

THE SNOWBALL

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The wallet in my pocket holds my passport, work-pass, and a few society membership cards showing paid-up dues—yet I, myself, am only a phantom, a transitory corporeal image. I really shouldn't be walking along this snow-covered pavement, or breathing this pungent, crystalline air. Even the most deprived of the deprived, devoid of all life's blessings, locked forever in prison, has more rights than I. Immeasurably more.

So I keep thinking ... though I'm not always quite sure of it. I'm too well acquainted with the world around me, too used to it, to be really sure. The tree branches are puffed with hoarfrost and look like horns of young deer. The electric and telephone wires are almost invisible against a pallid sky, though they are as thick and white as manilla rope. The TV antennas on the roof of the physics faculty building look frozen in the wan light of oncoming evening. Resembling the masts of a ghostly frigate. The chemistry faculty advertises its presence with the queer smell of elemento-organic ether—I never can decide whether it is pleasant or odious. An ordinary everyday world! And only my memory, twisted into a knot of nervous alarm, squeezes my heart and whispers:

*All are dreams, all chimeras that pass,
As if reflected in a looking-glass—
Days forever spent and gone.*

Yesterday it was still summer, but today it is winter. How many deceptions there are in that word 'yesterday'. No, it wasn't yesterday....

I have no overcoat. To be more exact, it is hanging somewhere in the cloakroom, but the number tag is in a stranger's pocket. Again a deception: 'in a stranger's'. Not a 'stranger's' The simple truth is that we haven't devised the right word for it, not yet. I walk fast so as not to freeze. I'll manage without a coat somehow. I often used to run to the chemistry faculty or to the main building without one.

I stopped short, with a start of fear. Well, that was all I needed. I had almost fallen under the wheels of a huge lorry. The driver leaned out of the cab and some highly original swearing burst into the pure, biting air, along with the pearly steam from his breath. I broke out laughing. Aren't you the fool, though, driver! I'm nothing but a vision. Come on, try again! Your lawyer can get you off. You can't kill someone who doesn't exist.

What nonsense comes into one's head at times. I must try to keep my mind about me, and not let it go woolgathering. I've got to remember I'm a sort of stranger here.

A gaily-dressed line of students come towards me. Careless and proud, they swing along like the Musketeers after a victorious bout with the cardinal's guards. With a bit of a swagger, full of loud laughter and impetuous boasting.

"What did you get, Penguin?" cried a tall fop of a fellow, turning to a short red-head.

"A mere trifle! Only absorption, Langmuir's isotherm, the double electric layer and the bi-structural model of water.... I could do it with one hand tied...."

"They've just taken their physical chemistry exam," I thought to myself, and walked slower.

"Just take a look at what I'm wearing," said the red-head, pulling the collar of a blue-and-white striped shirt out from under his scarf. "No idea how it holds together! I take all my exams in it. Brings me luck! My suit's old, too—I took my school exams in it."

I felt a sort of muted, yearning jealousy.

Here were the red granite steps. The Canadian blue spruce-trees. The stone statue of bald-headed Butlerov, now wearing a rakish snow cap.

From habit, I reached into my pocket for the pass. My heart skipped a beat and fell to my boots: but with exaggerated heartiness I greeted the hall porter, thrust my half-opened pass under her very nose and ran to the lift. Poor thing, I thought. If she had only seen the date on it! — 'Given to bearer on....'

The red signal arrow lit up. One moment and the lift doors would open. I wondered whether it would be better not to go up to the third floor. What if I met HIM and somebody saw us together? I went cold all over at the very

thought.

As for going home, that was also out. My parents would never live through it. They must not know anything about it. But to HIM, if I really did meet him, I'd have to spill it all out at once.

I even laughed when I thought of HIM. Humour, probably, is in direct proportion to how unusual and unnatural a situation is. And to think that such a change had happened in an instant! In any case, subjectively, it was an instant. But objectively? How much time had really passed since the moment when I pulled the black cover off, at my thesis defence?

