

MIKHAIL ARMALINSKY

PROSTITUTION DIVINE.
SHORT STORIES, MOVIE
SCRIPT AND ESSAY

Mikhail Armalinsky

Prostitution Divine. Short stories, movie script and essay

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Аннотация

В книгу включены переводы на английский язык произведений Михаила Армалинского. В неё вошли рассказы, киносценарий и эссе “Спасительница”. Большинство оригиналов было опубликовано в книге “Чтоб знали!”, изданной в московском издательством Ладомир в 2002 году.

Mikhail Armalinsky is the leader of modern Russian erotica. He resides in the US since 1977. He is the publisher of Pushkin's Secret Journal 1836-1837 translated in 25 countries and the author of over 20 books of prose and poetry.

The main theme in Armalinsky's work is the comprehensive study of human sexual relationships. Working outside of any literary school, following no one and producing no followers, Mikhail Armalinsky has tirelessly, over the course of half a century, promoted in the

consciousness of his readers his themes, views, and convictions, which for him have the force of commandments.

The main idea of the essay is that the legalization of prostitution must be based on a return of its divine, sacred character, so that prostitution will be considered the most honorable profession, the one closest to God, the holiest.

Most of works in this book are translated from Armalinsky's collection of works in Russian **Чтоб знали!** available at litres.ru

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Михаил Армалинский
Prostitution Divine. Short
stories, movie script and essay

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The Deal¹²

to Brian Kvasnik

It was a town in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by endless fields of undistinguished grain. My only reason for going there was to conduct a business deal with a man who had the distinction of owning nearly the entire town. His name was Rail, a veritable lord of the manor who counted among his possessions two banks, impressive acres of land, and several large warehouses of nonferrous metals.

Though I had known this man more than a year, we had never met face to face; all our business had taken place over the phone or through the mail. Our last phone conversation had degenerated into an argument over his refusal to accept an order of high quality aluminum cast at my factory. This considerable order had just been loaded for shipping when Rail phoned with the news that it wouldn't pay him to accept such a large amount of metal at that time. When I insisted that he accept his merchandise, he refused, I lost my temper, and threatened to drive the load to his home and dump the entire shipment on his doorstep.

¹ *The Deal* was published in "Confrontation" Exile and the Writer issue, a literary journal of Long Island University Nos. 27–28, 1984, p. 119–126. It was edited by Anita Nordstrom.

² Unless noted all translations from Russian are made by Mikhail Armalinsky.

Rail hung up at that point, and we hadn't spoken for nearly a month.

Now he had unexpectedly called to say he was prepared to accept and pay for a substantial part of the order. In the same breath, he invited me to come to his estate and inspect a scrapped wreck of a bomber plane he had acquired.

I found the prospect of further dealings with Rail abhorrent, yet I hadn't the strength to reject business for the sake of catering to personal feelings. Even as I completed the arrangements for our meeting, I consoled myself with the thought that I would sell my factory as soon as it was large enough to provide me with enough money to last the rest of my life. The problem was, I could never seem to decide what exactly I meant by "large enough", as no matter how big it grew, it always looked small to me, as a son does to his mother.

It was evening when I arrived in town and checked into a hotel located in the standard, artificially cheerful downtown area. I had just signed the register when the clerk handed me Rail's message to call him. His eagerness irritated me, and I decided to take a long, hot bath before making that phone call.

I was undressing when the phone rang. It was Rail.

"You've arrived? How are you? Did you get my message? When you're ready, I'll take you out to dinner and show you the town."

Rail saved me the problem of answering him in a civil tone by not bothering to wait for my replies. We agreed to meet in an

hour's time in the lobby.

I got there on time, but it was obvious from his pacing that Rail had been waiting for me. He was around fifty-five, with a bald spot that made his hair grow in a horseshoe shape around his head – a configuration which had apparently brought him luck. From the moment he realized who I was, a smile never left his face. It also never quite reached his eyes. Still, he managed to radiate an impression boundless joy, slapping my shoulder in a simulation of friendship of which I was thoroughly sick.

Shaking my hand, he noticed my ring with a small, but very pure diamond.

“Oh, what a marvelous ring,” he gasped in delight, holding my hand in his and bringing it up to his eye level to examine the ring more closely. I carefully freed my hand from his grasping fingers.

As we drove down the main street, my introduction to the town was reduced to a litany of the following phrase spoken glowingly by Rail:

“That’s my bank, beautiful building, isn’t it?”

“I build those apartment buildings two years ago, and their value’s gone up five times since then!”

“You can buy the finest clothing sold in New York in that store. My policy is that the word ‘provincial’ has no place in consumer goods.

The Chinese restaurant in which we ate also belonged to him, and the food was excellent. He had brought the chef from Hong Kong and found him a local beauty to marry so that he wouldn’t

be homesick. During the dinner I noticed Rail's gaze on my ring several times, and as we were finishing dessert, he expressed his delight in it once more. I saw that the bargaining was about to begin.

"How much do you want for that ring?" The possessive gleam in his eye revealed the sparkle of my stone.

As I did not want to part with the ring – it held too many associations for me – I named a sum about quintuple its real value.

Rail smiled politely and dropped the subject, but I sensed that he hadn't given up.

With dinner finally over, Rail next drove me to his mansion. It was cavernous affair in which he had lived alone for many years, his wife having divorced him long ago. With no real family, Rail had still managed to turn his castle into a home of sorts: a home for the stuffed carcasses and soft pelts of a collection of animals which, had they still lived, would have stocked a small zoo. Rail had even decorated one room entirely in animal skins. Dark brown and black furs covered the floor, light tans and beiges were on the walls, and snowy white ones quilted the ceiling.

From somewhere in his furred abundance, Rail produced an enormous red fox. He held it out to me, its bushy tail dangling lifelessly, and declared, "Let's trade for your ring."

I took the fox from him, enjoying the feel of the soft fur as my fingers tightened around the inanimate throat. I hefted it for a moment, then handed the fox back: No. Rail acquiesced meekly,

and the fox disappeared.

Though I had no interest in a trade with Rail, I was becoming curious to see how high a price he would put on his desire.

We moved to another room, this one dominated by the huge form of a bald eagle, wings outstretched in a frozen moment of flight. The wingspan was easily two yards. Rail was quick to note my undisguised admiration, and he casually added, "All right, I'll throw in the eagle, too."

