewhere where I could feel and hear Misha once again...

Nevertheless Oren is a talented lad. And where does he demonstrate his talent? In a psychotherapist’s narrow office, under a concrete ceiling with imaginary stars.

Madhouse.

Oh, yes, we are in it.

— So, blonde, you’re going to black out now. Where is the promised fun? — asked Oren, after the last chord lingeringly sounded.

— Come on. — I enthusiastically got up from the desk, taking the bottle of cognac with me, and pulled Oren’s hand.

Ghosts, that had been disturbing the tranquility of sleeping patients until recently in the hospital, left it and the nights filled with shouts of patients awakening in sequence, running out of the wards screaming “O Lord!”

“Death, take me”, “ Down, devil!” become a thing of the past. Even the familiar old woman, who was often mourning the departure of the doll to a better world, accompanied by shouts, saying, “Breathe, my girl, breathe,” now quietly slept in her individual ward, paid for until her death.

Such changes happened thanks to the “ghost fighter”, who went on the war-path. He stayed in the shadows, like a real warrior, and, having fulfilled the mission entrusted to him, he often wandered around the building, watching over sleeping people. In a short period of his life, he was alone. This night gave him a girlfriend, once acquired, though not for a long time.

They scampered about quiet corridors and empty flights of stairs between floors. They pushed each other and laughed. They loved to have fun and loved the dark time, in their mutual opinion, there was something magical in it. They enjoyed a newfound friendship that could last for a very long time.

That last night, spent together, they weren't aware of their actions, without in the least thinking that their loud laughter broke the tranquility of the hospital walls, and that devils could run to the shouts. Bursting into the canteen, “like-minded friends” went to the kitchen, fried pancakes and, after eating full, decided to take a walk. Together they imagined how, holding hands, they would doddle along the morning embankment wearing white pajamas. Their ultimate goal was the beach. They wanted to see the sunrise by the sea. In the morning it is calm and serene. And each of them supposed that they wouldn't catch an opportunity to see the next sunrise over Israel. Each of them had their

own reasons on this issue.

In order to get out, we had to get over the security post. It was located at the front door.

— They are sleeping. — Having stopped around the corner, Oren peeked out into the hall. — On the way, before getting into the doctor’s office, I still managed to put some soporific for the guards, — he added, turning around, and smiled slyly.

I had already been expecting the onset of the fourth stage and, accordingly, the final one, for a couple of hours. But still I was on my feet, albeit found it difficult. Apparently, my desire to get finally to the beach gave me strength. It is there that I will be able to leave all things and go to the place where my “invisible friend” lives, and we will return sometime together. To a new life. Well, if we don’t return, then, accordingly, we won’t return together. In precisely this way — extremes, there are two of them, either all or non.

Of course, I didn’t happen to throw a handful of pills into my mouth, maximum a couple of sleeping pills. But nevertheless I understood how they act, and, strangely, now they gave very poor effect. My mind was under control, the events fit into the framework of understanding, and life... well, it went on.

Something went wrong. Again. I should have thought about it, but far from it!

A few quick short-snorts from the bottle of cognac shook me up and gave me a better mood.

— We’ll crawl anyway, like soldiers on the floor, so that

we wouldn't be noticed, — I told Oren.

— Yes, we'll crawl, as if bullets are whistling over our heads, — he said, inspired.

Oren, my soul mate, yet it was so funny and entertaining with him.

He lay down on the floor, covered with a thick carpet, setting his palms on it. He squinted his eyes and looked around being completely confident that he was the embodiment of the leader of the troops. Then he raised his fist and started giving signals of the Special Forces, showing that everything is clear and I should join him. How did I know the Special Forces signals? Who knows, the instructions Oren gave me were quite clear, and I lay down next to him, pressing my chin to the prickly pile of the carpet.

Oren showed that we should move ahead, and we crawled. I was slowed down only by the bottle with the remnants of cognac, which I was still holding, being afraid of leaving it on the battlefield. I was dragging it along, like a wounded comrade.

— I won't leave you, we'll arrive at our destination together! I shouted.

— Hush you. The goal is already close. — Oren continued crawling with all his seriousness, carefully moving his hands and legs, looking around, holding his head as low as possible, crouching fearfully being afraid to catch one of the passing bullets.

— Yes, Commander, yes sir! — I said in a half-whisper and snapped him a salute.

We crawled to the front glass door, through the door we could see the courtyard with the fence of bushes growing on

the edges, lit by the early rays of the sun. My attempt to rise to my feet ended in failure. Muscular coordination was impaired, and, no sooner had I grabbed the handle of the door, I hit my forehead on the thick glass. The door opened from the impact, and I fell on the concrete porch behind it. I tried to get up, but failed to get the balance; I came a smasher down the stone steps of the stairs. Sharp pain hit the back of my head.

— Get up, soldier. — Oren picked me up, trying to take me up from the floor, made great efforts, and managed to put me on my feet.

— It seems my injuries are fatal, commander, — I could hardly speak, my head ached terribly, my vision could not be focused, and a warm viscous fluid ran along the neck on the right side.

Oren continued holding me and helped me over a few steps and sat me with my back to the front door, holding my head.

— Oh, my, blonde, I failed to keep an eye on you, — he said in his thin voice, watching me faint.

Light. Bright harsh light and snow-white walls which reflected this light.

— Oh hell, take my soul! -My own voice responded with ringing in the ears and a wild headache. Oh, hold on a sec! Why is there so much light in hell?

— Right there you would have been accepted for what you have done.

I glanced in the direction of that voice, well familiar to me — a dull, heavy voice.

— Dr. Sammy. And what are you doing here? —

A handful of pills I've taken should have caused death. I clearly understood this and stayed in commission to meet a new world. But this world was quite familiar and habitual, and not at all new.

I was lying on a spacious hospital bed, covered with a white blanket to my chest with several small letters printed on it in rows in small letters, forming the name of the hospital. Of course, it is "Abarbanel".

A thin intravenous line stretched from the vein on the back of my hand. Dr. Sammy was sitting near the bed, so full of thought. His open hospital gown couldn't hide the bulging belly tightly wrapped by the blue shirt with the coming off buttons. He turned a sheet in the folder of papers and concentrated on reading a new one.

— Is this my track record of sins? — I blurted out, realizing that my plan had failed. It's incredible, but it failed.

— No, Anna, this is the story of your illness, — He grinned depressingly and continued to look thoughtfully at the sheets on his lap.

The daylight was unbearably bright, reflecting from the doctor's bald spot, and I closed my eyes for a few seconds.

— Will you write my sins off as illness and send me to heaven? I need to go to hell, only there. — I tried to get up, but the cutting pain in the neck area forced me to lie back on the pillow.

The doctor stopped his work with the study of the history of my illness (in his opinion, the illness), and turned his interested eyes on me.

— After all I didn't die?

— No. You didn't.

— It's sad.

In some miraculous way (in this case, you can't blame it all on anything else), my body could stand it. It wasn't broken by an impressive cocktail of narcotic potent drugs, backed up with a bottle of cognac to be on the safe side.

— How do you feel? Can you talk to me? — The doctor asked, his intense look was running on me, inspecting me. How devil sick I got of this look, exploring me, like a lab rat. Oh, Oren also asked me not to mention the devils, but I didn't mention, only thought, I hope, it doesn't count.

— I've got a bad headache, but apart from that I'm fine. Can I have some water? My lips were dry, and my tongue seemed to stick to the palate when I moved it.

Doctor Sammy slowly closed the folder, put it on the bedside table and stood up. He went to the cooler that stood at the front door, and returned with a glass of water.

— Thank you, Doctor. — With the greed of a man who had been walking around the hot desert for days, I swallowed all the water from the plastic cup.

— Why did you arrange all this? Broke into my office, stole cognac... — He settled his ass on the edge of the bed and took the folder from the bedside table.

In bewilderment, I returned him the empty glass. I don't deny, I've arranged it, but that was not only me who took part in all of this. And what about Oren, my soul mate for entertainment? Why didn't he mention him?

— I just thought I wouldn't come back here anymore. But your medicine, it works wonders.