* * *

My theoretical premise aroused no particular opposition, not from anybody. My chief, naturally, gave it a brilliant testimonial, while my official opponents confined themselves only to the odd detail.

One of them, Professor Prosokhin, took a long time polishing his glasses with a handkerchief, breathing on each lens, and then cleared his throat. Slowly, his voice as squeaky as an un-greased wheel, he muttered something as he bent over his papers. All these people were perfectly indifferent: no matter how many chapters, pages and drawings in the dissertation, no matter how big the bibliography, from foreign works or ours. The Scientific Council had already estimated the work in their minds, and now listened with bored expressions to the scrupulous but tiresome old professor. From time to time, I put in tick marks, jotting down the odd phrase. My answering address was still ahead of me. At last, Professor Prosokhin finished his speech with the sacramental ending:

"However, the drawbacks I've mentioned do not in the least belittle the importance of the work in question; it answers all the demands laid down for a work of this kind, and its author, without a shadow of doubt, deserves to be awarded the degree of Candidate of Physico-Mathematical Science."

Chairman of the Scientific Council Professor Valentinov, tall and handsome, with aluminium-gray hair, gave a dignified cough and inquired: "Will the candidate answer both opponents at once, or separately?"

"At once! Both together!" the cries broke out from the audience hall, because the Scientific Council members were already fed up with the sameness of the procedures of defence.

"Well, in that case," said Valentinov, with the charming smile of a peer receiving the Order of the Garter, "we will call upon our honoured guest, Samson Ivanovich Gogotseridze."

Corresponding Member Gogotseridze flew up on the rostrum like a Djigit mounting his horse. He cast a fierce look round the auditorium and, having intimidated nobody, burst into rapid-fire speech.

"The thorough and painstaking analysis made by our much honoured Professor Sergei Alexandrovich Prosokhin relieves me of the need of making a detailed review of the thesis presented by the respected candidate, Viktor Arkadyevich." (A benevolent nod in my direction.) "So I shall dwell only on several deficiencies in the work. There are but a few, and they are

lost in the mass of positive material presented."

Gogotseridze paused for breath and mopped his red face with a snow-white handkerchief.

"Ye-es. I shan't speak of the work's merits, but only briefly on its deficiencies."

His 'briefly' stretched out for seventeen minutes. I had already begun getting a bit nervous, but my chief gave me a barely noticeable wink, and I cooled down. After enumerating all the deficiencies, Gogotseridze emptied a glass of mineral water and pronounced the traditional conclusion that, apart from this and that, the thesis answered the demands required and the candidate deserved his scientific degree.

I rose from my seat to make my answering address. As nobody had defeated me, and the particular details my opponents had not liked were far from vital ones, I decided against a rude or tactless answer. For five minutes I thanked all those who had helped me in my work. This was practically the most important thing. But God help me, should I forget anybody! Then I humbled myself before my opponents, promising to take all their remarks into consideration during my subsequent work and, in general, to be guided by their valuable advice.

My chief kept nodding in time with my every word. Everything was going fine.

Then Valentinov called on the listeners to take part. But nobody was in a hurry to speak. Unwillingly, as if in duty bound, one of the Council members rose, mumbled a word or two, and resumed his seat. Somebody else spoke for five minutes on abstract topics and said that young scientists—such as I—were much needed and that the work was even above the level of a Candidate's thesis.

And suddenly I heard the question I had long awaited—put by a young girl I did not know.

"I followed very attentively that part of Viktor Arkadyevich's report where he gives the theoretical grounds for the possibility of moving against the vector of time. I even underlined this paragraph in the synopsis of the thesis. I'm very eager to know about the fundamental test-trials made to obtain this effect."

Just the question I needed! The chief and I had anticipated it and, as far back as a month ago, had prepared the perfect answer. About our having the time machine in readiness, he wouldn't permit me even to breathe a word. It could make trouble in defending the thesis. Everybody might get worked up and start throwing questions—what it was, how it worked. I had even had difficulty persuading the chief to let the time machine be moved into the council hall and disguised under a black cover. Well, just in case....

