

Tango of Death

Yuri Vynnychuk

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yuri Vynnychuk, one of independent Ukraine's most popular writers, was born in the city of Ivano-Frankivs'k in 1952. Unable to have his own works published until the early 1990s due to Soviet cultural policy, Vynnychuk would publish them as "translations" from ancient languages (Irish, Welsh) or even made up languages such as Arcanumian. Furthermore, Vynnychuk invented the existence of a whole Arcanumian civilization in the 1990s and convinced others of its existence.

Unable to obtain employment as a philologist, he worked as a freight handler and a painter. In 1987 he cofounded the cabaret theater *Ne Zhurys'!* (Don't Worry!), writing songs and scenes for its performances. Since 1990 he has worked as a journalist and has been sued over 30 times over this period of time for his scandalous articles. His latest brush with the law was in 2012 due to the publication of his poem "Kill the Bugger" about the President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, in which Yanukovych is outwardly referred to as a crook. Vynnychuk received the honorary title of *Halyts'kyi Lytsar* (Galician Knight) in 1999 for his weekly article written under the pseudonym Yuzio Observator (Yuzio the Observer) in the Post-Postup newspaper.

Since 1990 he has been publishing everything that he had written over the years but had remained unpublished. This includes poetry, short stories and the novels *Vesniani ihry v osinnikh sadakh* (Springtime Games in Autumn Orchards, 2005) and *Tango smerti* (Tango of Death, 2012). *Tango smerti* was awarded the prestigious BBC Book of the Year prize for 2012. He has also authored many popular publications covering the history of the city of L'viv; his immensely popular two-volume set *Lehendy L'vova* (Legends of L'viv) is republished every year.

His works have been translated into English, French, German, Japanese and into all Slavic languages.

EXCERPTS FROM TANGO OF DEATH

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Translated by Michael M. Naydan and Svitlana Bednazh

Chapter G

(pp. 80-87)

In contrast to my friend I had absolutely no desire to study, more precisely it was not quite like that, I had no desire to study in scholarly institutions, but rather preferred to study myself; mostly by my own trial and error, I moved gropingly, but confidently; I loved to go deeply inside myself, and if I imagined a good place for me to work, then it would be a small train station where I could live and work as a watchman, meet the trains that will never stop there, but for which from time to time I needed to change the track switches; and I would have a kitty and doggie, and a chicken that would provide me with an egg every day, and a goat, and that's it, no one else, and I wouldn't even need paper, because I'd write my reflections on the sand, and in the winter on the snow.... But Yosko studied in the conservatory; he played the violin and bandura. You're surprised, really? A Jew, who plays the bandura, it would be the same as a Hutsul strumming a balalaika. But Yosko's father, Mr. Pharmacist, said that his son will play the bandura, well, so his mom was forced to carry out his will, and Mr. Pharmacist really loved the bandura, he loved it so much that he would have become a bandura player for the sake of that bandura, and though that dream didn't come true, on the other hand, he died for Ukraine, so it turned out the same way. Yosko's sister Leah wasn't as lucky because she was born when her father was no more, and he couldn't leave any instructions about her future lot, but Mrs. Golda decided that the little girl also would study music, and when she appeared to have vocal abilities, she took her to audition for Professor Jan Rasp of the music conservatory, and he promised that he would definitely take her on when she finishes her schooling. From that time on Mrs. Golda regularly bought raw eggs for her daughter and forced her every morning to gulp down an egg on an empty stomach, after which Leah, before she started off for school, had to sing out loud, bursting out like a nightingale to the whole dang courtyard; on weekdays that didn't bother anyone, but on Sunday, when many people wanted to sleep

a bit longer, that singing got on your nerves, and then swearing and curses echoed from the window, but Mrs. Golda didn't give a rat's ass.

One time on Friday I found Yosko at home as he, sitting on the floor, was cutting paper with scissors into equal-sided squares. I was taken aback, and he explained that tomorrow was Saturday, and they're not permitted to do anything on that day, except for putting out a fire if one should break out in the house, so he was there preparing paper for the lavatory.