I shook my head no, still gazing at the magnificent bird, and began unconsciously rubbing the ring with my hand.

Rail's watchful eyes caught this motion, and he remarked benignly, "Don't worry, I'll get it by peaceful means."

"Is that a threat of military action?" I asked in surprise.

"No, no, you misunderstand me," Rail assured me.

We continued to tour Rail's house, but he no longer mentioned anything about a trade. His restraint did not fool me. In his own discreet way, Rail was keeping careful note of the effect of his various treasures on me, and I knew plainly that he hadn't given up.

The next day, Rail took me to the enormous warehouse where he had stored the remains of the plane. Its stark metal framework, so skeletal in appearance, reminded me vaguely of last night's silent menagerie. I was glad I had only to finish the business at hand and go home.

As I looked over the plane, I noticed a whispered conference between Rail and a workman. Rail looked at my car; the

workman nodded and walked away.

Rail waited patiently as I completed my inspection of the wreck. When I had seen enough, we went to Rail's office and spent the better part of an hour coming to terms on the price. It was only then, when we were shaking hands on the completed deal, that I thought I saw the possessive gleam of the night before in Rail's eye. When I looked again, though, he was only smiling at me. Had I imagined it? Or had the sparkle of my diamond somehow been reflected in his eyes?

It was time to leave. We walked back to the warehouse where I'd parked my car. I was expecting a final assault on my ring, but Rail remained strangely aloof. We stood for awhile by the car, exchanging the last few required pleasantries and a farewell handshake. I reached out to open my car door and abruptly recoiled without opening it. There, nonchalantly perched on my front seat, was a luminous white human skeleton, its skull turned toward the driver, the left hand hanging familiarly on the back of the driver's seat.

I looked in dismay at my car, then at Rail, then back at the car. Rail was enjoying my predicament. Patting me reassuringly on the back he said, "Nothing to be frightened of – she's completely harmless." He smiled and continued, "I thought you might get lonely on your long trip, so I took the liberty of arranging a traveling companion."

I continued to stare in disbelief. The intrusion of the skeleton had imbued my familiar auto with the appeal of a coffin.

“Man or woman?” I asked, while trying to think of some way to evict this mass of bones from my front seat.

“A woman, of course,” he answered. “Look at her – see how wide the pelvis is?”

I stared at this fleshless apparition, trying to imagine a human female somehow draped around those bones.

“I’m glad it’s a woman,” I said at last. “I like them thin.”

The attempt at humor came hard. What I really wanted to say was, All right, you’ve had your fun, now get this damned thing out of my car! I didn’t want Rail to know how badly he had startled me, though, and I became determined to play his little charade to the end.

I opened the door and got in. I paused a beat before putting the key in the ignition, certain that at any moment Rail would blessedly call to one of his workmen to remove the skeleton from my car. Rail, however, did nothing but bend down to my window and cheerfully wave me goodbye. There was nothing left for me to do but start the car, turn around, and drive off.

I was driving through the warehouse exit when I saw the workman Rail had spoken to earlier, the one who had, I was certain, taken care of the skeleton. He wore jeans, one leg dark blue, the other light blue. He waved to me without smiling, and I watched him for a moment in the rearview mirror before I turned onto the road.

At least the isn’t carrying a scythe, I thought darkly to myself, though that omission did nothing to relieve my uneasiness.

The road was in poor repair, and my otherwise silent partner signaled her presence by jangling constantly in response to every bump and jolt. She listed violently towards me on a particularly nasty pothole, and I instinctively put my hand out to catch her. I struck the cold hard bone of her empty hips. It was then that I noticed the connective tissues of the joints had all been replaced by thin wires, neatly joining one bone to another. The intricacy of the finger joints particularly caught my eye.

Cars that passed me slowed down while everyone inside, waved, and tried through gestures to ask, "Well, what's it like driving around with a skeleton?" I smiled tolerantly and indicated 'OK' with the familiar thumb to forefinger circle. They invariably laughed in response, and sped away.

My companion had no need of food, but I was getting hungry. I pulled up to a roadside restaurant just as an elderly couple was leaving. When they recognized what was seated beside me they reeled. I saw the fear in their eyes as they hurried away, crossing themselves. I locked the car, just in case.

Seated in the restaurant, I heard the brief wail of a police siren outside, which I forgot about as the waitress returned with my order.

I felt almost refreshed as I left the restaurant, only to walk squarely into the flashing glare of police car lights. My car was surrounded by a small milling crowd, through which two darkly uniformed police officers showed like grease spots. I noticed the elderly couple, describing something to the officers in an agitated

manner.

The police were interested in my driver's license and in my companion. I told them it was a gift from Rail. Though they recognized the name, they still wanted confirmation, and I willingly supplied them with Rail's phone number. Luck was with me; Rail was still in his office and confirmed that the skeleton was his property, on loan to me. The intervention of the police had at least supplied me with one bit of information on my boney 'friend' – she was no gift.

The police said goodbye pleasantly enough, though they left me with a stern warning not to frighten any more people. I promised to go straight home and lock her in the bedroom in case, heaven forbid, she should try to escape. The laughter of the crowd was more a sigh of relief, and they scattered quickly, leaving me alone once more with my companion.

"Well, Mary," I remarked conversationally as we pulled away from the restaurant, "We reminded the temporary living of death, didn't we?" The sudden jolt of a pothole jogged her lower jaw open, and for an instant I thought she would answer me. The instant passed, and I noticed the two rows of small, white even teeth. I reflected on this, and mused that my traveling companion had ended her life young, and if young, why not beautiful as well?

I didn't arrive home until late in the evening. I welcomed the cover of darkness and carried the skeleton, bride-like, into the house through the connecting garage. I brought her to the guest room, where I tried unsuccessfully to stand her on her feet.

She collapsed with alarming speed, and I caught her at the last moment before she crashed to the floor. I looked around, and finally decided the only thing to do was lay her out on the bed.

That night I had many dreams; dreaming rarely happens with me. I awoke with a headache.