— I understood everything, Anna. — He sat with one leg over the other, and he could hardly do that. He had

short ones, or he still has them, I don't know, and they were plump, but he managed to perform this action with relaxed gravitas. After all, he's a man who has achieved great heights in the field of psychology. — Your “invisible friend”, who you were telling about, was he with you yesterday?

— Aha, what has my “invisible friend” to do with it? It was Oren.

The doctor started, frowned, squeezed the folder in his hands, and asked in a worried voice:

— Oren? Are you telling me that Oren was with you?

— Well, yes, that whimsical lad from the ward opposite the elevator.

— Anna, did you know him?

— We met here.

The doctor opened the folder; many pages were hiding a thin tablet. He took it out and laid it beside me.

— How many days, in your opinion, have you been here?

— I don't remember. I tried to figure it out by sorting memorable events before answering him, but all that I saw was the frozen long straight line of the monitor. Asystole, that's the scientific term. Full zero, that's just great! No memories, explanations and considerations. There was no record in my memory of the exact number of days spent in this place. Except for one, initial record associated with it. I came here of my own will, stumbling across a familiar building, when I was wandering down the street, I thought: “Why shouldn't I go to the doctor's office, to listen to his scientifically based reasoning about life. Anyway there's no place to go.”

Sudden clarity of memories... The memory began to recover. Then I told the doctor utter nonsense, imbued with arguments about the meaninglessness of everything that happens, about the days that I didn't want to come, about the unwillingness to return home (and that's all because I realized who my "invisible friend" was, although he didn't support arguments by agreement, but I was sure I was in right), which, accordingly, urged Sammy to offer me a day or two of rest in an individual room here. And he took up my treatment, didn't even demand money to pay for a privileged room on the top floor.

A few days ago, when he called me, I came to his office. Now I understand why he looked at me so strangely then. To his question about how I feel, I answered, that everything was fine, I was doing usual things — going to work, meeting my friends, yet for him I was here. Leaving the doctor, I suddenly felt bad on the porch of the hospital, everything around me disappeared for a few seconds. It was as if I left one reality and got into another.

Misha, what is present?

I didn't want to go into these details then, and now he can no longer explain it to me. On the other hand, I think that I would still not be able to fully understand how he managed to get me out of here, leaving only the semblance of my presence for Dr. Sammy, the staff and the patients.

It's just that everything is arranged so that those who live in the earthly world never find an answer to the question of how their world really works.

— A couple of weeks. You've been here for a couple of weeks. And as for Oren, are you sure that you met him

in the hospital? — asked Dr. Sammy.

“Zactly! We were talking about my crazy, like-minded fellow.

— Yes. — There was no doubt about being acquainted with him. — Doctor, you ask strange questions, — I said reproachfully, raising my eyebrows.

— Strange? Do you know that Oren has been dead for half a year?

What a “turn”.

I felt a wave of goosebumps running through my body, small creeps running under my knees, I was able to feel the tube in my vein, a long tube. I looked at its mounting in horror. How come... My friend Oren is dead? Seriously?

— Anna, look at me, — the doctor called, forcing me to raise my eyes. — Oren was quite a character, and I’m very sorry for him, I tried to help him. You couldn’t meet him in our hospital.

— Stop kidding around with me, I tell you, we met here. There was no other place for me to know him. He played the piano for me, an imaginary piano in your office. And he said that his parents had left him, and also about ghosts. — I lowered my eyes, not having the slightest desire to look at Dr. Sammy.

— Oren suffered from schizophrenia, said that he could see ghosts and that he himself wanted to be one of them, in order to get rid of those ghosts from here. Parents put him to our hospital when he was twelve years old. He refused from treatment. Pestered the patients. At first he thought that he was in the sanatorium and that his parents would soon take him home. One night, about six months

ago, he hanged himself on a tree in the courtyard. Made a rope of torn pieces of sheets and hanged himself.

I sighed sadly from sorrow for Oren's soul. May his head was crazy, but apart from kindness and naivety I didn't notice anything else in him. It is unfair, as for me, to play with the fate of people, good people. I know that it is impossible to understand the essence of the cosmic purpose, but it hurts when such a thing happens.

So, it's like this. I decided that all this meaningless game with submission to the doctor's opinion should be stopped. Otherwise it will never end.

It seems that everything is ravings of a madman, I don't argue, but there are too many facts that indicate that I didn't make up Misha's story, but I really saw Oren the ghost.

— Listen, stop looking for the symptoms of insanity in me, — I addressed the doctor, beginning to say things that were supposed to shock him. — Oren could see devils and ghosts. Yes, it defies logic and scientific explanation. You can continue to assume that all this does not exist. I will not persuade you. Just I can say for sure that you, doctor, keep coming back to your memories of the nights spent in Ukraine. — It's a pity, "my invisible friend" didn't make even a casual mention of a couple of prostitutes' names, then I you could deal the final blow with the doctor. — The seminar lasted a couple of days, and you stayed there for a week, you liked the Slavic harlots, didn't you? And Nina, your neighbor, she welcomes you warmly in her bed. On Tuesdays most often. Everyone has their own vices, this is our essence, and I learned about yours thanks to someone who lives in a world that defies any logic you

are used to.

My arguments made Dr. Sammy turn purple, his cheeks puffed out, and instead of his bald head you could easily imagine a tomato. Mr Sammy the tomato.

— Holy Moses!... — he gasped and, jumping up from the bed quickly headed for the exit, crossed the doorway with the door wide open and vanished out of sight.

— Say hi to Nina! — I screamed after him. Most likely, he didn't hear it, but if he did, I would like to add some more, if he happens to come across these lines. It is unlikely, but "elephants might fly" in this life. I had no intention to offend him. This is true, but truth has to be faced up without offences.

Sagging down on the pillow, I felt the smooth surface of the tablet's screen with my elbow.

The pictures of last night, flashing in black and white recording of surveillance cameras that were displayed on the screen, could amuse anyone. In Dr. Sammy's office with twinkling eyes in a night shooting, I was sipping brandy, sprawled on a table, and talked to myself, addressing an empty chair. A few minutes later I got up, dragged my invisible companion (that is, Oren, who was sitting on the chair) and here we go. I ran down the corridors, stumbling on my own sluggishly moving legs, fell, but was tenaciously holding the bottle with the remnants of cognac. It's even embarrassing to talk about cooking pancakes, you can imagine what it looked like from the side, let me not describe the details.

Of course, Dr. Sammy can be understood, after the things I saw you don't have to be a psychiatrist as everything

is clear with the main character of the night recording.

I pulled out the plastic dropper tube from the vein in the back of my hand. Pressed the puncture point with my finger, stopping the blood, and got up from the bed. I walked along the cold tiled floor with so much effort as if I hadn't made a step for several days, and most likely that it was so. In the corridor I came across a couple of nurses. One ran by with a worried face, and the second passed by, not paying attention to the inhibited patient.

I limped to the elevator, straightened my pajamas, looking around warily, and pressed the button with the letter L (lobby). I put my hand on the wall next to the metal doors, waiting for the cabin to arrive.

But how come? All of it? Will it end as it is? Now I'll produce a "profound idea" and tell those observers, creators, what-d'ye-call-them, everything I think about them. Let them make fun, considering me to be a nonentity living in a big anthill, but all the same — the wisest creators of all things wouldn't you go to... to the place where they had come from, with their laws and rules. And what the... am I still walking along these corridors at all, when I shouldn't be here? Oh, yes, according to my assumption — I should not, but according to your idea — I should be here.

I entered the elevator's cabin; it gently dived, sliding down. I remembered Oren once again. I was already afraid of thinking about Misha. I was angry, I appealed to the remnants of self-control, its echoes were still present in my mind, but it seemed, only a few minutes left before losing them. Misha ... "my invisible friend", my darling, my husband from the past life, my angel, he... But how come! Why

is it so!

— Still I thought about him. Heck! — I kicked the iron wall of the elevator cabin and clutched my head.