"Yosyo, you plannin' on shitting all day long, or what? Why's it you need so much paper?" I asked in surprise.

"I'm doing it not so much for myself, but for my mom and sister, and two aunties and two uncles, and grandpop Abeles."

There was nothing else to say – I sat down next to Yosko and helped him cut up the paper for the lavatory. And soon grandpop Abeles sauntered in with a live chicken under his arm; he took off his frock coat and hat, and then stepped out into the yard with the chicken. It was the first time I saw a chicken become kosher: grandpop took it with both his hands and began to violently shake it so its head kept turning, gushing out blood, and when it had already become as red as a ripe tomato, grandpop pulled a hatchet out of his pocket and in a single stroke lopped off the head and waited for all the blood to drain out.

"We're forbidden from using blood in food," Yosko explained to me, and I just nodded my head in sympathy, understanding that Yosko would never ever try a delicacy like kishka, filled with blood and buckwheat groats, not to speak even of ham or chitlins.

Right at that time Leah arrived, and upon seeing our efforts, she burst out laughing.

"What, Yosel? Have you hired a shabez goi for yourself? Maybe we can also make klocki dumplings for tomorrow?"

"What's a shabez goi?" I asked.

"It's when a Jew can't do certain work on Saturday, then he calls a non-Jew to help, and that kind of helper is called a shabez goi," Leah explained. "When you finish up your clever work, will you help me make the klocki?"

"Other than a snowman and bags for grain, I've never made anything."

“That’s nothing, I’ll teach you. You’ll thank me some day.”

So then, Leah and I later made klocki from potatoes and cheese, grandfather Abeles plucked the chicken, and Yosko’s mother kneaded the dough for a sweet pastry at the same time poor Yosko was sweating over his studies. Because Golda had hired a Hebrew teacher for Yosko, Mr. Katsenelenbogen, who always, even during sultry summer days, wore a black frock coat and a black wide-brimmed hat, from under which in every direction his sidelocks dangled. Because poor Yosko, while studying Hebrew, had to have a covered head, Mr. Katsenelenbogen brought a hat for him, which clearly was too large. That’s why it wasn’t sidelocks, which Yosko didn’t have, dangling out from under it, but his mother Golda’s curlers. Sweat flowed down his face in streams, and toward the end of the lesson he nearly cried; and we kept peeping into the window and waited until his torments would end to go play soccer. Hebrew was really difficult for Yos, and he couldn’t fathom at all why he needed it when he wanted to be a musician, and not a rabbi; but his mother Golda was stubborn, deeming that Hebrew was a sign of intelligence, and who knows, perhaps, someday her baby boy would travel to the land of his ancestors. So we started to think and figure out how we could help our poor Yos. And here the idea came to Wolff to follow Mr. Katsenelenbogen’s entire route from his house to Yosko’s. So we did that, but we didn’t notice anything useful save the firmly established habit of the teacher to stop by the stand for the Legions and drink a glass of lemon-flavored sparkling water. But that one detail greatly interested Yas, and, shouting out “Eureka!”, he remembered that Mr. Rubtsak, whom he knew very well because he was his neighbor and on more than one occasion had helped him after school, worked at that stand, and it would be simply marvelous to pay a visit to him right then when Yosko’s tormenter would be passing by there and toss into the sparkling water a purgative laxative. You can have no doubt at all that we really took to that idea. So we bought some powder at the drug store, and Yas set off to the stand to Mr. Rubtsak, and we observed from a distance. And right then Mr. Katsenelenbogen wearing his black hat and with another just like it under his arm shuffles over, leaning on his umbrella, with which he never parted, no matter how sultry it was, and stopped as he was wont to do near the stand, placed the hat on the counter, hooked his umbrella over his elbow, and asked for a glass of sparkling water with lemon syrup, and at that moment we ran up and one after another started yammering at Mr. Rubtsak to give each of us an ice cream, and really fast because we were rushing to school, and Mr. Rubtsak nodded to Yas for him to pour the water, and he began to portion out the ice cream into paper cups for us, and I said to Mr. Teacher, that he had a white feather on the back of his frock coat, that