My throat was dry, and when I got up to go to the kitchen, the room swayed dizzily. I downed a glass of water and headed back for my bedroom, but felt suddenly so weak that I stumbled into the nearest room. It was the guest room. About to fall, I sank onto the bed next to the skeleton and shut my eyes. My heart was pounding as if I had been running. I dimly felt the touch of a cool shinbone of my side.

The telephone rang abominably loud. I reached it with difficulty on the third ring, and it took me a full minute to recognize the voice of my secretary, asking questions about my trip and wanting to know when I'd be back at the office. I told her I had a fever and wouldn't be in that day.

"Would you like me to come over and take care of you?" she asked in a tone of voice which reminded me we were lovers.

"No," I answered after a moment's hesitation, "I'm fine. Just take care of your business."

"I'll come by after work then, all right?"

"If you want. But I already have one here."

"What do you mean?" she asked anxiously.

"You'll see when you get here," I said.

"Are you trying to tell me you have a woman there?"

“Well...” I thought a moment. “Let’s say a former one.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” she answered irritably.

“I told you, you’ll see when you get here. Excuse me now, I’m very tired,” I said, and hung up. I fell quickly into a deep sleep.

I was awakened by a scream. It was my secretary, Mary, standing over the bed, shocked and confused. I forced a smile as she gestured vaguely towards the skeleton on the bed and asked, “What’s this?” in a trembling voice. “What time is it?” I finally asked.

“One o’clock. Afternoon.” she answered, looking at her watch.

“I thought you were planning to come after work.”

“What is this?” she asked again.

“Not what,” I corrected her, “Who. This is also Mary.”

“Where did you get it,” she demanded.

“A gift.” I was tired of explaining. “Make me some strong tea, please.”

Her mood changed instantly to solicitous concern. She placed her hand on my brow.

“Keep it there,” I said, closing my eyes. Then I asked her again to make some tea. She gave one last backward glance as she left the bedroom.

My head swam sickeningly each time I tried to open my eyes, but I could keep them shut only for a moment, then the spinning sensation forced me to open them.

The live Mary returned with steaming tea on a tray.

The tea was excellent, strong and hot, with a perfect touch of lemon she had thought to add. I felt my strength returning, and as I drank, I reflected that one of the things I liked about Mary was the way she would ask a question, and, not getting an immediate answer, would stop asking and simply wait for me to tell her myself.

When I had finished my tea, I told her of my boney companion. Mary listened indifferently, then asked, “What are you going to do with her now?”

“Love,” I said with a laugh.

“Well, it’s a good choice,” she said slowly. “I may as well tell you now – I’m moving to Florida.”

I decided to keep discipline. “I wish you luck. Is it John?”

John was her beloved, with whom she had lived four yours and then left to come here, get a job with me, and unselfishly become my mistress. I had nothing against this, as my affairs with my employees did not affect our working relationship.

“Yes, it’s John,” she answered.

“Give him my regards.” I turned to face the skeleton. “You’ll have to excuse me now, I must get back to my bed.”

“All right.” She got up to leave.

“How long will you be working?” I asked as she was almost out the door.

“I can stay two weeks, but I’d rather leave sooner.”

“You can leave in a week.”

She thanked me and left. I listened to her footsteps, and the

final soft closing of the front door. I stared for quite a while into Mary's skull. She didn't stir, and her teeth without lips to cover them seemed bared in a constant smile. She was so close to my eyes that her contours blurred and undulated. I put my hand on her ribcage, and the weight of it made them creak.

I withdrew my hand, afraid of breaking her, and smiled to myself at the thought of the damage a simple embrace might do.

I pressed my forehead against her cold, dry collarbone. 'You won't go away to any John,' I thought sleepily. 'The men who slept with you have no power now... you've no memory of them, no flesh. everything you have left belongs to me.' I drifted into the living oblivion of sleep, where I remained until late in the evening. The room was dark when I awoke, and my hand had found its way onto her empty stomach, where it lay pressed into her clumsy backbone. I tucked my hand under the blanket and went back to sleep.

I was awakened in the morning by the birds singing outside my window. The fever was gone. I shook my head to test, and felt no pain. My body surged with joy at being cured. The skeleton still lay at my side, and to my refreshed mind this seemed a little strange. Overcoming the lingering weakness in my body, I got up and went to the bathroom where I sat in the tub for my shower, still unable to stay on my feet. In spite of my weak condition, I knew I had to go to the office. My responsibilities there rapidly turned into an unbearable weight around my neck if I let them to go, even for a day.

I remembered Mary's announcement that she was quitting my company – and my life. Both departures saddened me, though sadness had become a familiar feeling to me because of all the separations I had endured in my life. Mary was an exceptional secretary and mistress, and she had brought definite convenience to my self-contained life.

At the office I sorted through the stacks of mail and phone messages, wrote replies, and generally did everything I could to make up for lost time. I felt weak, but in response to polite or obsequious questions about my health, I responded with the same standard "I'm fine."

I went home in the afternoon, locking my eyes briefly with Mary on my way out. She was much cooler toward me now that she had made her decision to leave, but she didn't try to avoid me.

The house seemed unusually big when I got home. It was big, of course, but in the past it had always secretly pleased me to think of all space I wasn't using. Space that was always there, waiting for me. Today that space reminded me only of another space – the empty space defined by the thin bones of a skeleton. That space awaited me as well.

I entered the bedroom. She lay on the bed, with her legs of bone spread wide apart, with her eternally grinning skull. I envisioned her with muscle and flesh and blood around the white framework, building a woman upon it in my mind, and then mentally tearing her down, undressing her to this final, fragile diagram.

“You know, I’m as lonely as your bones are for their meat,” I said, and the sound of my voice echoed hollowly from the walls. I studied the bedspread through her breasts would have been, slowly letting my fingers fall through the empty slots between her ribs. I then took my hand and placed it inside her ribcage, my fingers reaching and closing around the spot where I knew her heart should have been. But there was no heart, and my fist closed only on empty air.

Still, her heartlessness was no disappointment. It was her silence and openness I felt drawn towards. With her I was calm – as I was with everyone I didn’t love. I sat down next to her on the bed and stroked her skull, its fine smooth coldness contrasted nicely with the other more porous bones of her body. A coldness and hardness that had known life and death. ‘You’ll listen to me,’ I thought, ‘you’ll be with me, experienced, knowing... maybe I’ll even come to love you for your natural devotion.’