When the girl gave her question, the chief smiled and, nodding toward the cover, put his finger to his lips. I winked at him: Was I my own enemy, after all?

I had risen to answer the questions and to make a brilliant display of my erudition. After making a few general remarks, I thanked the inquirers and passed over to answering their questions. But, in reality, this last was the

only serious question that deserved an answer.

And then I looked into the girl's eyes. Dark honey they were, with golden sparks—attentive and serious. Sir Lancelot leaped on his horse. Don Quixote levelled his spear at the arms of the windmill.

I don't know how it happened, but I went over to the time machine, pulled off the cover and spoke in a muffled voice: "Here it is!"

Silence blanketed the hall. I tried not to look at the chief. My fit of impulsiveness petered out, and I realized what a foolish thing I had done. But it was impossible to back out now. And, as if urged to self-destruction, I moved into the attack.

"The capacity of this experimental apparatus is still very limited. Therefore, I can transfer myself into the past by only a few months. I shall do it now. When I disappear, I would ask everybody to keep his seat. And even more, not in any case to stand on the spot where the time machine is set up.... I shall soon return."

The audience held their breath. And I went to the control panel and switched on the apparatus. As if in a half-dream, I pulled the crystal hoop down across my forehead, took off my jacket, rolled up my shirt-sleeves and attached the copper contacts to my arms. Then I pushed the button. The last thing I saw was Professor Valentinov's open mouth, and a notebook he held, the one with a carved leather cover which he had bought in South America.

* * *

The lecture hall was cold and gloomy. I took off the hoop, set the limb at zero, and turned off the apparatus. Then I looked around. Fairy-like frosty leaves had grown on the walls. They shone with an opalescent gleam. Dull specks of light had settled on the empty benches. The high ceiling was drowned in darkness. I went to the doors and pulled at them. They were locked. What rotten luck! It might spoil everything. Useless to make a racket, even risky. All the rooms were locked up at night. Should I wait till morning? But would they wait for me—those I'd left behind ... there in the future? And I wondered: What time was it, anyway? Somewhere above the blackboard there should be a clock. It seemed to me I could make out the pale gleam of its glass face. I tried to remember where the light switch was. How odd! How many times had I been here, in the daytime and at night, yet I'd never paid any attention to where the light switch was. I walked over to the wall and, keeping close to it, began moving along the perimeter of the whole room with outstretched hands. Finally I touched it. Right beside the doors. How was it I hadn't figured that out earlier?

I turned on the light. The clock showed twenty-seven minutes past four. Four hours remained to lecture time, if I hadn't accidentally fallen into a Sunday. And I decided to wait. I turned off the light and went to the back of the room to stretch out on the last bench. When the charwoman entered in the morning, she wouldn't notice me. How many times I had slept here before!

But everything had been different then. Some lecturer would be muttering

something from the rostrum. Students surrounding me—some taking down lecture notes, others idling away the time playing some game or other, the rest whispering. And I had slept.

Now I squirmed around on the hard bench. What a nuisance! Why in the world had I taken off my jacket! I was wearing only a nylon shirt with rolled-up sleeves. I rolled them down and, hugging myself for warmth, tried to fall asleep. But my thoughts chased sleep away. As soon as the room was unlocked, I would have to slip unnoticed into the lab. Before my classmates came and, most important of all—him! I would try to change into the old ski-suit that I usually wore when I did experiments. It hung in my locker beside my white lab-coat. A good thing my wallet with all my money hadn't been in the jacket, but in my trousers. What would happen in the morning.... Honestly, what would happen in the morning?

It all turned out as I had imagined. Crawling under the desks, I managed to fool short-sighted old Katya, the char, who threw wet sawdust over the floor and kept muttering to herself. And I slipped out into the corridor. I wasn't worried about the time machine. Our students had been taught not to put a finger on anything, and the scientific workers would not think of fiddling with the control panel. Especially if a warning notice had been hung on the casing.