there must be some blonde girl wooing Mr. Teacher, and that blonde girls are really rare among Jewish girls; then Mr. Teacher became alarmed and immediately began to inspect his frock coat and, grabbing the unfortunate blonde hair or rather feather, crumpled it up and with an expression of disgust on his face threw it at his feet and stamped on it; in the meantime they poured him his lemon-flavored sparkling water, above which yellowish droplets were jumping in the air, playing rainbow-like in the sun, and Mr. Katsenelenbogen with delight tasted the soda water, feasting his eyes on the sunny day, then pulled out of his pocket a checkered kerchief as large as a tablecloth, the other end of which, by the time he had wiped his lips, all the same remained in the pocket of his frock coat, took the hat under his arm, and sipped further, waving his umbrella. We moved further away, licking our ice cream, and in a minute Yas met up with us, and then we hid on the wrap-around porch outside of Yosko's windows and watched Mr. Katsenelenbogen place the hat, in which Yosko's head immediately sank down below his ears, on Yosko's head. But his mother Golda propped up the hat with her hair curlers, and again we could see Yosko's sad eyes, which were contorted, ready to cry. Mr. Katsenelenbogen began to read some kind of mysterious words from the textbook, and Yosko repeated them; this lasted maybe ten minutes, when suddenly the teacher straightened up on his armchair, twisted his head in various directions like a rooster on a hill, then took off his hat, and after that violently threw off his frock coat and flew from the room into the hallway, where there was a common lavatory for several of the rooms. However, he failed to make his way inside because the water closet was occupied. Wolff was sitting there, and to the despairing screams of Mr. Teacher answered with an expressive moan, delivering with this all the appropriate sounds, for the sake of the high art of the performance he had practiced for nearly half a day.

Mr. Katsenelenbogen already had grabbed his stomach, dancing away a "tumbalalaika,"¹ and a hissing flew out from his lips when momma Golda ran out into the hallway and took an interest in what had happened to Mr. Teacher; when she found out what an unpleasantness had befallen him, she knocked on the door of the water closet, but also heard just the moaning and unseemly *perdissimo*, then she rushed back into the house and carried out a pot, and told Mr. Teacher to do his obligation in the pot; Mr. Teacher waved his hands and whispered that it was unseemly to do such things in the hallway, but Mrs. Golda promised that she would stand on the steps, so that no one would catch Mr. Teacher in such an awkward situation, then Mr. Katsenelenbogen took off the suspender straps from his shoulders, began to take off button after button, loop after loop, but not quite as quickly as he

1 A Russian Jewish folk or love song performed in Yiddish.

had hoped, and in an instant we heard a booming rumble, which reminded us of a landslide in the mountains, and together with the rumble, a shriek of despair and at the same time relief echoed; Mrs. Golda flew to that rumble from the steps and quickly shielded her nose, and Mr. Teacher stood there crying with his pants in his hands, not knowing whether it was from happiness or from grief, when the door of the water closet opened up and from out of which Wolff jumped, choking both from laughter and the odor; Mrs. Golda flung out choice curses in Yiddish, so that even we understood her, and we took to our heels.