The sound of the doorbell intruded on the silence. I don’t like uninvited guests, and I couldn’t think of anyone I would be happy to see. I flung the door open irritably. Before me stood a man in jeans and a jacket.

“Good evening, excuse me for the intrusion,” he said in a gentle voice which seemed incongruous coming from this rough face that seemed oddly familiar. “The boss sent me for the skeleton.”

It was then that I noticed his jeans were made with two differently colored legs, and I recognized the workman from

Rail's estate.

I was stunned. I stared at him stupidly for a moment, then asked, "What did you say?"

"The Boss sent me for the skeleton," he repeated, more slowly this time.

"I thought it was a gift," I said wanly.

He shrugged his shoulders inside the loose fitting jacket and fixed me with a steady gaze.

At a loss, I invited him into the living room, where he followed me after removing his shoes. I offered him a drink, but he refused. I grabbed a bottle and poured something into a glass, gulping it down quickly.

"Where is it? Let me get it," he said.

"Wait a minute. I want to buy it. Her. How much does Rail want?"

A strangely familiar look flickered in the workman's eyes. "The Boss say's it's not for sale. But he'll trade."

"For what?"

"The ring."

Relief flooded my body as if a wave had washed me from head to toe. With weak fingers I slipped the ring from my hand and dropped it into the workman's outstretched palm. His fingers closed around the ring, making a tight fist.

"Wait," I said, stopping him at the door. I almost smiled at the look of surprise on his face.

"Give me a receipt."

Hero³

They decided to call the baby Hero. Such an unusual name showed the despairing ambition of the parents, who used the birth of a son as a generally accepted pretext for giving up on their own lives and transferring all of their unfulfilled hope to the child. When Hero was old enough to understand the meaning of his name, he began to feel that people constantly expected him to provide some justification of this meaning. And since he provided no justification, the name elicited laughter at first and then derision.

At school, for instance, he tried to distinguish himself in gymnastics classes, but neither strength nor agility was in his movements, and after the last in a sequence of failed exercises the instructor's voice often thundered: "You there, Hero!" In an attempt to elude ridicule, Hero called himself Harold among his peers. But they soon found out somehow or other that he was not Harold but Hero.

The older he grew the more hopelessly convinced he became that he could not fulfill the obligations imposed on him by his name; and by the time he entered technical college to become an engineer he was a stoop-shouldered young man with a stomach ulcer. Although he considered himself a writer and wrote poetry

³ *Hero* was published in "Mid-American Review", a literary journal of Bowling Green State University, Volume VI, Number 2, 1986, p. 87-96.

instead of taking notes at lectures, here again he was deficient in that heroism which in art is called “talent.” In his love life also something essential was lacking, and since women guessing this, paid him no particular attention, he developed in himself what is known as a lofty attitude, which allowed him to avoid taking any sort of initiative.

One day the customary exchange of amorous experience was taking place in Hero’s peer group, and each boy discussed in detail the sensations felt and exhibited by his partners in love. Following the end of one lurid story, everyone turned to Hero, since it was his turn to talk. With a disdainful expression on his face Hero recited the following:

“Better drink gallons of gin and favoris
then loll with you tongue on a stinking clitoris.”

Under cover of the general laughter, someone countered this poetic extemporization with remark, “We know that you couldn’t perform either of these heroic feats.” And in fact Hero never drank hard liquor, for fear of irritation his ulcer.

He very much enjoyed walking in solitude through the city, admiring unusual buildings and marveling at the interesting thoughts that came into his head. However, when he returned and sat down at the table to write them down, Hero would suddenly discover that all his thoughts were forgotten beyond recall, and he began to think that perhaps he had only imagined them.

On finishing technical college, he married for love. His sweetheart agreed to marry him reluctantly. She had never had a proposal, and her mother was nudging her onto the main traveled road of matrimony – it's high time, she said – and, for that matter, the girl herself was tired of waiting and afraid to let an opportunity slip by. And Hero was obviously in love.

And so they were married. At the wedding the new bride already held the reins of government and handed out orders to Hero; but still, these were uttered in a soft and tender voice and sounded to the guests, who found everything touching, like billing and cooing. The bride had had Hero grow out his beard for the wedding ceremony – she had always liked a strong willed chin, and Hero had no chin at all. At the wife's behest they danced, something which Hero never permitted himself, due to his lack of any sense of rhythm. He shifted from leg to leg, a weak, good natured smile shone through his thick beard, and his wife looked at his happy eyes and thought cheerfully: "You know, he's really not so bad."

After a year a son was born to them, and the wife bestowed on him all her feelings of affection, something which Hero was unable to evoke in her. Thus only contemptuous indifference remained for his portion. Hero also began to feel indifference, discovering with amazement that his love had irretrievably fled. In his student days, while pontificating on love, he had asserted that one must sever relations immediately upon the vanishing of love, and hurl oneself right away into the search for a new one.

However, now, looking at his child, toward whom he also felt no love and in whom he saw only a new lifelong responsibility, Hero discovered reality for himself, and likewise his own helplessness in it.

Once after a particularly noisy fight with his wife he went away to his mother's and spent the night there. The thought of divorce awoke horror in him, since he saw in divorce not freedom but the necessity for the actions and efforts required for this procedure. Besides, he had a dread of solitude, to which he had simply grown unaccustomed. Hence after work he returned home as if nothing had happened. His wife cursed him out, which even had become a melancholy norm in their relationship, and Hero pretended to ignore her. He comforted himself with the idea that he gave in to her on trifles, but in serious matters held his own. In the depths of his soul he knew this for a lie, and so felt bitter, cast out into the street to wander around with his son.

He remembered the time just after his wedding, when the long kisses of his wife had awakened him mornings. At that time she had been subject to morning passion, and she used to wake up earlier than Hero. He would feel her hungry mouth, redolent of recently applied toothpaste. For his part, he tried not to open his mouth and only stuck his tongue out between clenched teeth, while she traveled over him, he still half asleep. After a couple of months she gave up brushing her teeth before starting to kiss him in the morning, and he no longer bothered to hide his smell; and so by the end of the first year, they had completely forgotten

how to be ashamed in front of each other and were able to release gas audibly in bed, which became a place of slumber rather than of love.