After changing, I rushed headlong down the stairs. I decided to run over to the chemistry faculty building. Not many knew me there, and it would be easier to give my position some thought. Running along the second-floor corridor, I glanced into the half-open door of the reading-room. Nobody was there. I moved quietly across the carpet to the window-sill, lined with pots of cactuses and agave plants.

From beyond the window came the clamour of an awakening city. The chimneys were shrouded in smoke; bridges bore speeding trolley-buses; people were hurrying to work. And this was all reality, the same objective reality as I—in the flesh, as it were.

All the desks in the reading-room showed signs of occupation. Teachers and post-graduates had left behind their briefcases, folders, notebooks, writing-paper, ball-point pens. In a few minutes, they would come in and take up their interrupted work. I noticed an object on one of the professors' tables which drew my sharp attention. It was Professor Valentinov's notebook. The yellow leather covers were decorated with painted hieroglyphs of the ancient Aztecs. The professor wrote down in this book everything he had to do the next day. I quickly leafed through the filled pages. The last entry was made on December 11. "That means today is the eleventh, and the entry was made yesterday," I decided, because on this sheet of the diary were the following notations:

1. Call Nik. Andr. about Astangova.
2. 11.30 to 13.20—lecture for 3rd yr. students.
3. 2.00 p.m.—Scientific Council.
4. 5.00 p.m.—post-graduates. Yes, today was December 11. More than seven months back....

And then a wonderful idea hit me. I looked round, to see if anybody stood

near the doors, and quickly put the notebook in my pocket. Then I ran out.

* * *

At the chemistry faculty the turmoil of exams was going full blast. Everybody was anxious, in a hurry, nervous. Down the stairs scrambled laughing crowds of those who had been fortunate that day. Even the women desk-porters were caught up in the general excitement.

"Everybody who studied well succeeds in passing exams," said one of them, gesturing with a ball of wool. "There's my girl over there ... she piles notebooks under her pillow at night, and hides a 5-kopeck piece in her slipper for luck. But if the young 'un doesn't study, no such trick as that will help...."

The lift doors opened with a hiss, and for the life of me I couldn't decide what to do. The doors slid to, noisily. The buzzer rang and the lift rose at the summons of someone above, leaving me still standing there. I decided to wait till just before work started, and telephone him. Otherwise he would leave for the chemistry faculty or somewhere else.

The money slipped with a clink into the steel throat of the public telephone. A girl's coquettish voice sang out: "Hell-o?"

"May I speak to Viktor Arkadyevich, please?" I said, moistening dry lips with my tongue. The receiver was put down on the glass-topped desk— I heard the familiar click. I knew, of course, where they always laid the receiver. There was silence. Only now and then came the muffled tones of distant conversation. But then I heard footsteps approaching. A man's walk—long, sure strides. I felt good to know HE walked like that. And there was also an off-beat, high-heel staccato, not quite in time with the man's steps. I stretched my ears.

"If I didn't know you were here, Viktor Arkadyevich," came Raya's soprano from somewhere far away, as if from another planet, "I'd think you were playing a joke on me. It's your voice to a T!"

"Hello, this is Viktor."

That was a shock! His voice seemed that of a stranger's, and unpleasant to boot. But I remembered how my own voice sounded on a tape-recorder, and calmed down. It is hard to recognize your own voice. Takes a long time to get used to it.

"Viktor Arkadyevich," I said into the mouthpiece, trying to take deep, quiet breaths, "don't interrupt me, and try to make your replies brief. I've a very important thing going on, and nobody must know about it except you and me. You catch?"

"No. Who's talking?"

"Viktor Arkadyevich, are you working on an experiment concerning the reversal of the microsystem against the vector of time?" I had staked my all.

"Who's talking?"

"Look, get hold of yourself. We've got to meet: then you'll understand everything. I'll explain it all to you...."

Probably he took me for a blackmailer, or a spy.

"Why don't you want to give your name?" Undisguised hostility rang in his voice.