Yosko told us what happened further. That is, Mrs. Golda² had to remove the teacher's clothes, heat up the gas hot water boiler, and bathe him in a wash tub, and then also wash his pants and underwear together with two shirts, not to say anything about his socks with garters, and even his shoes. Mr. Teacher was morally broken and crippled, having figured out which trick the damned kiddies had played on him. He sat on the couch, wrapping himself in a bed sheet, and mumbled some kind of words of wisdom to himself under his breath. Tears flowed down his face and sorrow ate at his soul, and Mrs. Golda cursed us to holy hell, but she cursed Wolfe the most, especially when she noticed we were peeking to see her hanging Mr. Teacher's underwear on twine; he didn't utter a single word, and to all the replies of the lady of the house answered just "uhu: or "u-u." And then Mrs. Golda grabbed a straw broom and began to chase Yosko around the house, though he wasn't guilty in the least before God and had no clue about our operation. And the mother, having seen that he was hiding from her and defending himself as much as he could; whereas in all other instances when he had committed an offense, he obediently got a whacking; in the end she believed his innocence and sent him to meet Leah from the music school, so that she could stay till late evening at her aunt's until Mr. Teacher's shirts and trousers had dried, and he could get rid of the hideous bed sheet.

From that time on Yosko stopped studying Hebrew. Mr. Katsenelenbogen would avoid Mr. Rubtsak's stall like the plague, and Mr. Rubtsak couldn't stop wondering why Mr. Teacher stopped liking sparkling lemon drinks so suddenly. After that incident, Yosko didn't see Mr. Katsenelenbogen for a long time, but when he met him in 1940 with Lviv already under

2 It is very common in Galicia in Western Ukraine to address people with the terms *Pan* (Mr.) and *Pani* (Mrs.) along with their first name or their honored profession (doctor, lawyer, teacher, etc.) as a sign of respect.

Soviet rule,³ he politely greeted him and tried to apologize for the regrettable mishap, and Mr. Katsenelenbogen patted him on the back and said to him with sadness in his eyes:

“It’s nothing, never mind, soon the time will come when you won’t envy those who have died, and more than anything, those who haven’t been born.”

And when Yosko related that to us, we couldn’t fathom at all what Mr. Teacher had in mind, till the beginning of July 1941, when our eyes were opened, because we saw Mr. Teacher among those Jews who were carrying out corpses from the prison on Lontsky Street, corpses that already had begun to stink, and that heavy stench struck your nostrils, the corpses of people whom the Soviets had mowed down in all the prisons of Ukraine when they were retreating from the Nazis. There were corpses of young girls, raped and mutilated, and there were corpses of seminarians covered in dreadful bruises everywhere, and all the Jewish people were in tears while they were carrying them, and didn’t turn up their noses like all the people standing to the side and covering their noses with handkerchiefs to avoid breathing in the stench; and later I saw Mr. Katsenelenbogen crawling along the pavement in front of the Opera Theater and scrubbing it with a toothbrush, and next to him other Jews crawling on all fours and also scrubbing the pavement, and there were also the math teacher Leo Feld, the musician Hershel Shtrauss, and the owner of the production shop Yakub Iker, and even the inveterate card player Itsyk Kon, who didn’t fit in such dignified company at all; and nearby SS guys were just standing there and laughing, and the crowd was laughing, darting glances at the Nazis, so as not to miss the next wave of laughter and join in with it in time, because that laughter drew them closer, raised them above this Jewish mob, above this rabble, that once was so full of itself, and today crawls along the ground in their suits, and shirts, and cravats; that laughter made them equal to the daring Goths and gave indulgences for survival, for if you didn’t laugh, then right away you found yourself on the other side, among these black bedbugs with long side curls and without them, and there was no place for you among the representatives of civilized Europe. And I saw tears roll along the sunken cheeks of Mr. Katsenelenbogen, and he moistened his toothbrush in them and cleaned the pavement on his stomach, his spectacles flew off, and he struggled groping for them, and it was here that my soul felt so disgusted, so pained by the fact that we had caused him such misery, a poor lonely man, who had never hurt anyone, he was just carrying out his teaching duties. I couldn’t

3 The Soviet Red Army occupied Lviv on September 17, 1939 and abandoned the city on June 22, 1941 before the arrival of approaching Nazi army, which occupied the city on July 1, 1941 and which began a systematic eradication of the Jewish population over the next three years. Soviet forces retook the city in July 1944, and the city and much of Western Ukraine was annexed by the USSR.

restrain myself. I bent over and gave him his glasses, and the crowd irately began to boo me. Someone pushed me, and I flew against the wall, and the SS guy gestured with his finger for me to come over and wanted to know if I was a Jew or not. Assistants immediately appeared and volunteered to tear off my pants and determine whether I was a Jew, but right then our school receptionist darted out from the crowd and lashed out:

“Lets you back off! That's Leska Barbaryka's son! What kinds of people are you! I've known him since he was a tot!”