Gradually Hero exhausted all interest in his wife's body, and she no longer woke earlier than he in the mornings. Often, with burning cold in his heart, he would look at her wan sleeping face with imperfectly washed-off makeup on its eyes and was horrified at the strangeness of this person. During sleep his wife would lay her hand on the pillow beside her head; and her thumbnail, which she chewed constantly, nauseated him. During her menstrual period, which in his wife lasted a depressingly long time, Hero always felt a burning shame among friends or in a public place – it seemed to him that everyone was aware of the stench emanation from his wife, so strong that she could not hide it by any means, or, what was likelier, didn't even try.

When a little drunk in the company of friends, Hero's wife liked to allude transparently to his sexual indifference toward her. The friends would understand and titter, and he would condescendingly smile as if the conversation were about something else. At such moments he had a great desire to take a lover, but somehow the occasion never arose, and he forgot again about his desires.

Hero often put the question to himself of whether or not his wife was deceiving him, and after analyzing her behavior he could arrive at the desired answer – “No.” This question raised itself again and again, and finally Hero stopped trying to find the

answer, and merely regarded the question with a sidelong look, until his energy for questioning ran dry out of indifference to the identity of her lover.

The only thing which shakily bound him to his wife was his son, but he had grown into a malicious beast, and Hero was unable to approach him.

Hero considered himself a talented poet, but he had no time for work in which he might show off his powers. His everyday business obligations amounted to mere hackwork, in which he was either unable or unwilling to find a place for creativity. Goaded by the constant reproaches of his wife concerning his meager salary, from time to time he pretended that he was looking for an additional job. But whenever any such opportunity materialized, he did his best to ensure that it remained unused.

Hero painstakingly conserved his free time. He partitioned it into time for books, time for movies, time for television. He was always glad of a chance to talk about something he had seen or read, but in his speech there were neither color nor subtlety; and only from the fact that he usually noticed individual felicitous details would it have been possible to guess that unexpressed depths lay in his soul. Hero's fondest dream was to shoot film; before his eyes stood technicians, who jolted the audience with his and their significance and well-wrought work. Perhaps it goes without saying that Hero made not the slightest effort to realize his dream.

Thus life went on.

Even in childhood he had experienced immense internal revulsion at waking up in the morning when the alarm clock rang or his mother shook him by the shoulder. It was necessary to turn on the radio loudly, shout in his ear, douse him with cold water, to get him out of bed. When he was a little older he trained himself to overcome his hostility toward forced waking and to get up right away when the alarm clock started to ring, but still he continued to think about this hostility. His thinking arrived, for the time being, at no conclusions, but the effort of thinking used up all the energy which was roused every morning after the hated awakening. He ironically referred to himself as the "Sleeping Ugly," remembering the time when the morning kissed of his wife had made his awakening happy. Even on his days off Hero did not manage to wake up of his own accord – either his son would be making noise, or his wife would be clattering around in the kitchen, or else she could simply wake him, irritatingly reminding him that he had to do some household chore or other.

He experienced the greatest satisfaction in life from waking up naturally, in the first moments, when there is no memory yet, and everything in front of you is unrecognizable, and only after several seconds you remember where you are, and who you are, and what sort of life you have. This sensation was especially beautiful in summer, when tree branches moved by the wind would peep in at the window, and the sun's rays, shining through the leaves, were transmuted on the wall into muddy wavering shadows which mingled with the botanical drawings of the old

wallpaper. Behind the window birds could be heard talking and vying with one another. Sometimes a loud dung beetle would fly in, and would fly around the room in a frenzy until, finally, it flew out the window, leaving behind it the silence of awakening. Thoughts at such a time were characterized by a great mobility, which more than compensated for their lack of depth. In the body a state of peace and joy fluttered like a flag, as if one were happily returning home after a long journey.

Hero had not experienced this state for a long time and sharply yearned for it every time he found himself unceremoniously awakened by the life which it was his fate to live. And the sharper this yearning became the more Hero thought about its essence.

No other single outrage against human nature is so widespread, and therefore can be perceived as so natural, as awakening by force. Hundreds of millions of people are awakened by the bell of an alarm clock, by a trumpet signal, by a cry or a blow. And sleep – thought Hero – is the quintessence of such spiritual life as is possible in a material world. The body continues to perform the minimum of necessary physiological functions, to remain as an unburned bridge between that world to which the soul is sent, and this world. But the nocturnal travels of the soul, with their unknown but extremely important purpose, are offhandedly interrupted under any plausible pretext.

Daily work, loathed by the majority of people, is considered the most publicly acceptable pretext, and consequently the most natural one for forced awakening. People masochistically set

the alarm for the time allotted to sleep or else ask someone to wake them up. What is more, on awakening they will put their bodies under cold water, set them in motion – in other words, do everything possible to drive out sleep from their bodies. In this way people live as willing slaves, who for their obedience and self-control are called “free.” Thus thinking, Hero dreamed of rebellion.

Sometimes he imagined that by the force of his young life his son would be able to lead him out to some new dimensions of being. And he clumsily tried to establish contact with his son by taking charge of his upbringing. But if Hero refused him something in a threatening voice, the son would run to his mother and get what he wanted either right away or after a tantrum, which would stop the moment he got what he demanded. Throughout the process of his son’s howling, the wife would scream that she would kill him, enumerating dastardly methods, such as “I’ll cut off your head!” – but soon she would relent and kiss him with a passion that had found no better use. If Hero became indignant that his wife was permitting his son what he had just forbidden, his wife would hurl her always copious irritation at him, calling him a “swine,” a “blank,” a “nothing,” or sometimes something altogether different, depending on what seemed to her at a given moment to be the most insulting. The son, clinging to his mother’s skirt, would stare triumphantly at his father. Hero, eyes flashing, walked off into his room with the despairing conviction in his heart that someday he would find

a way out of this situation by some extraordinary method not requiring the strength for divorce and the start of a new life.