"You don't know me. Absolutely, you don't! I found out accidentally about your plans.... Quite accidentally. I'm working on the same thing you are. But ... I've got into trouble. I've been unlucky, and need your help."

The breathing quickened at the end of the line. I exulted, mentally. It seemed he was taking the bait. Incidentally, my moves had been dead certain. You see, I knew him as well as ... I knew myself.

"You don't find all this a bit odd?" he asked, finally.

"Not a bit. It's perfectly normal. I'm only asking you to meet me. Nothing more. If you were a girl, it would seem natural: a boy asks, and she plays hard to get.... But you're no girl, and you can't refuse me. After all's said and done, you haven't the right to!"

"Why do you think I haven't?"

I had not expected such a stupid question, not from him.

"Why do I think so?" I parried for time. "Well, maybe because: 'I knew her, As my soul I know. Await her, As for love to show.'"

"All right! Let's meet, wherever you wish.... How shall we know each other?"

"Don't worry about that! We'd know each other in any crowd, the very first second."

I stopped short. Mustn't overdo it. He wouldn't like it. But it was too late.

"What do you mean by that?" And again unbelief shaded his voice.

*"A remembered evening, blue and starry,
No Lethe grants, no exits shape.
Like a slave he is, in a sandstone quarry,
Whose ball and chain bars all escape."*

I cited the lines of a poem he had written when still a student, which he had never shown anybody.

Silence on the line.

"And so, where arid what time?" he finally asked.

What a chap! And I'd never known he was such a brick.... He was very excited now, I knew that, but how calm his voice was! Really collected!

"You're free this evening?" I asked.

"Only till seven."

Interesting. Where was he going? Probably, something important had come up. Otherwise he would have thrown it over to meet me. His curiosity was stretched like a taut bowstring.

"What if we meet right after work? At your home.... Mum's going out somewhere?"

I had wanted to say 'your mum', but I couldn't, and simply said 'Mum'.

"Come at five. I hope you know where I live?"

"Yes, I know."

"Somehow, I thought you did. So ... at five?"

"Righto, at five. Thanks. So-long. You're a real brick!"

* * *

Neither of us—he nor I—had yet got over it. I stood looking at my flat, staring at every object.

Everything here interested me. The wallpaper, the picture I had drawn, my hooks, and the piece of sculpture a friend had made for me. I stared at my mother's sewing machine with the crocheted doily on top, as if it were some kind of miracle. And at the television set where my old ginger tomcat was sprawled out with his fluffy tail falling down over the screen. I found almost nothing was changed. Was it, perhaps, because I'd left it only yesterday? But that 'yesterday'— why, it was seven months older than the day I found myself in now!

Nothing affected me as much as my flat did. Was it, perhaps, because HE was in it? He? I kept calling him 'he' as if he were another person, a different individual than myself.... Incidentally, he really was another person, a different individual. Which of us, then, was more real, more in his right place here? He or I?

"I'm afraid we're both thinking exactly the same thing," he said, managing to force a smile.

"More than likely.... By the way, why are we so formal? After all, we.... At any rate, we are closer than even identical twins."

"God yes, so we are! I can't seem to find words.... On the tip of my tongue, and can't get them out! Wait a minute.... You and I.... We, old fellow, are one and the same person under the conditions of a shift in time. Yet, simultaneously, we can exist only separately! Do you catch the point?"

"You're telling that to me? The egg trying to teach the chicken?"

"There you are! See? Who's boasting now?"

Imps of mischief sparked in his eyes. "I was the one who got the idea of transmigrating a person into the past, and all you did was perfect it and carry it out."

I fell into a chair, amazed at his cheek. But, on thinking it over, I found his view made a certain amount of sense. More than that, I even thought of a way to turn his own weapon against him. He wanted to add something, but I interrupted.