I must stop the flow of these thoughts, otherwise I will start sobbing here, in a cramped cabin, huddled into a corner, and they won't be able to pull me out of here without a sedative injection. Oren, well, he could run up and say the expression "pin up blonde" so often used by him, accompanying his appearance by clapping hands. And this time I would take kindly to his appearance, I could hug him, looking for support. But he is a ghost, a stupid ghost who does what he wants and appears when he wants. I grinned bitterly. I know how to choose friends, indeed!

I went outside, sat on the top step of the concrete porch, and looked at the dark orange clouds colored by the rays of the sunset, floating from the sea. It makes no sense, I think, to describe my feelings, that figures that I was damn bad, oh, how bad. Neither patients nor visitors were seen in the hospital courtyard. Perhaps today is Sabbath. Even if it's not Shabbat, there's no difference.

A heavy door slammed behind my back, I knocked up against it with my forehead last or maybe not last night, I can't say for sure. Then I heard the steps approaching me. "Dr. Sammy dared to continue our conversation", I thought with a grin, not daring to look in his direction.

The man, who sat down next to me clicked a lighter, without saying a word and tobacco smell touched my face with white smoke.

— Can I have one? — I addressed him in an aloof man-

ner, not taking my eyes off the sky, watching the movement of simple forms of clouds.

— Anna, I started to think I won't find you. I had to get around the whole hospital. — His coarse voice made me shudder. It was painfully familiar timbre, low and calm.

My heart almost flew out of my chest because of overwhelming happiness, and I jerked off, and when I saw him, I froze petrified. Convulsive pain pierced me with dozens of knives. In front of me sat Michael. His look froze on me... a stranger's look.

— I've got to talk to you, — he said, holding out a non-smoked cigarette.

Slowly dropping back to my place, I peeked at the face that was causing fiery memories and pulled the cigarette from his fingers. Why did he come? He could continue enjoying life, it paid off in spades.

— Misha left it for you in the hallway of my apartment. — Michael handed me a white postal envelope, held it for several seconds in an outstretched hand, waiting for me to take it. He put the envelope on the step at my feet not waiting for me to take it, then handed me the lighter. — I'm sorry, — he said comfortingly. — Listen, I hope you will certainly meet each other. Thank him from me, he helped me a lot. Can you imagine it, when I woke up on a yacht, everything seemed to have turned upside down... I've been there...

Disregarding Michael's words, I lit the cigarette and was making a puff after a puff, breathing out the smoke, being afraid to turn my head to him. It was beyond my strength to look at him. And in general, I wanted him to shut up.

Listening to his voice was unbearably painful.

— Anna, I really want to help you. If you are not ready to talk now, just in case, I will leave you my business card. — He put a white card on the envelope. — If you need anything, just call. On my mobile phone or to the office.

He got up, started going down the stairs, and then stopped. He paused for a couple of seconds. Yet he decided to return. He got down on his haunches in front of me, a step lower, and asked:

— Do you want to leave this place? Will you stay at my place?

His face was so close, I was looking at his lips being afraid to look into his eyes. How much I wanted at that second to fall on his neck, a warm big neck, and at least for a moment to imagine that it is he, Misha, in my arms. But there's no point in all these ideas, no one can replace Misha. I shouldn't indulge myself with a fantasy, that's what I've been doing in recent years, that's enough.

Nevertheless, a human can reconcile with many things, if not with everything, it only takes time. Several weeks will pass, and Michael will no longer cause me so violent emotions, only sometimes a feeling of sweet longing. Later, he will become a friend for me, then a close friend, and within a few months our friendship will grow into something more. I will see my older brother in him. The older brother, who I was supposed to have, but I didn't — standing on his own two feet, the one who has time to build his life and provide assistance. He easily managed to solve not only his problems, but also the problems of all people close to him. How similar he is to my Misha, and not only in appearance.

Michael will fulfill his promise, equally to Misha's promise to him. From the beginning to the end.

Cold and absently, I shortly said "no" to Michael, willing to reject him. But as a person who doesn't go back on his words, he could not do otherwise, his next act will be the birth of our relationship.

— Here's the deal, I'll go back to the car and wait half an hour. No, an hour's better, and you think. Deal? — He touched my head and ran his hand through my hair, catching a disapproving look. He stood up with a distressed look, adding: — I'll be waiting, just in case, — and left. He was going away from me in such a familiar measured walk, with his hands in the pockets of dark sports pants, his strong shoulders slouched. How much I loved to touch those shoulders.

He walked out of the open gates of the iron fence, waving the security guard sitting next to the entrance/exit control point, I looked right through him when he went outside, and got into a familiar car parked in front of the gate.

As soon as Michael had left, someone else decided to come.

— Pin up-blond, I also want to tell you something. — Oren appeared in the rays of the sunset. — How's your evening? Don't you have a feeling of exciting changes?

I smiled involuntarily hearing his voice. He sat down next to me, on the place where Michael sat a couple of minutes ago. He took a deep breath, raising his head as if he could enjoy the fresh air entering his chest. In fact, it was only the anticipation of pleasure. He wasn't wearing hospital pajamas, and his hair wasn't disheveled, a neat short

hairstyle framed his head. A white fitted cotton shirt tucked into skinny ripped jeans and black sneakers — in front of me was a stylish guy who follows the trends and takes care of himself.

— Where are you going? On a date?

— There will certainly be a date, but not today. I'm leaving, Anna. I can finally leave. All of this thanks to you and your angel, he helped me. I told you that he would help. He provided for everything.

Misha was able to help the crazy kid Oren, who was a lonely ghost. From now on, he is given a chance to start all over again. The bitterness and anger, provoked by the circumstances of this evening, faded for a while in comparison with the feeling of joy for my friend.

Oren looked at me sympathetically, got up and smoothed his hair slightly disheveled after the evening wind.

— When you meet him, give a big thank you from me. This big, — he tried to spread his hands as wide as possible. — Well, I've got long fingers, but my hands are short, there's nothing to be done here. Tell him that.

Like Michael, he was convinced that our meeting with Misha would take place. Maybe I still don't understand something, or they are saying so only to comfort me?

— Oren, it's unlikely that he will return, — I said sadly.

— Here you start again. You believe him, he won't fail. Look, I never doubted him at all. As soon as I saw him behind your back for the first time, I immediately understood everything. I was delighted. I will tell you more, I was waiting for him. And now.... — He got silent. His eyebrows lifted, and his lips pursed sadly; stretching out his long fin-

ger, he pointed to the envelope lying at my feet.

— Yes, I will read it, — I said, knowing in advance that the words left by Misha on paper would tear me apart, I won't be able to stand it, give way to pain, start crying, fall into hysterics, like a sentimental girl. I hate sentimentality. I don't want to realize that Misha is no longer with me.

Oren hit himself on the forehead and shook his head with an apologetic smile.

— I haven't told you the most important thing. Just I want so much to go there, to live. But still, I'll stay with you to tell you something. He warned me, said that you would be willing to commit suicide, so I changed your pills for vitamins. All of them are colorful, I made a little mistake, apparently, a couple of antidepressants remained. But how much fun we had, — he giggled embarrassedly, covering his mouth for a second.

Now everything became clear to me, the medicine of Israel did not work a wonder in this case. Someone else contributed to the incident, pushing my like-minded mate to another heroic act.

— You are a hero, Oren. — I got up, hugged him, so cold and fragile. He shyly hugged me back.

— Will you write about me? Then I will be an established hero. A real “ghosts fighter”. — He backed off a little, looking at me with his big prayerful eyes.

— I'll try, but I'm not a writer. I don't think that I'll be able to give account of everything in a nice manner. — I unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and straightened the collar.

— You will, you will succeed in many ways. I saw your diary entries and left a couple of pages for you, in case you

forget again what was happening to us. — He winked happily. — Listen, blonde, I wanted to come back so much, but I didn't do anything for it to happen. I wandered sadly down the corridors, so lonely and lost. I drove off all the ghosts and remained alone. A dog, if I had tamed it, it could have become true to me, but I did what I did... I kicked it out, I could have a heart for it, but I chased it away. How surprised I was when I met you, you could see me. I had a friend, a true friend, and your angel, who helped and gave me a cue. It turned out I was wandering here for a good reason. I had a definite mission — not for the dead, but for the living. And I performed it without thinking, I just wanted to help. You're good, tart tempered, but you're good, I loved you. Your angel knew that I would be given the opportunity to return, but didn't tell me about it. So, what I am all about. Don't be resentful at the whole world, sooner or later everything will work out if you don't give up and try to live here in this world. Life is hard, but how interesting it is. I tell you this. And no more mistakes, just go ahead.