One day he was sitting with his son watching television. The son madly loved a series of monster movies, but at the same time he was horribly afraid when the monsters appeared on the screen. So when he watched these movies he demanded that one of the grownups sit beside him and hold his hand. This preserved his feeling of safe reality. Hero sat on an armchair a little behind his son, who was positioned nearer to the television. The movie had just started, and the monsters had not appeared yet. After a few minutes they crawled out into the screen, and the son, without turning his head, stretched out his hand behind him, expecting his father to take it in his own. But Hero unexpectedly had become interested in the movie himself and did not notice his son's extended hand. And then the son, without moving his eyes from the screen, said impatiently, "Take my hand, you swine!" Hero startled and obeyed automatically. After a second he was seized with laughter at this word of his wife's that so cozily settled into his son's head. Then he felt fury and shouted: "How dare you talk to your father like that?" The son said: "Don't bug me, I'm watching TV." Hero repeated his rhetorical question and then he heard the door opening – his wife had come in. The son turned in tears to his mother, and his father's anger ceased to be frightening. After this incident Hero clearly understood that his son was out of his reach and would recede from him further and further each year.

At work, which swallowed a significant chunk of Hero's life, he had no friends. There was nothing for him to discuss with his colleagues, since general topics, which are the basis of conversation, were repulsive to him, and of secret things he did not like to speak with anyone. His job required no effort for its accomplishment and fascinated him with its monotony. After work he would go home and have dinner with his wife and son. The meal, cooked by his wife, was always unpalatable, but he had grown used to this too. During dinner his wife would tell him how her working day had gone, how her boss praised her again, and she could interrupt this story with kisses she lavished on her son. "How I've missed you!" she would exclaim, clasping him to her, and then, in the same breath: "Don't eat with your hands, use your fork – listen to me or I'll kill you this minute!"

Hero no longer paid any attention to this, just as those who live by the sea no longer notice the sound of the waves. The dinner conversation, as a rule, was essentially always the same: Hero's wife would reproach him for his meager salary and momentarily conclude that he was fit for nothing. Angry or worn out, Hero would reply: "Shut up!" get up from the table – which was well-timed, as dinner had ended at that very moment – and hide himself in his room. Earlier he had tried to write, but soon he became more interested in reading, and lately he was unable to tear himself away from the television set. In days gone by he had spoken with contempt of those who watched television for hours every night. But now he convinced himself easily that there

were some really informative programs on television which might replace books. But even when a program was uninteresting he was unable to make himself turn off the television, and watched it until late at night, when sleep glazed his eyes.

It was becoming harder every day for Hero to be awakened by the alarm clock. All the protest he was accumulating against the life that he knew splashed out in anger against this infernal machine. One morning he became so savage that he dashed the alarm clock against the floor. His wife fell on him, curses mingled with her putrid morning breath.

That day, at work, while automatically performing endless calculations, he noticed in himself an unhealed sense of outrage forced awakening. Never before had this been so strong. Gradually his excitement waned, but his thoughts would not turn away from the dream of freedom in waking up. It seemed to Hero that if he could but attain his freedom, he would also become free in all other respects. And really he asked so little: nine hours of sleep, but not timed to a required waking-up time – and thus obliging him to go to sleep at ten in the evening if he needed to get up at seven in the morning – but always at his own disposal at any time of day.

Every morning, each awakening seemed to him a whole new birth into the world. And continuing the analogy between awakening and birth, he imagined premature awakening as akin to premature birth. Nine hours of sleep – nine months of pregnancy. A premature baby – a sleep of seven hours – may

grow up into a healthy child (a day worth living), but only if it is cared for with special love. In the same way the day following a seven-hour sleep might turn out all right, if the two unslept hours were compensated for by love for a woman or for one's work. But if sleep is limited to two or three hours, then awakening after such sleep is like abortion. And there will be no new life for you until you make up this deficit at a later time.

In the course of the day copulation occurs between body and soul, so that conception takes place toward evening. Sleep brings you forth for a new life, and every morning you are born anew, a new person, wiser for the experience of the preceding day – the previous life. Sleep is the mother of whom you are born, and on how she is permitted to bring you forth depends on your life – the life of the next day.

Now Hero waited for days off and holidays with a special feeling, not so that he could sleep late, but so that he could wake up by himself. Voluntary awakening had become something sacred for him; and when his wife rudely shook him awake on one of his Sundays, demanding that he start doing some household chore, he hit her in the face with his full strength. His wife was extremely frightened, since he had never even raised his hand against her before. He had enjoyed cultivating in himself a feeling of tormented pride because he had never hit a woman. Now, however, after the first slap in the face, Hero enjoyed the loss of this burdensome innocence; and for the first time his wife did not begin a quarrel, but, seeing that that her husband did not respond

to the test stone she threw, again went into the same old routine of insults and shrieks, and only voluntary awakening on days off remained inviolate.

Having gained his first victory over the external world, Hero began to think intently of his weekdays. The sweeter his free awakenings on Sundays became, the more humiliating and intolerable became the forced awakening on weekdays. His work seemed to him a sharp implement with the help of which society intruded upon his spiritual life. Only in time of illness did society agree to give a person the freedom to fall asleep and awaken as his soul required – and then only for the mercenary reason that sleep at such time will serve as medicine, and consequently will return the person to the ranks of the able-bodied.

Hero remembered how sometimes he had wanted to wake up at a particular hour. It had been this way on the morning when he had wanted to meet his wife at the airport after her week-long business trip in the second month of their marriage. He had set the alarm for five a. m., but woke up of his own accord at one minute before five. And thus it always happened when his soul made an effort to participate in his physical life. And only a soulless life was making his awakening forced.

In order to justify a disdainful attitude toward sleep, people reduce it to the supposedly elementary repose of the body from righteous labors. But in reality, sleep is the necessary “repose” of the soul from the unbearable materialism of the world. The body – the heart, for example – has demonstrated that it can work

without any repose whatever in the course of its entire life.

How funny would seem the rebellion of a person who did not want to wake up on command and did not respond to efforts to awaken him. But if we suppose that all people might decide to wake up of their own accord, we will have to rebuild the whole system of interrelationships in human society, since society will henceforth be founded on spiritual relations. This means that there will be a sorting of people into those who put their souls onto work which interests them and those whose soul is not in the work which has been foisted on them. Once this last group of people has resolved on voluntary awakening, their souls will not allow their lives to be squandered in work alien to them – the soul will put the body to sleep at the most natural time, the time allotted for this uncongenial work; or the soul will delay its return to the body when hated work demands attention. Then it will be discovered that the great majority of people would not wish to wake up, were no one to awaken them.