"Hold on, old man! Hold on! That's not fair...." I would bat it right back at him, take it right out of his own mouth! "Wait, let's shoot in turns. I faced your fire, lieutenant—let's say the bullet nicked my epaulet. Now it's my turn. Don't you realize, fathead, that the idea's not yours? No, indeed. And no protest! I accepted your objection without argument. The idea wasn't mine, I agree. But it wasn't yours, either! It came into the head of a person a year younger than you, and nineteen months younger than I. So, you eat crow? One nothing, in my favour! You're dead, lieutenant. Take into your care, O Lord, his soul: he was a good man."

And he laughed. Wasn't he a brick, though? I was simply crazy about him. Oh, if we could always stay like this—the two of us. I'd always dreamed of having a brother. But he wasn't my brother....

"Old age hasn't taken the edge off you yet. You're pretty sharp!" He clapped me on the shoulder. "Marvellous idea! There'd be no harm in working it out further.... Where did you leave the machine?"

"In the assembly hall, at the faculty. So what?"

"I was figuring it with an angle of inversion of four-hundredths of a second. How did you do it?"

"I, or you, rather, let a mistake slip into the calculations. You weren't absolutely exact when you ascertained the indeterminate values—infinite quantity by infinite quantity."

"How weren't they exact? They obey L'opital's law!..."

"It doesn't apply here. I used Fershtman's method. And got an angle of 52 thousandths."

"But it makes no difference.... Hm, a machine for one person. Too bad!"

"What's too bad?"

"If we could have both gone back a year in time.... We could have got there the very moment the idea came to me, that is, to him—more exactly, to all three of us. How do you like that?"

"Fine! A splendid idea. Then there would have been three of us! The three musketeers!"

"Even better: God the son, God the father, and God the holy ghost! Three in one—a trinity!"

"Say, it wouldn't be bad working with you!" I looked avidly into his face, trying to catch the irreversible changes time had wrought in me.

"Good to work with you, too," he said, and I was aware of a note of tenderness in his voice. He was also looking hard at me. Naturally! He would be just like me seven months from now. Who wouldn't be interested?

We were silent. I had not thought I would be so shaken by this encounter. I'd imagined it would be quite different. I had seen myself as a shining ambassador from the future, wise and brilliant, a sort of royal figure almost glowing with phosphorescence. I would teach him, give advice, I had thought, and 'he' would be open-mouthed and admiring, just about faint from excitement. But instead, the beggar was like this! And it was only natural, only natural. As always, reality turns out to be both utterly prosaic and utterly unexpected. She was a wise one, old Mother Nature, really wise! What were our hypotheses to her?

"Look, old fellow, maybe we'll have a bite to eat?" He was the first to break the silence.

"That's the first bit of common sense I've heard from you. What's for dinner today? Perhaps 'epulae epularum'?"

"Bean soup, seasoned with fried onions and thickened with browned flour.... Cutlets, rare—I cook them in hot butter, three minutes each side. I hope your tastes haven't changed?"

He fell silent, apparently remembering.

My mouth watered. I was devilishly hungry.

"Oh, yes," he continued, "there's stewed fruit, too; and what's more, I bought a jar of Sea Crest sea-food."

"Mussels from the briny deep? And the sauce?"

"Marinated in dill sauce," he answered, a bit surprised.

"Did you ever buy them before?"

"No. Today was the first time. I bought them at the university ... wanted to try them. But what of it?"

"Oh, nothing."

I remembered the day I had first bought a jar and taken it home. Like now, Mum had gone out somewhere and I had eaten alone. In a hurry to meet my date, I opened the jar holding it in one hand instead of putting it on the table, prying off the lid with a knife. The knife slipped, the jar fell, and the white dill sauce went all over my trousers.

I slid a glance at his—they were like new, the knife-pleat perfect. My own, after these seven months, looked a little worn; and on the left knee you could make out a faint stain... from the sauce.

"Never mind, in a second his will have the same," I thought to myself, maliciously. "It looks like he's going to open the jar like I did."

And then it occurred to me that there might be some sense in interfering personally with this very human story, ameliorating the results to some extent. But, on second thoughts, I decided it really wasn't worth it. It would have been a highly irresponsible act, only good for a science-fiction story. Never interfere with the process of events if you don't know what the results will be. So, let pretty boy get a spot on his trousers!