I looked at Oren, a cranky lad, whose company scared me at the beginning, sometimes pissed me off, and I realized that in such a short time I had found time to love him, as well as he had.

— I've got to go, pin up-blonde. I feel, I feel. How good I feel, I've never felt so good. — He began to shift from one foot to another with impatience. — Goodbye and don't be sad. Your angel... he's having a hard time now, but he will cope with it and come back, he wants to get to you.

My heart clenched after Oren's words and my pulse

quicken with excitement. Misha, I can't even imagine how he is now, how big his torment is. I was ready for everything to help him, I wanted to find him there, but he didn't let me do it.

— Farewell, Oren. I will miss you, — I said, feeling hot tears coming to my eyes. — No, wait. — Still I decided to hold him, grabbed his hand. — Do you know where he is now?

— Yes, the devils whispered. He hasn't been sent to hell yet. "They" want him to continue to obey orders. He is strong and learned a lot as he was an angel. He will find the way out, even if he goes to hell. I believe in him.

I opened my hand, and Oren, giving me a playful goodbye smile, ran to a tree that grew in the yard, surrounded by wooden benches decorated in bright colors. This was the very place where he met death six months ago, and now he was prepared to meet life there. His image began to dissolve in the air, becoming transparent, until it completely disappeared at the very trunk.

The letter written by Misha kept not only in my memory, I kept it nearby, in a separate pocket of my wallet. In the lines he'd left, he didn't forget to call me once again stupid, referring to the deed, which he so prudently tried to prevent. He knew about the trait of my character to go to extremes and do everything in my own way, following raw guesses, with firm confidence in the correctness of my choice.

He asked me to convey his thanks to Oren, but I opened the envelope when he had already left. It's a pity what can

be said.

Leaving the letter on the bar table in Michael's apartment before going to Eilat, Misha finally decided for himself that he would no longer follow orders — to take away the souls of people who, according to the creators, should become the next cogs in their universal mechanism design. This decision was promoted by a few days that he had spent in the human body, next to me.

On the way to Eilat, after I expressed my opinion about the “penguins”, he said: — What is that to you? Everyone has his own philosophy of life.

Misha's philosophy was as follows — he didn't care for all this philosophy. In any case, the centuries-old problems will not go anywhere, and people will not change, even if the Savior *comes on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory*^[12] for the second time. Could it be that they just screw it up again? They will screw it up. And then they will wait for the third Savior. What for?

Why should efforts be made for them?

There are things that are meaningless to fight.

To hell with all this!

Is it really impossible to live in harmony with you and with the one who gives this harmony, enjoying the gift given to us, away from all this?

Oh, yes, of course not.

Everything had to fall into its former places, but I had already begun to return to the hospital and guess about everything, and Misha didn't want to return to his world. As for the hospital, I wasn't supposed to remember anything at all. My memories should have been erased, and Michael

promised that he would continue playing the role of Misha for me after the seven days of my “invisible friend” that had been designated for him for staying on earth would end (I don’t know how he’d managed to get these seven days, he has his own methods).

Of course, our relationship with Michael wouldn’t have lasted long, they would have exhausted themselves (still Michael is not my Misha, who I felt strongly for), and the advice of my “invisible friend” would have pushed me to the accomplishment of what we had long planned.

What’s the problem to quit? We were going to go to Thailand or to the Maldives, to buy a house by the sea, live a measured life and take it easy. I would teach you how to play poker. I’d teach you to play poker, definitely you would never be out of money. What are you waiting for?

There were no barriers for the implementation of our plans I was just waiting for him. My reason understood that it was inane and stupid, but my heart felt something different. I’ve always felt, continued playing life, but did not really live in it.

Sitting on the porch of the hospital I was holding the letter in my shaking hands and reading the words Misha had left for me. I couldn’t hold tears, they were running down my cheeks one by one, dropping from the chin. I had never experienced so much pain, and I knew that this pain would not pass off until Misha returned to my world. In his words, he called me to continue life, regardless of the circumstances, and asked me to wait.

I’ll take care of you, baby.

And he did take care of me. His care was felt even after

he'd left.

Misha and I couldn't share the following days, as it turned out, they were intended only for me. I visited new cities and countries, and wherever I was, I looked at the sky, imagining that my Misha was in heaven and not in hell. Of course, I know that heaven is not in the sky, but heaven is associated with something sublime and pure. He couldn't go back to hell, I denied it, because sending people like him there, you will agree with me — is an absurd misunderstanding. So absurd that it doesn't fit into all existing rules and laws.

On the other hand, absurd is absurd.

But in spite of everything, I raised my eyes to the morning sky that was swaying a little with my hammock, fixed on the wooden beams of the porch of a house on the water, when having rest in the Maldives. Or to the sky, pervaded by living and perhaps already long dead stars, standing on the balcony of a castle hotel in England, sipping red wine. Or to the sunset sky with clouds floating over it above the horizon, when I was in Thailand on the Andaman Sea coast, surrounded by untouched nature, and I understood that everything I had I received thanks to Misha, but now I would change every day of my carefree day life for... Well, everything is clear what for. I missed him to the point of insanity, he was my obsession, but still he was real.

I've got to move on. He asked me about it.

I didn't return to Israel, I went to Siberia. Thanks to Misha's agreement with Michael (he did it right after all, having given me time to think, in less than an hour I got into his car) I didn't need money, and I fulfilled the last in-

struction that Misha mentioned in the letter. After exhausting daily workouts, which lasted almost a year, I made an entrance on stage of the Opera and Ballet Theater, meanwhile still had time to fulfill Oren's request — I wrote about him, as well as about all of us.

Oren, my ghostly friend... how much he wanted to live.

How much Misha wanted to live.

How much I wanted to live with Misha.

We were united by the desire to live, but not in the world called: "It must be so", but in the world called — "I want it so".

I used to wake up at night, fidgeting with my palms on an empty bed, somewhere on the verge of sleep and reality, yet feeling him close by me. I was afraid to open my eyes, because this line immediately got blurred.

I am with you, baby. I have always been and will be with you, wherever I am.

Sentimental nonsense? Maybe. Nevertheless, I believed that these words, addressed to me by Misha, were breaking through the line separating our worlds.

Sometimes I got up before dawn, went to the kitchen. No more cigarettes (an unnecessary habit that should have been broken a long time ago), only tea with biscuits. I sat down at the kitchen table opposite the window, watching the snow fall swirling behind the glass. Misha could come to me, hug me, saying: "Anna, why are you sitting here? I can't sleep without you. Come with me", and I would have followed him anywhere.

Is it so difficult?!

Week after week turned into months, but the thing that we

both wanted, did not happen. Morning, morning after the morning, the new morning, the next morning...

Total crap.

Misha. He was so close. For real. In my hands. What for? To disappear? I seemed to have been teased, laughed at, and then put in my place. Like, here's your place, where it used to be. Go on, live on, do something. As Oren said, quoting Dr. Sammy: "Our life consists of the usual (I would add for myself — ordinary) things". Eat, sleep, meet with your friends, spend money on shoes, bags, dresses — junk. Dance.

I liked to dance. And I danced, but on a different stage, and for other spectators. They thought I was talented.

I thought a few years ago — my "invisible friend" had pushed me to taking pills, thus cutting our connection, made me live the wrong life, not the one I wanted. He refused from our friendship. And didn't even explain the true motives of his act. Now I think that he was just following another order. Those who gave orders could well decide that our connection with him should be stopped.

But... it's useless. I can play with my memory by all means, there will still remain feelings. I will always feel him, on a subconscious level.

Who are we? And why are we so connected? Who is each of us?

It was not given to me to understand the idea of the creators. All that remains is to wait, obediently continuing to live on and to dance, experiencing the emptiness and pain of loss.