This thought stupefied Hero. He suddenly saw sleep as a hopeful refuge from life, which was often so unappealing. But the feeling of protest no sooner arose in him than Hero's brain quickly analyzed and destroyed its power. And the only occasion on which the brain had not managed to attend had been during half-sleep, when he had struck his wife because she had awakened him. "That means that I can find strength in feelings from the realm of sleep, and it means that the domain of sleep is inaccessible to the destructive work of the brain. And if I were

able not to react either to noise or pain during sleep, and to wake only at the wish of my soul – it would be the most serious step of my life,” Hero thought.

When on coming home from work he did not turn on the television, his wife asked tauntingly whether he wasn't sick. Hero gave no answer and went into the bedroom. He undressed, lay down in bed and lay for a long time, mulling over his pleasant resolution, which did not weaken, as his resolutions always did, but only grew stronger.

He heard his wife putting their son to bed. This was a nightly ritual of weeping, threats, storytelling, more weeping and more threats, which occupied no less than an hour. The son demanded a light burning in his room – he was afraid to go to sleep in dark – and he always insisted on having his own way. Hero's wife could not endure the hysterical crying of her son and returned to turn on the light.

“To fall asleep so that not even his screaming could wake me –” thought Hero. His wife came in, undressed and lay down, the air current from her act of lying down carried smell of sweat to him. He lay with his back to her and pretended to be asleep.

“What, sleeping already?” asked his wife, but Hero made no reply. Lately this question exhausted their relations in bed. But now Hero was thinking of only one thing – how to enter into sleep. He heard his wife open the drawer of the night-table, fish out the vibrator and set it to her favorite speed. The drone of the vibrator sank Hero into his longed-for sleep.

When he woke up he saw the face of a man bending over him. The man was dressed in a business suit, and a stethoscope hung around his neck. At his side appeared the frightened face of Hero's wife.

"How do you feel?" asked the man, and Hero understood that he was a doctor but still could not understand why he was there.

The doctor shook Hero by shoulder and repeated his question.

"Great," replied Hero and sat up in bed, "but what exactly is the matter?"

The doctor was about to open his mouth, but the wife interrupted him:

"I couldn't wake you up, you were sleeping like the dead."

"For how long?" asked Hero.

"It's three in the afternoon," replied the doctor.

Hero smiled triumphantly. His dream was coming true – he was becoming invulnerable.

"What are you smiling about?" The worry on his wife's face was quickly replaced by irritation. "You've already overslept for work. I shook you, poured water on you, pinched you – nothing helped."

"Daddy, are you alive?" asked son, opening the door to the bedroom half way.

"Ask your mother," said Hero.

Meanwhile the doctor had finished taking his pulse. Then he began to examine Hero's eyes, listened to his heart and finally announced thoughtfully that he would like to examine him more

thoroughly in the hospital. In conclusion he assured them that cases of lethargic sleep were extremely rare, and that such a deep sleep as Hero's might be accounted for by nervous exhaustion. The doctor left with ill-concealed bewilderment on his face.

But the joy of victory bubbled up in Hero's heart. He felt an unprecedented strength in himself. "This is why deep sleep is called heroic in fairy tales," thought Hero. He was impatient to test once again the strength of his soul, which had so successfully withstood the pressure of an alien world. The doctor's visit had given him the status of an invalid, despite the diagnosis of complete health, so Hero decided not to get out of bed. He took down a book, but was unable to read and laid it down beside him. He looked at the window, in which an ancient tree was swaying.

"Are you going to lie around all day?" asked his wife as she entered the room. "I missed work today too, because of you."

"I want to sleep," said Hero, looking at the tree as before.

"You'll sleep long enough when you're dead," replied his wife. She was going to add something else, but their son screamed, and the wife ran out of the room.

He looked at the tree and thought about how indifferent he was to people and how indifferent people were to him. Here they are born, pass through all the stages of life, and this seems so natural to you, and other people's feelings do not touch you. And when they die, you simply transfer your gaze to others, still young, and life continues uninterruptedly for the observer. But at some point you understand that you are not an observer but a participant, and

this means that death will come for you, too, and somebody else will just as easily transfer his gaze from you to someone else, And no one will understand your dying feelings until he dies himself, but then it will already be too late for him, so much the more so for you. Thus, by lack of understanding of one another, people are protected from premature knowledge of death.

Hero started so drift off into sleep, and relished his soft but overpowering sensation. He fell asleep in the early evening and heard neither the sound of the television, nor his son's sobbing, nor his wife's screaming. He felt only the growing depth of the peace which was filling him.

In the morning Hero's wife discovered that his body was cold. The doctor was called out to confirm death. The wife, frightened and distraught, wept without sobbing and was tormented by the blasphemous feeling of relief which she recognized among her sensations of bitterness, horror and helplessness. Her mother arrived and after a fleeting glance at her unloved son-in-law took her grandson away from her. When, in answer to the boy's question "what happened to Daddy," Hero's mother-in-law-replied, "He died," the boy flew to the telephone.

"Who are you calling?" asked the mother-in-law in surprise.

"I want to say goodbye to Daddy," the son explained.

1984

Translated from Russian by Amy Babich

Muscular Death

His huge muscles were attractive to women. Aware of this, Nar always tensed himself as he walked, so his muscles would bulge out noticeably. He never let his arms dangle but instead bent them slightly at the elbows, which thrust forward the musculature of his chest. It also had the effect of raising his shoulders, which, though sloping by nature, looked broad when overgrown with muscles. Constant tensing had become such a habit with him that even in his sleep he occasionally played with his biceps.

At seventeen he moved from a small town to a big city, started college and devoted himself to the study of science with the thoroughness and doggedness of the provincial. But he poured no less energy into athletics. Having once seen a photograph of a famous body builder, Nar was fired with the dream of such a body. Life in the big city supported this dream, and he started working out almost every day. Nar acquired magazines and other body-building literature, and before long the walls of his room were decorated with photographs, not of women's but of men's bodies, consisting of hypertrophied clots of muscle, for the cultivation of which had garnered international prizes.

The more his body developed muscles, the more deeply besotted with love for it Nar grew. He especially valued his body for its power to get attention from women. True, this was not

always successful. Or rather, practically all women paid some sort of attention to him, but he did not always receive that warm attention that slides so easily into tenderness. Some girls looked sardonically at his jacket bulging with muscles and inquired: “You pad yourself there or something?”