One of the SS guys translated the receptionist's words, then smiled, nodded, and shooed me away with his hand to let me know I was free to go, and I left, preserving the image of the poor teacher in my eyes along with all the others, who were crawling, even the card shark Itsyk. I saw Mr. Katsenelenbogen for the last time at the pharmacy. They had banned selling medicine to Jews, but the Teacher had not yet heard about that order and asked for heart medicine drops. The druggist didn't know what he should answer so as not to insult the Teacher; he finally said that they hadn't delivered them yet, and the Teacher stepped out of the drugstore and moved in the direction of another one. I caught up to him and explained that he couldn't buy medicine anywhere but that I would gladly do that for him. He was surprised, but agreed to it, and when I handed him that medicine and didn't want to take money from him, he asked who I was, but I didn't tell him that I was carrying a sin against him in my soul, and I didn't say that I was friends with Yosko, because then he would have put two and two together. I just smiled and joked:

“A good Samaritan.”

Chapter V (pp. 289-295)

The bazaar behind the Opera Theater was not only called Krakidaly,⁴ but God only knows why, Paris. It didn't lose its importance or name even during the war. Lvivians sold all sorts of things there, forming two rows, and buyers walked back and forth between them – mostly Soviet officers, rank and file soldiers, government officials, as well as their wives, who here, “in Paris,” turned into European ladies. Among the vendors you could meet theater actors too, bank directors, and distinguished professors – each one would bring out something from his or her home to sell, and each one would loudly praise his or her goods. Some needed money for food, and others collected money to bribe the liberators, to save someone assigned for deportation to Siberia. But the Krakidaly Bazaar drew people for yet one more reason – this was the place for socializing and a source of political news and rumors; here certain middlemen gadded about, who knew how to arrange for contact with the Cheka⁵ secret police and with prison workers; here you could find out the latest news from the London radio and the date and time of the next militia roundup, buy a German passport, and find someone to guide you across the border.

At the market from morning till evening shouts echoed of “Liquor, booze, hootch,” “Bachevsky, Bachevsky, Bachevsky!,” “Booze, booze, booze!,” “Local liquor and imported stuff!,” “Saccharin pastilles! Real Wodka Wyborowa!”⁶ One cheerful man shouted out at the top of his voice: “Selling a cure for bedbugs, fleas, cockroaches, and all kinds of utter bastards. Death to fleas, death to male lice and female ones too!” Soon after that a fellow approached him and wanted

4 The local nickname for the bazaar, which historically was located on Krakivska (Krakow) Square behind the Lviv Opera House.

5 The Cheka (*Chrezvychnaia komisiia*, meaning “extraordinary commission”) was established by Vladimir Lenin in 1917 and was the first of several iterations of the Soviet secret police.

6 One of the oldest and most popular brands of Polish vodka, the production of which began in 1823. Its name means “select vodka.”

to know whom he had in mind when his mention of “all kinds of utter bastards” disappeared.

The enterprising Lviv women collected a great big heap of shining multi-colored buttons, crowns, ribbons, belts, gloves for cotillions, artificial flowers, colored hairclips and combs, décolleté night shirts and robes – and they carried out all this to sell to the greedy Soviet ladies, who had never seen such miracle-wonders. Besides what they had collected from their houses, the Lviv ladies also sold what they had made themselves, because there was not a single lady of the house who didn't know how to bake tortes, sheet cakes, and cookies, and it wasn't surprising that at the Krakidaly Bazaar you could see Mrs. Professor,⁷ and Mrs. Learnedbarrister, and Mrs. Haughtypants herself, who, without any complaining, peddled their goodies. Ah, how the ladies from the Soviet paradise savored them! Each year you would notice the chomping traps of the officers' babes bespattered with cream and crumbs.