Patrt 4. Misha



“Only those who attempt the absurd can achieve the impossible”.

A. Einstein

Chapter 13.

December 31, 2017

Siberia. Krasnoyarsk

— Happy upcoming New Year!

A clear female voice made me flinch. Having opened my eyes I was blinded by the light — as bright as a flash that returns to life.

I was lying in bed, on my side, crumpling up a blanket in my hand with my head in a soft pillow. My eyes quickly began to get used to the light, and I raised myself up, leaning on my arm.

— How long can you sleep! — The girl who woke me up said.

I turned my head to her, answering, in a sleepy, hoarse voice:

— I've already forgotten when I slept last.

A brown-eyed and rather pretty young stranger was standing in the doorway. She was holding a big red mug. The terry pajamas of the same color, reminding Santa Claus's costume. It hid all the advantages of her miniature figure, long curls of disheveled dark hair were falling to the waist.

— Come on, get up. Do you remember what you've promised? — She gave me a picky look and screwed her nice face up into an expression of a fair share of severity, went to the window and pushed aside the light curtain. — My car is covered with snow. — She uttered with sorrow, then turned around and added puzzled: — And where is your car?

— No idea. — I replied and folding back the blanket put my feet on the parquet floor and started to get up. I could hardly do that.

My whole body ached badly. My muscles ached, as if I had quit training for a couple of weeks, and then abruptly returned to them. What am I talking about? All of this was so long ago.

— What year's coming? — I asked, tilting my head from side to side. I gave my neck and shoulders a stretch, not paying attention to the fact that I was not wearing any clothes. At all.

— Yeah, really... — the pretty stranger said, — you had a great fun with your old friends yesterday, — after looking at me, she gasped in surprise. — Is your nose broken?!

I touched my nose with my fingertips and felt a sharp pain at the touch. It shoot up the frontal part of my head.

— No, it isn't broken. Everything's fine, — I decided to assure her, although I was not so sure myself.

— So will you be standing naked in front of me? — She handed me a mug, and went to the closet.

— Anyhow what year is coming? — I looked down at the mug, read the inscription on it "Happy New Year 2018", and took a few sips of hot coffee, feeling its taste and aroma. — I've got it, you don't have to say anything.

The girl took gray sports trousers from the shelf of the cabinet and threw them to me. I managed to catch them with my free hand.

— Get dressed, I've made a New Year's breakfast. Russian salad and red caviar sandwiches. — She took the mug from me and walked to the exit of the room.

— Wait, what's your name? — I tried to stop her, followed her to the threshold, getting into her trousers, my legs got entangled in their fabric. Losing my balance, I hit my back against the corner of the doorway, having experienced a sharp pain. I felt it once again with my body, not my soul, which made a blissful smile involuntarily shine on my face.

Without giving her name, the Santa-girl stopped. Turning over her shoulder, she frowned, and twisted a finger at her temple, casting a sympathetic look, then went on, moving away from me along a narrow short corridor that led to the hall of the apartment.

And now it's time to think thoroughly.

I looked around. This place was not familiar to me, and I didn't know how I ended up here. The last thing I remem-

ber, in the material world, from the past life, was lying on the porch of the house (our house with Maria), in a pool of my blood that oozed from wounds on my hands. I was sure that everything would be over, that I would no longer be tormented so much from inside by the grief for the loss of my wife. But I couldn't imagine what was waiting for me beyond the borders of the usual world. My painful grief didn't vanish, it became millions of times stronger. It was hell — a sheer hell. Endless torments, which I had never experienced. And the worst thing — you realize that here you have no chance to change what's happening. You have nothing to do, but to accept and obey, obey, obey... I tore apart the stumbled souls, they drowned out my pain. Albeit briefly, but it helped. I stood in the first circle. I was one of the first.

Sin causes sin.

Sin satisfies sinful hunger.

And yet I am back. Hellish torment is over. How? Who helped me, the stumbled? Why was I given a second chance? The answers to these questions were not known.

Many years have passed since my death, in this world, everything has changed, and I felt helpless, as if I had been sent to another planet.

I walked over to the closet, peering at my own reflection in the mirror. Some scratches on the chest and fresh bruises on the right shoulder and thigh. The nose is slightly swollen and twisted. The rest of my appearance hasn't changed. It was still the same tall, dark-haired, strong guy aged about thirty. Coarse features, bristles on the cheekbones, small wrinkles on the forehead, blue eyes. Exact copy of the hu-

man body, which I possessed before.

What happened, it is not even in the realm of my consciousness. I am standing here, in a room surrounded by the belongings of a stranger, whose place I occupy and, judging by the injuries on my body, his death was caused by what had happened to him. He'd gone, and I came. Whether it's fair or not, it's not for me to judge, let the others be judges.

— Have I tried in vain?! It's a holiday today, a family holiday! Doesn't the word "family" mean anything to you?! — The voice of the girl who had woken me up came from the depths of the apartment.

I left the room.

She was sitting in the living room at the round dining table, near the panoramic window, not draped with curtains. Behind its glasses, large flakes of snow could be seen falling on the ground in the misty freezing air.

— Why are you so slow today? — She asked frowning her thin eyebrows, having noticed me stopped a few steps from her looking at the window. — What, haven't you come out of yesterday's party yet?

This snow, caught by the wind, it seemed that I often looked through a similar window from the last floor of a high panel house, surrounded by houses of the same type. A lot of floors and lots of windows where the light was on in the wee hours.

Familiar street. Familiar courtyard. But these are not my memories. I've never lived here. Maybe these are his memories? No, it is unlikely. He was not of those people who can sit in front of the window and wait for something, sometimes drowning in moments of the past experienced

by him.

— *Show me some more of our past.*

— *You shouldn't be living in the past, baby. — I said in a hoarse whisper, resting my forehead on her neck.*

— *But I want to go through it. Once again.*

— *If you want that so much, than close your eyes.*

I was hugging her from behind, sitting in the bath, being afraid to let her go of my arms, showing her our past where we were together. We didn't have a "real present" anymore. She lived here, and I existed there. And she already had a different name. I couldn't remember it.

— It's just, that this American has screwed me over. — The stranger spoke again, after I sat down in a chair opposite her. — I still hoped that he would come to his senses, apologize, — she sighed, — I know, don't say anything. You were right, he is one hell of a wanker. I thought he loved me. I didn't care what others said...

I watched her put a few sandwiches on my plate, then a few tablespoons of salad, poured the juice into a glass still talking about the American. She was baffled, appealed to compassion and such a girl, with a snub-nosed face and a cute doll face, wearing terry pajamas and slippers, that would make any guy in my place to press her to his chest, stroke her head, sympathize with her. And I would gladly do it if I were not the one who tried to understand the reality, surrounding him.

— It's a New Year today, you can't be upset. We'll go to the theater, see the ballet, and at midnight... — She continued speaking, fascinated by her own feelings. I didn't interrupt her, I was thinking my own thoughts, I didn't partic-

ularly listen to the words that she uttered without stopping, just was looking aloof at the gestures of her hands.

— Misha! — Suddenly screamed a frightened stranger, making me shudder instinctively. — Your nose is bleeding! — She suddenly jumped up from her seat, grabbed a cloth from the edge of the table, ran up to me and put it to my nose.

— I've told you I'm all alright, — pushing her away, I took the blood-soaked napkin from my face, — sit down.

She returned to the table with a hurt look, gazing fixedly at me.

— What's your name? — I asked sharply, and wiped the blood that continued to flow from my nose with the back of my hand.

— What a nightmare, — she said, — what happened to you at night? Did you have a fight? Can't you remember a thing? Don't you remember me? Why didn't you tell me before? Have you been hit on the head? — She didn't get an answer to any of her questions (I didn't keep up with her frantic pace, it's not just my slowed down state), and with each new question, tension was accumulated in her, which in a couple of minutes erupted in anger of indignation. — I see that something happened to you, and you say “alright”! Not alright! We've got to rush to the hospital, immediately to the hospital!

She jumped up again and ran into the hallway, picked up her handbag, saying something to herself.