"Oh! Dog damn it!" he whispered, catching the opened jar on his knees while a delicate aroma rose from the marinated crabs and mussels.

I think I swore when it happened to me, using exactly the same words.

The cat opened his left eye, but not finding any dog, shut it again into its slanted slot.

Just the same, we tried the crabs. He ate his

share before the soup, and I with my vegetables after finishing off the chop. Then we lay back on his day-bed, sprawling across the width of it without taking off our shoes. To enjoy a smoke. Our habits were the same. Looked as if I hadn't changed.

With deep enjoyment, I blew smoke rings. We were silent. I noticed he stole a look at his watch several times.

"You said you were free only till seven. Where are you off to? If it isn't a secret, that is."

"A secret? From you?"

"You don't make allowances for the memory. It's human to forget. Forgetting is the same as not knowing. However, if it's a secret..."

"Nonsense! I have a date with Irene, Ira. On Kaluzhskaya Square, by the telephone booths."

"With Ira?"

"Don't you even know her? That would be original.... Well, how's she doing, there ... in the future ... she lost her looks? Or have you...."

Behind his attempt to joke, you could sense a nervous tension. That was what helped me to recall, at last, what day this had been. And for me, the numerical abstraction—December eleventh—was filled with the sad reflection of a sore spot in my heart.

* * *

That evening I had been waiting for Ira by the telephone booths. People went in and came out. They phoned each other for dates, they laughed, talked, cajoled. Pierced by the street lights, the steam from their breath was reddish and iridescent. Unwinking, the clock face stared at me like a great amber eye. She was three minutes late. The minute hand would stop for a time without moving, then suddenly jerked ahead. And something in my heart jumped with it, like an echo.

I saw her from a distance as she crossed the street. She was hurrying. Tiny snow-blizzards circled round her fur boots. Joyous sparkles of light gleamed in her eyes. But I didn't trust them. She was as cold as the dust of frost on her fox collar. Tall, and very beautiful.

She was so remote, so remote.

Yet this was what urged me to tell her all that was in my heart. I sensed that she did not love me, but I did not want to believe it. I chased the thought away. And I hurried things. She liked me, she was not bored in my company. I should have kept it that way, played it cool. Joke about love and not show my feelings. If I had been colder, more off-hand, who knows what might have come of it. She was used to having the fellows after her, and went from one victory to another. Interested, but not awakened.

And she did not want to rule, but to feel the strange power of testing a tender submissiveness to another's calm and confident strength.

I realized all this, but could do nothing about it. I was in love, and so—defenceless. She could not help but conquer. It was an unequal battle.

That day was my Waterloo. I told her all. What answer could she give me? What could she offer? Friendship?

She realized that I was not one of those who bow before a victor and become a slave. Perhaps she would have liked to keep me near her in the role of rejected lover, but she knew nothing would come of it.

She did not offer me friendship, did not say that she 'didn't know' her feelings toward me, or that she had to 'think it over'. She was a brick.

The challenge thrown, she had to answer. Perhaps she was sorry that I had hurried things. I did not know. She only said, "No." And added, "I'll always be glad to see you, always."

I realized we were through. I never went to see her any more, and did not telephone. Nor did she.

We parted at the Crimean Bridge.

* * *

And now, after about an hour, he was going to go through all this. All of it! Beginning with her being three minutes late up to her 'No' at the Crimean Bridge. And I was so sorry for him, I was hurt to tears. Only now did I feel that he was I but an I who was not yet aware of, did not understand the mistake, had not yet committed it. I wanted so much to save him from the

pain ahead, to warn him, arm him with my experience. It was a very complex feeling.

And more, I wanted to meet her very much, meet the former her, as yet unaware of our ruined date. This time I would win the battle. Everything would be absolutely different. She would be the one tormented with jealousy and doubt, and would accuse me of being callous. I could make her fall in love.