Milya peddled her mother's cookies and even grumbled about doing that:

“Because of this Krakidaly Bazaar I just get fat and nothing more. ‘Cause when no one buys the cookies, and I'm bored, I eat them. And then momma complains that she doesn't feel bad about the cookies, but she doesn't see any money from it.”

So it's not strange that the Soviets, after they just arrived in Lviv, immediately got interested in how to get to the Krakidaly Bazaar, or rather, as they said it, “to Krakadily” [The Crocodiles], because here they could buy wonderful things really cheaply, and they, acquiring used European suits and coats, quick as a wink changed their clothes at the gate, and only then would walk out into the city, but that didn't save them from crooks, who promptly figured out the ignorance of the liberators, sold them the most wide-ranging, odd, useless stuff, convincing them of its exceptional value. The four of us joined in with this profitable gesheft.⁸ Yash managed to get enema pipes and plastic covers for rubber syringes from the drugstore, which had been smashed to bits during a bombing,; all these devices had a small valve, which allowed you to open and close the flow of liquid from a vessel. As first we weren't able to comprehend Yash's idea, but he convinced us that the goods were first class, and had to sell, if we were going to market those pipes to the Red Army boys as an outstanding achievement of contemporary technology in the field of smoking. And it happened that we tried to convince

7 It was common in Halychyna (Galicia) for married women to be addressed with the title of her distinguished husband's profession. E.g., *Pani* (Mrs.) *Profesor*, *Pani Doktor*, etc.

8 In multicultural Lviv it was common for German, Polish, Yiddish, and other foreign words to be adopted into the local dialect of Ukrainian. “Gesheft” comes from the German word “Geschäft,” which means business or deal.

them, explaining how such a “mouthpiece” for smoking, perfected by world science, twisted with a valve in various directions before the eyes of the bewildered soldier.

“Here’s some great technology! If you want to – you smoke, if not – you don’t.”

After he said that, the soldiers gleefully and with fascination smoked the newspaper roll-ups with reeking cheap tobacco jammed into the “mouthpieces,” continuously turning those little valves. After the supply of our little pipes was gone, we managed to sell more than ten printing machines as a form of technology for printing money. We did this, of course, in semidarkness, so the client wouldn’t guess he’s being duped. Afterward Yash related that at Liutsiya’s place he discovered a large box with broken watches and alarm clocks that were left after her watchmaker grandfather had passed away. Wolfe took an interest in that news and had a burning desire to sell the treasure.

“But who will you sell a watch to that doesn’t work?” We asked.

“To just about anybody,” Wolfe said. “Oddly it’s enough to break off the second-hand so it doesn’t get in our way, then you lift the watch up to the soldier boy’s ear and click your teeth. Like this: click-click-click!”

“Well, just look out that it doesn’t click you,” Yosko started to laugh, and we agreed to keep an eye on this activity of Wolfe’s, promising to join in if the business worked well. And what do you think? It worked! And how it did work! It’s possible, maybe difficult, for someone to believe, but imagine a person who never had a watch and never heard one ticking. One should say that the Soviets were just wild about watches; true, they had a very unique notion about beauty and reckoned that a watch must be big, the bigger the better, that’s why they wore impressive onions, while some even tied up alarm clocks on their wrists by rolling up their sleeves, so others could see what a lost braggart they could be.