— Take your seat at last! — I shouted, thus deciding to calm her down a little. — I can understand the American who, as you said, “screwed you down”. — Having finished,

I threw my head back, feeling how the blood began flowing into my throat.

Santa-girl threw the bag on the floor and resolutely approached me. She stood opposite me, arms folded.

— Screwed me over. — She said reluctantly in a hurt voice.

— Who are you and what is your name? — I decided to repeat the question and, with my head down, I wiped my hands with a cloth. Bleeding has stopped.

— I'm Yana, your younger sister, you jerk. — She tensed up her arms folded across her chest, unstopably hack sawing me with her offended look.

— Sorry, — I never had a sister. — Don't worry so much, yes I don't remember anything, but we are not going to hospital.

— I won't be surprised if you've plunged into something. — She, nevertheless obeyed and returned to the table, sullenly shaking her head.

— Plunged into? — I was already getting amused with her manner of conversation. — Listen, just help me remember, OK?

— Misha, you are an unbearable jackass. You've always been the one. I knew that it wouldn't do you any good. You are screwing around. It's time to grow up and settle down. — She sniffed her nose, took a few sips of juice from the glass, her hands were trembling. — Know what? If you decided to play a person who has lost his memory, then there are no problems. I'm already fed up with it. You never think about me, you don't think about anyone except yourself.

— It was not me. — It is really so, if you take a second look. — I would never hurt my sister. And the word “family” means a lot for me.

— And what did you do for your family?! — She exclaimed, looking intently into my eyes. — Our parents went to America, I could go with them, but I stayed here with you. Who cared about you? Your buddies who are pulling you into skirmishes? Or prostitutes, who can be pleased with several doses of powder, in order to love you until the buzz is over? You were a sportsman, you were in the ring. You had the future, they believed in you. They admired you. You’ve got great potential in you, why have you ruined it all?

Her resentment and anger, aimed at me, were utterly and completely justified. The guy whose place I was lucky to take lived a wild and disorderly life. Ambitious, bold, self-willed. He was often lucky only because no one of those who was in charge of the maintenance of order in the “earthly world” really cared about him.

Permissiveness.

Why don’t I try cocaine? Why not to become addicted to it? Cocaine rose his soul to the status of God, who he felt himself last night before his death. One awkward movement and the steering wheel slipped out of his hands, he was pressing gas with the loud bangs of the music bass, and the last crushing blow came from the collision of the car with a tree on the side of the road

— It seems I remembered where “my” car is, it can’t be restored. And I think — must have been a real jerk not to appreciate a sister like you.

Yana couldn't take her eyes off my eyes, peering at them carefully and with soulful eyes. She managed to find something alien in them, which made a shadow of fear flash on the face for a moment. She didn't believe that a total stranger was sitting in front of her, couldn't accept it, and who could accept this in her situation. In such cases, it is easier to fight off the caustic feeling, inspired by intuition, and hide your guesses in the far drawer.

— Have you had an accident? Has anyone been with you? — She asked bewildered.

— It happened so that I flew off the road, but don't worry, no one was hurt. — Except your brother, who is no longer alive. — It goes without saying, I couldn't tell her about it. — What did you say about the ballet?

— I am glad that you didn't refuse and went with me. Although I'm very worried about your condition. — Yana, dressed in a sophisticated evening dress in black, with narrow straps that girded her tanned shoulders, put a leaflet into her handbag, and turned her attention to the stage.

The places we took were in the second row of the floor of the stalls. The lights of large chandeliers went out, plunging us into darkness, and the curtain went up slowly.

— You have no idea how good I feel, ballet fan. — Looking at her cute profile, I got my face to her cheek, feeling the smell of fruit shampoo, coming from the hair, and whispered in her ear: — You look stunning today.

She slowly turned her head to me, frowning slightly, and asked angrily:

— When did you have time to take a dose?

— I didn't take anything, my dear sister who'd been "screwed over", and don't frown, it's just not you. Look, the show's starting.

Having thrown an "idiot" once again into "my" side, she again focused on the stage.

I didn't have the slightest desire to watch this ballet performance. I don't know why I came here. Most likely, because of Yana, she could not show herself without being accompanied. It was necessary to support her.

I put my head on the back of the chair, my jacket was tight in the shoulders, I couldn't even fold my arms over my chest and closed my eyes. I heard applause sweeping around the audience and how everything stopped in silence for a few seconds. Then classical music came, played by the orchestra. A few minutes later, I began to feel sleepy, I wanted to dive into a dream with peace. There was no such thing as "peace" in hell, what can be said — it's a place of chaos and fear.

Maria... I was trying to get back to you. You were waiting for me here, in this world, it looks so huge now, and where can I find you in this world? Memories flooded back, as if plowing in consciousness. Echoes of phrases, fragments of feelings — her despair. I heard her after I had left.

Misha... my darling... he... but how comes! Why is it so!

— Sit straight, don't disgrace yourself. — Yana whispered angrily, nudging me in the side with her elbow.

— This atmosphere of art makes me sleepy. — I found an excuse, and no matter what I wanted, I still listened to my sister.

Having demonstratively adjusted the collar of the shirt,

I took a straight pose. I've never been a ballet lover, and in general all this masculine grace caused laughter, and girls flat and shapeless seemed to be prepuberal teenagers to me. But this evening, my opinion changed radically.

As if spellbound, with a fixed eye, I was watching the performance of a gracefully fluttering girl on the stage, who didn't seem to be a subject of gravity. Her femininity and plasticity were striking, she performed a dance with grace, immersed in her own world, unknown to others, having entered into the spirit of the character. As if she lived exciting episodes of her own life on stage again and again.

She was atwirl in a muffled blue light, against the background of ballerinas fluttering next to her, her raised arms slightly bent at the elbows were drawing circles. She was jumping up and flying round so gracefully, gently coming down on the floor of the stage, then jumped up again and continued spinning, spinning... spinning... that's all, my head was already spinning around.

Her performance was over, the music faded away, the audience burst into applause, shouting "bravo", and the girl who performed her fascinating dance, just a moment ago, went gracefully forward for a bow. I wish she hadn't stopped it. I wanted to bow to grandeur of her talent.

Having run a hurried glance through the spacious hall, she tried to give her smile to everyone in the audience. Her absolutely not flat breasts heaved and heaved, it seemed that during the performance she'd given away a part of herself, plunging us into the world known only to her. She threw her hands up and bowed once again, proudly raised her head and noticed me. Our eyes met. Painfully familiar eyes. Her

stretched forward leg, covered with a dense fabric of pantyhose, shuddered, her face was startled by a puzzled surprise. I read her lips as she spoke my name.

— Holy shit! — My enthusiastic exclamation caught the attention of a number of spectators and Yana's angry look. But all of them didn't bother me a bit.

Not only was I able to return to the earthly world, I also had the opportunity to meet her so quickly, I just had to think where she could be.

She ran off the stage and disappeared behind the scenes. I darted off and began to make my way to the exit, stepping on the feet of the people sitting in a long row, bumping into their knees, and Yana rushed after me.

We met in the empty foyer of the Opera and Ballet Theater. On her way, she had already dropped the pointe shoes and ran barefoot over the tiled floor polished to a gloss. She ran to meet me and I hurried to her.

It's when such events happen in life, you begin to doubt the correct perception of reality, it seems to dissolve and is perceived as a dream. Well, or in my case, everything can be attributed to ravings in hell. Yes, even such things happen.

Petrified, I looked at the one I had lost long ago. Baby, I missed you madly. Everything was quiet around. Even my heart, that was pounding so fast in my chest a minute ago, seemed to have stopped. Tension hung in the air, as if before a thunderstorm. The touch of her warm hand on my cheek. A thousand volts electric shock. My heart beating resumed with a new force, and the world was filled with life and sounds again.

— Misha, you're back. It's incredible. — She looked at

me so excitedly, her green eyes gleaming like wet glass, a tender smile touched her lips.