Though, perhaps, it seemed so only to me. Perhaps, it was not in my power to change anything?

"I'm going in your place!" I said aloud.

"What for?" His face darkened, became cold.

"You don't even know what's ahead of you today! You don't know her, nor yourself either. Let me go! Just for today.... Then I'll disappear. You'll be grateful to me. Let it all be different for you. Not as it was with me!"

"No. I don't want to know how it was with you."

"But you don't know. You know nothing. This date today can never be remedied.... I know, and I'll tell you."

"No, don't!"

"You haven't understood me. Okay, I won't go in your place. But you must act differently, not like I did then. Best not to go at all. Wait until she rings you herself. She will phone."

"I don't want to listen! Understand? I don't want to!"

"But why? I only want to open your eyes. Not for my sake, for yours."

I looked into his eyes, and realized that he knew and understood it all, with the insight of a loving heart, as I once had. And nothing could change him, as it had not changed me. He would go on his date and open his heart. I realized that. Once I had carried on an imaginary dialogue like this, with myself. Now he would talk with me about it instead. What difference did it make?

From the very cradle, man wants to do everything himself. To do things and to experiment, make mistakes and get up on his feet again, rubbing his bruises. And that was good.

"I suppose it would be best if I went back now?"

"Yes, I suppose so.... Shall we meet again?"

I laughed.

"You will always be inside me. But I ... will always be slipping away from you. Your life ... is a chase after me. We move in different time phases."

"Shall I vanish when you return to your time? "

"No, we'll simply become one during an imperceptible instant called the present. It is a point sliding along a straight line that runs from the past to the future. Shall we say good-bye?"

"I'll see you off. As far as the university."

"Okay."

* * *

I did not let go of his hand, and looked long into his eyes. Our past would

help us discover ourselves. That was very important.

"And so ... good-bye?" I said.

"So-long," he smiled. "You'll always come back to me. We'll certainly meet when you fall in love again."

"So-long," I agreed.

I was sad. I bent over, scooping up the soft, crumbly snow with my hands, and squeezing it hard with my fingers into a solid, icy ball. I was going to throw it at him. But for some reason, my eyes went dim, and I only waved my hand.

He was quietly smiling.

I turned and pulled open the massive door.

* * *

I opened my eyes and touched the crystal hoop. I looked round the auditorium. Here, nothing had changed! Professor Valentinov had not even managed to close his mouth. There was fright and excitement in the girl's amber eyes. My chief was pale and angry. It was like a silent scene of expectancy on the stage. Now the door would open, and somebody in a helmet would announce: "The Inspector-General is coming!"

"We-ll?" Valentinov finally got out.

I stared at him blankly.

"We are waiting ... if you don't mind," he said.

"Beg pardon, I don't quite understand." I was still off balance, and really did not realize what he wanted of me.

"You promised us you would disappear," he prompted, and smiled. His wrinkles smoothed out. He had got hold of himself, and once more was the peerless knight wearing the Order of the Garter.

"But didn't I... Wasn't I absent from the hall for a few hours?"

"No, not yet!" It was the girl, apparently, who let out the cry. And in this cry was such anguish. Anguish for me, and for something else....

"So, I didn't vanish?"

"No," smiled the peer. And the crow's feet around his eyes said: "Well, he must have his joke. Hoh, heh, the green cub."

"I didn't vanish?" I took off the hoop and pulled the knife-switch.

Then I went over to Valentinov and offered him the yellow notebook with the Aztec ornamentation. In the professor's hands there was an exact copy.

"Compare the two books, professor. They should be absolutely the same. With just one difference: the last entry in the book I am holding was made on December 11 of last year. And now it's July!" I pointed at the window, where the fluffy poplar seeds flew against a deep, blue sky.

For some reason, everybody looked out the window, just as if they suddenly had doubts whether it really was July, and not December.

"Besides that, look here!" I took the hard, frozen snowball from my pocket and exuberantly hurled it against the linoleum blackboard, covered from top to bottom with formulas.

The snowball landed square in the middle and stuck there.