One day an extraordinary event happened. Golda rushed over to us gasping and told us that a corpse was lying in their house. My mother just threw up her hands, and my granny immediately poured some kind of herb into boiling water to give frightened Golda something to drink, because she couldn’t catch her breath at all and kept waving her scarf near her face. From those fragments of phrases that she screamed out and whispered, we understood just one thing: the body belonged to an NKVD⁹ guy, who on more than one occasion had tried to court Leah, and now he tracked down when she would be alone in the house and tried to

9 The Russian initials for the Soviet secret police, The Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs.

force himself on her. But Leah, defending herself, smacked him with a pan over the head, but the fact that she smacked him not with the bottom, but the side, it cut through his temple. He lay there like a flat cake, an elongated one, with his mug covered in blood and not breathing. Golda and Yosko found him right in that unattractive position after they had returned from the store. Again everyone's gaze was directed my way, allowing me to understand that my role as savior had not yet been consummated, and new achievements and new ordeals await me.

"Well, what then," I sighed. "Go there and wait for me, and I'll run over to Mr. Knoflyk. Maybe this time he'll be able to save us.

At Mr. Knoflyk's funeral establishment a red flag was flapping, and on the sign a fresh inscription could be seen: "Red Kharon."¹⁰

"What do you think?" Mr. Knoflyk nodded in the direction of the sign. "That's my *oberih*¹¹ protective charm now. More than one soldier boy has peeked in here and asked in Russian: "Where can I find comrade Kharon?" I always answered in the same way: "Comrade Kharon's at a meeting in Moscow." And I'm left in holy peace. And in a few days some Soviet Jewish guy dragged himself over and asked in Russian: "Isn't that Grisha Kharon, who was the director of the Zhytomyr NKVD?" I nodded. Then he says: "Say 'hello' to him. If you have any problems, I'm in the State Supply Office. I deal with all issues."

"But I've come to you again regarding a very delicate matter," I quieted my voice, and Mr. Knoflyk immediately took me to his office and got ready to listen to me. "Golda Milker has got into a new mess, this time because of her daughter. When a certain NKVD guy came to visit her, Leah decided to treat him with an omelet. She took a frying pan in her hands and just as she intended to put it on the stove, the NKVD guy got a burning desire to hug her, but he slipped on a spot of cooking oil and cracked his head on the side of the frying pan. He was so unlucky that now he's lying belly up, and his spirit is wandering somewhere over Vysoky Zamok.¹²

"Uf!" Mr. Knoflyk wagged his head. "Now that's a mess! We have to bury him properly. And you're incredibly lucky, because at the moment I have a really comfortable coffin – a deep

10 Kharon is the Ukrainian and Russian word for Charon/Kharon, the Greek ferryman of Hades.

11 The *oberih* in the Ukrainian folkloric tradition is usually a handmade charm made of straw, dried flowers, and other items from nature that is placed in the house to protect the hearth from evil.

12 Vysoky Zamok (meaning "high castle") is the highest point in Lviv, a wooded mountain peak overlooking the city that is a popular spot for local Lvivians and visitors to the city. It once had a castle on top of it in the 13th century.

and wide one. We prepared it for his Grace, who was at his deathbed, and was really obese, so fat, that he wouldn't fit through this door. But he changed his mind about dying and he's kicking, and wolfing down honey nut pastries with marzipan. And the coffin is just sitting there. You know what we'll do? We'll put your guest on the bottom, and on top – Mrs. Topolska. I'd guess he wouldn't mind if he has to lie under a lassie?"

"Of course not! He was quite a guy on the make. He couldn't pass up a single skirt."

"Well, that's super. You just bring him here to me."

"Wait a minute, will Mrs. Topolska's family have a problem with this?"

"What family? She doesn't have a family. She was a single lassie, a spinster, but she had a lot of foresight and didn't forget to set aside money for her funeral. In her will she wrote: "I want to lie comfortably, with lots of room and on a soft bed." All three requests will be honored. But tell me: was that guy of yours in a military uniform?"

"Sure, and with a pistol too."