I covered her hand with mine, took her fragile trembling fingers to my lips. I felt a rush of adrenaline, it began to tear me apart. I wanted to scream and swear in this empty hall with tall ceiling, but still I found the strength, to keep my emotions (suddenly, I felt annoyed at one of her words — “incredible”), and said with restraint:

— I promised. — I didn’t fully realize it myself what I had done, I just remember — I promised her. I remember that I wanted to get “home,” even if I didn’t have a home as it is. A thought, that we could have a home, anywhere, the main thing is that we should be together again, was warming me.

— Misha, you’ll give me a heart attack today. — My sister Yana, breathing hard, slapped at her side, bent a little, put her hand on my shoulder. — What’s going on? Can anyone explain to me? Do you know each other? — In her downed voice, she addressed us question after question (this girl could rarely limit herself to one question), breathed out and straightened.

— Maria. — I said confidently, wrapping my arms around the waist of my wife from the past life, and pulled her close. I cuddled her with a vengeance, bent down, buried my head in her warm neck, drowning in the joy of experiencing the feeling that I had longed to meet.

— Anna. — She replied, laughing and hugging me with trembling hands.

She’s got even more elegant and tiny. It seemed that she was about to disappear, to melt in my rough embracement.

But I couldn't open it; I wasn't willing to let her go. Even if the demons of hell begin to take me to their residence, I won't be able to let her go. I felt pain in my chest, had I only to think that she would not be with me again.

— You've got it wrong, my brother. This is Anna Waisman, by the way, I'm your fan. I'd like to apologize for... — Yana suddenly stopped talking, watching intently, as Anna, hugging me, clung to me with her whole body, as she pressed her lips to my cheek, and sighed with ecstasy.

A few seconds passed and the "sister" dropped a short phrase:

— I see, it seems, the play is over. — She took a bunch of keys out of her purse and handed them to me, smiling indulgently.

Anna was sitting next to me in the front seat of the car, throwing her coat over a ballet costume, with her knees pressed to her chest. Her round layered tulle skirt rested against the dashboard. Her wavy blonde hair, which she had unpinned in a hurry, fell on an incredibly beautiful face. His features, so neatly chiseled, were painfully familiar, and her eyes — she averted them in an attempt to hold back tears. She turned away to the window, looking at the snow-covered streets behind it, looking at the city, decorated for the holiday with garlands, stretched along lampposts. Sometimes she furtively turned around to me, casting a short glance pierced with admiring surprise, doubting of what was happening, then turning back to the window in an attempt to hold back her tears. She was trembling. Not with the cold. She was scared. The fact is that Anna, as well as I,

knew what a cruel sense of humor the creators and their entire team had.

I squeezed her fragile palm in my hand, I wanted to tell her that I would stay with her, and we would live every day together, trying to spend sleeping as little time as possible. But to be honest, I wasn't absolutely sure about it.

What if everything that is happening now is nothing but an evil joke of the creators?

Memory gradually continued to recover.

A small town in Siberia. At dawn, she returned to life in the earthly world. Parents gave her a name — Anna. She grew up in a house by the river and dreamed of seeing the sea. I squeezed her palm. That time I had dreamed about it.

Then I couldn't touch her and feel the warmth of her skin with my fingers. She was my crazy fancy, just as I was hers. Then she had no idea who I was. How unbearably painful and hard it was for me. Although I was no longer in hell. The world where I received privileges and possessed phenomenal possibilities, if compared with the material world, was limited to a rigid framework for me. I have long existed like a beast, locked in a cage, from which it was impossible to escape. And it is the place where there's no time, space, illness and death. Where you can dwell forever, traveling around the worlds, fulfilling not so complicated instructions, considering yourself a kind of meaningful and necessary, one of those without whom, in fact, the whole system cannot function.

Did I need it all? Did I need this eternity?

The answer is simple: — No.

People who experience terrible, tragic events in their

lives trust in the Lord. Even those who are inveterate skeptics, in moments of despair begin to doubt their own skepticism (I heard their thoughts before escorting “to kingdom come”), and with all their might seek out help, even from those whose existence isn’t proven by anyone. They live with faith and hope for a miracle. For example, I no longer believed in anyone, and there was no one to ask for, and there was no one to wait for help. But I could help my Anna — her smile warmed my stumbled soul. She is more important than my own existence. I was allowed to take care of her. For her, I was a “miracle” — an invisible friend, she felt reliance on me, asking for help. And I could give her everything she asked. Except one. Me myself. Without me, the real, life for her was becoming more and more meaningless, empty and unnecessary.

Money turns into pieces of paper with indelible paint. Expensive things in junk. The carefree life that “we” were going to spend together in a house on the ocean coast is spent like meaningless days, that will go on nonstop, and beautiful guys become an option for infrequent and pleasant meetings.

Anna and I went to the country. Yana gave me the address of the house she bought a couple of days ago. She made such a gift to herself on the holiday eve, preparing everything for a joint New Year’s Eve party with the American (at that time she couldn’t even imagine that he would “screw over” her). Beforehand, she managed to give the necessary instructions to those involved in organizing celebrations and romantic evenings.

We could find bathrobes in the bathroom, Anna threw one of them on her, having got rid of her stage clothes.

Champagne and fruit were placed next to the rug spread out in front of the wall fireplace. Logs were burning crackling in it, fire flames played with shadows on the wooden floor.

— I was waiting for you so much. — Anna told me, she sat beside me, leaning her shoulder on my shoulder, looking thoughtfully at the snow whirling in a whirlwind outside the window, and not daring to take a sip from a glass of champagne. She lowered her head and ran her palm over the soft pile of the rug. Lost one.

And why did you suddenly get so confused, baby?

— Misha ... — looking into my eyes, Anna sighed heavily, — I was... ready to go to hell just to see your eyes again.

It was midnight, and the chimes of the wall clock began to strike monotonously. Another thing from Yana, prepared for special moments.

— No good would come out of it. You know. — I said. My eyes slipped on her thin neck, which I was eager to embrace with my hand, then ran down the collar of her dressing gown, to her naked breast. I remember kissing it. My tongue seemed to feel the taste of her warm, pulsating nipples.

— When despair boils in you, you don't care what happens. How long have you been here?

I didn't answer her question immediately, at first I didn't even get into it, turned my eyes to her puffy lips, which produced these words. So sweet. In the one world for us. I remembered how I experienced a painful desire feel their

taste again, at least once, when she was lying in bed lost in sleep. I was nearby, feeling wild hunger. It had been added up for years — if you keep track of time by earthly standards. None of the souls could satisfy it, either a sinful soul in the chaos of hell, or an innocent one that I had to take from this world. Regret is what I felt then, looking at my Anna. But I was wrong; I shouldn't have succumbed to the tormented conscience. We only live by the will of the creators. I had to feel this way in order to obey orders subsequently.

It's all over. I'm with her. The chimes stroke the last stroke this year.

Did she ask how long I had been here?

— About ten hours. At first, I didn't remember much. — I started talking, trying to concentrate. How much did she excite me, everything inside was cramped by lust, it languished so painfully and for a long time, beyond the border separating our worlds. And it was confusing. Soon I will get used to the feelings that I have already experienced as a human, and to the fact that she is with me. Is her body completely naked under the robe? Or does she wear only white lace...

— How did you manage to do that? — She wondered.

She's knocked me off the topic. I have already begun to think not only about what is under her robe, but how I would get rid of her robe, what I would do with her after it. I'll do it. I can do a lot of things with her... OK, I keep my temper in control.

— I decided to protest and send them to the devil.

— To the devil with orange heels?

— To the leader of all the devils. His heels are purple. — I have no idea what color the heels of devils are. And, in general, why should they have them? Being bewildered, I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind. — What makes you think that devils have heels? It seems like they should have hoofs.

— Oren said so, — she replied, and laughed softly. — I asked him the same question as you have. And he replied that they didn't have hooves, but they have heels.

Oren, well, yes. The ghost boy from the madhouse. After all, I knew that the lone evil spirits fighter wouldn't fail. Absurd little boy. A flighty, silly warrior who has such notions as honor and duty. He believed in me. He believed that he had met a higher being, an angel. He certainly went too far with devils. He found their heels, and gave them color. Although... why am I so categorical, everything's possible. Devils may indeed have a hierarchy, which is distributed according to the color of their heels. Oren was an expert on evil. Who knows what's going on in their world? Yes, they also have the world created for them, and our friend kept order there. He did well, was one of the best.