"Then you have to get a suit for him. Over here in a box is Mr. Tsepa's beautiful suit. When they put it on him, it burst at the seams in the back, and the family decided to buy him another one, though I tried to convince them that for Mr. Tsepa it played no role, because no one in this world now will see his back. But they, do you know what they answered me: and how about in the other world? And I shut my trap. So take it,- and he shoved the package in my hands, but still didn't let go of it because the thought came to him that it would be worth putting makeup on our guest – what if along the way I meet one of his buddies, so Mr. Knoflyk also gave me a red beard, a gray hairpiece, and a box with paints for his kisser.

What can I tell you! The deceased looked better now than he did in life. His former high-cheekboned snout, covered in blood, having become lamblike, suited the image of an old uncle, calmed-down and satisfied with his former life; the black suit suited him, perfectly tailored, and a white rose stuck out of his breast pocket. His black glasses completed the picture, and when "unc" found himself in the wheelbarrow that Yosko and I were pushing straight ahead as we were whistling, all the passersby politely nodded their heads, smiled, and some even took off their hats because "unc" looked like he was alive, and it would be a sin not to give a greeting to such a pleasant type. Even Mr. Knoflyk admired him and smacked his lips with satisfaction. He helped us pull out the corpse from the wheelbarrow and put it

in the coffin. Nearby Mrs. Topolska was waiting for her turn on a table. She had some meat on her and was dressed in a dark-blue dress with white lace. One could see that she had prepared it especially for such a solemn moment. Her wax-like fingers were holding a small icon, and her dry, strongly pursed lips resembled ones that had never been kissed. Just as I thought about this when suddenly all our hairs, except Mr. Bouchek's, stood on end, and Mr. Knoflyk clutched at his heart, because our "unc" suddenly came alive and sat up in the coffin. He held onto the sides with his hands and surprisingly looked around everywhere, without comprehending where he had ended up. Then he felt over his face, took off his glasses, looked all around one more time, and muttered:

"Where the heck am I?"

Exchanging glances with Yosko I had already begun looking all over for some kind of good cudgel to send off "unc" back in the very same direction, in which his sinful soul was moving, but somehow the old devil had been turned back, so as to give us even more grief, but Mr. Knoflyk stopped me:

"Wait," and then turned to address "unc": "We found you unconscious on the street. Do you remember who you are and where you live?"

The NKVD guy shook his head and began to search through his pockets, though there was nothing in them.

"Did I have documents on me?" He asked in Russian.

"No," we answered simultaneously. "There wasn't anything. Maybe you got away from the hospital.

"From which hospital?"

"We've got a hospital where they keep people like you who've lost their memory."

"No, I don't remember anything. What's happened – have I died?" He asked in Russian.

Here Mr. Knoflyk delightfully rubbed his hands together and dialed the number of the Kulpark Mental Hospital and informed them that they should come and pick up a crazy guy who had certainly must have scampered off from them.

"We'll come for him right away," they whispered to us.

"Can I lie down a bit more?" The "deceased" asked in Russian and again lay down in the coffin, crossing his arms over his chest. That is how the hospital attendants, who had come from the loony bin, found him. Mr. Knoflyk told them that we picked up this man when he was unconscious, thinking he was dead, but he came to life and now had lost his memory. The doctors bent over the coffin and nodded their heads:

"We know him. That's the dummy Hilko. He escaped from us about five years ago. Well then, get up," they started to make whooping sounds at him.

The NKVD guy sat up again and, dumbstruck, passed his eyes over those present:

"Wha-a-at's my name?" He asked in Russian.

"Don't play dumb, Hilko, 'cause I'll stick you with a needle right now that'll make you remember the time your granny was a young maiden," one of the attendants said. With those words they lifted him up out of the coffin, grabbed him under his arms, quickly dressed him in a straight jacket, and dragged him to a car without any windows. The NKVD guy screamed out something indistinct, but no one was paying attention to him at that point.

"Aha," Mr. Knoflyk concluded. "Our Mrs. Topolska has lost her boyfriend. As in life she was never underneath a guy, and so in death she won't lie on top of him."