— He asked to give this big thank you to you. — Anna spread her arms, smiling.

Oren didn't doubt that I would be able do the "impossible".

— I didn't have time to say thanks to him.

That's enough. There will be some time to talk.

I run my hand into her thick hair at the back of her head, and kiss her neck, slowly and ecstatically, inhaling the smell of her skin. She tilts her head back, a familiar moan,

escapes from her chest. Mad delight makes me go bonkers. I lean on her, putting her on the rug with her back down and pushing my knee between her legs.

— Baby... I missed you madly... — I'm whispering in her ear, she hugs me harder, clasping her legs around me.

— But don't go away. — She says it quietly, strokes my back, shoulders, looks into my eyes, her palms slide down along the body, on my sides, to the hips. Her fingers feel the body, stop and dig into the skin, through the thin fabric of the shirt. She smiles. She froze in my arms, beneath me, and barely breathes. I bent my head, lightly touching her lips with my lips, waiting. She relaxes. She feels me — it's not a dream, not a raving. Everything is happening now, and suddenly she says, gasping out: — You are real. — I catch the words, they echo the warmth of her breath on my parted lips.

She was in doubts. She was afraid, trembling with fear. Did she think that she could dance it over and get drowned in her fantasies? At first I couldn't believe the reality of what was happening. But the more time I spend in this world, the more I begin to realize that my staying here is no longer limited to seven days.

Clasping her face with my hands, I gaze into her clear green eyes.

— Now everything is happening the way we wanted to, and then it will be even better. You've brought me here. — I tell her and smile.

I was happy to madness. I denied, but still adhered to the framework of restraint, tried to be gentle with her with all my might, slowly, taking her in part by part, enjoy-

ing her. By and large, it was impossible to get satiated with Anna (once Maria, or whatever name she could be given), this pleasure is like a short moment of orgasm, which has a tangy long aftertaste, and when it disappears, I want to immerse myself in it again... again ...and once again...

Lots of people touched her elastic body, squeezed her breasts with their trembling fingers, reached out for to her hardened nipples drooling. She moved sitting on the lap of clients, feeling how each of them was getting excited, fidgeted, and made them cum into their pants. Writhing beautifully and plastically, whispered pleasant words. Imagining me in every young guy who had appearance similar to mine. Even if she had never met me in this life, she knew that I should be (somewhere) looking like her imagination was painting me. She didn't look into their eyes, she fantasized, she felt, pure lust stroke her into the marrow — we are together in our atmosphere. The rumble of club music bass, alcohol, obsession. She was carried away on the arc to the world, close to mine. Subconsciously, she was drawn to people, realizing that she couldn't feel me in human form. But she wanted it infinitely. She was waiting. She was looking for. I don't blame her for giving herself to others. Only in this way, she quenched the pain of incomprehensible longing, even if not for long. And she herself was afraid to admit that. I was torn apart by anger when I watched this, when I heard the lustful thoughts of her clients. I wanted to grab her hand and take her away. I wanted to instill into the person, she was sitting on, such paranoid delusion that his brain would explode with horror. I wanted to get into the body of each of the guys who she had sex with, and feel her

mine. But the borders of my cage didn't allow me to fulfill even a small part of my plans.

Anna was not given a chance to understand it. She lived in a world which I had left long ago, but she still loved me, without even realizing it, without consideration, loved me in others, giving a part of her own sincere love. Unemotionally, taking the excitement of everyone, enjoying the emotions of people, chuckling at how easy they could be evoked. She was playing.

They are just puppets in the skilled hands of the puppeteer.

Over the time, she began to realize that she had been carried away with playing. That there was no substitute, and the presentiment that she was cheating on someone, gnawed from the inside.

I will go through the circles of hell once again, I will get to the first one, but I will not share her with anyone else. I won't let her fuff around.

— Indeed, it's better to do something than to stay here in this very place where we have to be!

She was furious, screamed, and didn't understand that I had been thinking long about it. She didn't have a clue — that “something” meant returning to the very death trap for me. Such wights are collected there from billions of worlds, that I myself became even a worth wight, just to take mine from them. To survive. To last. On the other hand, everything there is built on one main principle, which is embedded in the globe. But the earthly world is more humane and civilized — an easy option.

We've done it. We've lasted. And no matter how much

time is allotted to us here, I will live every day, with the feeling that I was given a second chance.

From now on no one else will squeeze my Anna in his arms, experiencing extreme obsession, drowning himself in the passion of desire and imagining how he was having her in various positions. Nobody, except me, and only I will be allowed to take her rudely, properly, in any positions.

In any case, I really wanted this: the fantasies born in my head, and then the action.

Let's fantasize, and put it into action, baby.

Now they may enjoy her at a distance, watching her dance on the big stage of the Opera and Ballet Theater. Let her fascinate people, if she likes it, but in a different way.

We don't live in this world for the first time, she had come back here before, and so did I. And there were many other worlds where we lived, they are arranged according to different principles. There are countless numbers of them. They divide endlessly. Just, everything is easier and quieter here. We were drawn to each other, and exactly here.

— *Hey, stop it, we'll come up with something.*

— *It was like this before.*

— *It has always been like this, — I said affirmatively.*

We found each other, and we will find each other once again, even if we are scattered across different worlds. Actually... as usually.

After all I became a human; there aren't those abilities that I used to have before. They are not provided for people. Why did the understanding remain with me? What for? Probably, our creators still need something from us. They will never be satisfied with their creation — it should be

slightly corrected, improved, checked how it will begin functioning in a given situation. And it is alarming.

Notes

[1] Bat-Yam — is a small city located in the center of Israel, on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It is a part of the Tel-Aviv region, bordered by the main city, Tel-Aviv. Most of the inhabitants are repatriates from the CIS countries

[2] “Iron Dome” (Hebrew. כיפתברזל — Kippat barzel, Eng. Iron Dome — Iron dome) — a tactical air defense system designed to protect Israel against free flight tactical missiles with a flight range from 4 to 70 kilometers. It was developed by the Israel company Rafael.

[3] Herzliya — a prestigious resort city, located twelve kilometers away from Tel Aviv. The residents of Israel call it “the rich sister of Tel-Aviv”, because the city is a financial and tourist center, where mostly wealthy people live. The most well off created their own village inside the city, called Herzliya Prituah, which is considered to be Israel’s Silicon Valley

[4] Afterparty is a party that takes place after the main celebration. There are several clubs in Israel where such parties are held, they usually last until dinner. **A footnote**

[5] stripper— funny-bunny -my personal association is that a stripper, as if from a wonderland, is affectionate and cheerful, she suddenly appears, creates a special mood, and

runs away when her time is over, she is perfect for one-off meetings that do not oblige to anything.

[6] Falafel is a dish of deep-fried balls of crushed legumes (usually chickpea, but not only that), seasoned with spices.

[7] Hummus is a chickpea puree appetizer.

[8] Eilat is a city located in the most southern point of Israel, on the shores of the Gulf of Aqaba of the Red Sea, one of the international level resorts.

[9] Lobby, coma efes (לוביקומהאפס) — literal translation: lobby, ground floor.

[10] Abarbanel is a medical center of psychological health in the city of Bat Yam, specializing in patients of all ages. It was founded in 1944 by Yehuda Ababanel in order to help the victims of the war.

[11] Scorpions — most popular rock group in Germany and one of the most famous in the world. Over 100 million albums sold (as of January 29, 2010). The group takes the 46th line in the list of VH1's "The Greatest Artists of Hard Rock" version.

[12] Matthew, 24:30.

Anna leaves the Siberian town where she grew up and goes to Israel, where she often gets into troubles, but a ghostly assistant – her “invisible friend” always comes to the rescue. The girl communicates with him since her childhood. However, Anna stops hearing his voice when Michael (Misha) comes into her life. The girl has a lot to learn – about herself, about her “invisible friend”, about the new man of her choice... and love beyond time and human life.