“It’s all real – feel for yourself,” Nar replied seriously.

“Maybe some other time,” said the girls, preferring to take his word for it.

At one of his first student parties a certain curious young woman asked him to let her see his muscles for herself. She led Nar into another room, which was empty, and asked him to strip to the waist. While he was neatly folding his jacket and shirt on a chair, the young woman managed to undress completely, dropping her clothing to the floor, so that when he turned to face her a sight met his eyes that he beheld for the first time in his life.

“What a big chest you have, like a woman’s,” she exclaimed, and kissed him on the nipple. The muscle tensed by reflex, and his chest jumped forward. The girl burst out laughing and kissed him on the lips.

Although his mind was trying to dissociate itself and give the body freedom, Nar managed to connect two circumstances: the girl’s incipient interest in his athletic physique and the pleasure that he had just received. And subsequently Nar observed that the sexual experiments to which he subjected his body followed an unvarying pattern: a woman, enraptured by his body, would offer hers. Once he had discovered this law of nature, Nar tried

to make it work for him as often as possible.

Summers he tried to spend on the beach, even when the days were overcast. He strolled along the shore conversing with young women. Sometimes he played volleyball, but Nar's movements, hampered by his abundance of muscles, were not fast enough, with the result that some of the slimmer players – whom Nar privately called “runners” – played a livelier game than he did. This being the case, once he had struck a few blows to show off the musculature motion, he left the game circle as if disappointed in the skill of the other players.

In winter, Nar looking impressively manly, went out to rub himself with snow and yet to avoid giving anyone the impression that he was cold. He also walked to the river, to a swimming hole used by winter swimmers. With a stony face he plunged through the large hole in the ice and shoved ice floes out of his way. A crowd of spectators, from whom Nar drew ecstatic looks, gathered around him. It was no wonder, therefore, that in winter Nar habitually went around with a cold.

To his supreme regret, however, he was obliged to wear clothing much of the time, and since clothing hid his musculature, he tried to delegate to his clothing that function of getting attention which his body, had it been nude, would have performed. For this reason he selected colors that ran from bright green to orange, and his outfits were festooned with darts, half belts, miniature pockets, borders and similar accouterments. On seeing Nar in his current finery, one of his friends said to him,

“You’d be better off going naked, it’d be more decent.”

But whenever anyone told him to his face that he was tastelessly dressed, Nar demanded logical proofs of this assertion, which of course, no one was able to produce, and he felt that he had won the argument.

Occasionally, as he scrutinized his body, Nar was reminded that he would have to die someday, and that all the labors invested in producing such gorgeous muscles would be lost without a trace, together with the muscles themselves. Recoiling in horror from this thought, Nar stuffed it into a dark corner of his consciousness and went on working out. When he walked down the street past display windows, he looked at his reflection and rejoiced that he was still young and had before him a long life with such a handsome and powerful body.

Once he happened to see an advertisement for lessons at a mime studio. Nar enrolled that very day and happily bought himself the mime’s uniform of black tights and leotard. During his first lesson he bent his arm too suddenly and tore his right sleeve along the seam. But one of the female students offered to mend it. When a few days later they wound up in bed, the girl communicated to him her fears of becoming pregnant, and flatly refused to take seriously the contraceptive that he was beginning to slip on with clumsy fingers. As a compromise the girl turned her back to him. At first Nar was shocked, as associations to homosexuality rose to his mind, but then desire got the upper hand and he rid himself of it by accepting her terms. Nar felt

that the girl expected some kind of compromise from him, so she might receive that share of sensation which was due her by the laws of nature; but, now that he found himself in a state of contentment, he no longer wanted to think about her, and he fell to admiring his abdominal muscles. The girl gazed with tenderness at Nar's body, which had served her as an art object, and whose purely aesthetic charm would suffice for just one more rendezvous.

When he had completed about a month's study of the art of mime, Nar decided to give his friends a demonstration of his progress. He was not too lazy to prepare properly: he changed into his black leotard and announced the title of his act: "Bird of Prey." Whatever he may have been attempting to portray – bending from the waist and jutting his arms out behind him – more than anything else it resembled an exercise for the oblique muscles of the spine. Several of the spectators expressed the opinion that if this was a bird it was certainly not predatory, but more likely domestic, of the genus "turkey." And indeed, a certain resemblance to a bird could be observed in the way he strutted, but this came naturally to him without need of any lessons. Of this his gratified audience informed him plainly and without mincing words. After this debut Nar discontinued his lessons at the mime studio.

Nar's ever-growing love for his own body continually provoked in his acquaintances a desire to tease him, and Nar accepted this stoically. But many people were simply exasperated

by him, and when, as sometimes happened, they spoke to him rudely, he tried to “clear up any misunderstanding.” Instead of replying in kind or ceasing to associate with the man who had thus insulted him, he would cry out in honest astonishment: “Look, what have I done to you?” – at which they simply gave up on him and walked away.

On occasions when a fight was brewing from an already insupportable mass of insult, Nar would puff out his muscles and glint his eyes in the direction of the offender, by which means he would manage to frighten his adversary and induce him to make conciliatory gestures, which Nar always accepted eagerly.

Once, as he was walking along the street with a woman, a passerby shoved him. Nar grabbed him by the sleeve and demanded an apology. The man obediently paused, as if trying to decide whether or not to apologize, and then suddenly struck Nar in the face. Nar lost consciousness for a second, but remained in his feet. Returning to himself, he saw that the fellow was running, and rapidly getting away. Nar took off after him, but quickly realized that he would never catch him – Nar was a slow runner, and this character had already vanished from view. Since there was no blood, and the pain passed quickly, Nar gave up and returned to the girl, who was crying with fright. That evening the girl was extremely affectionate, and Nar loudly vituperated the “scoundrel” as he attentively studied his undamaged face in the tiny mirror of her compact.

When he went to a gym to “pump iron” Nar customarily

brought along a liter of milk in a cardboard carton; he would place it beside the weight he was pressing and drink it up in the course of his workout. He had read in some magazine that by doing that he would sharply accelerate the growth of his muscles. On one of his workout days a women's volleyball team was practicing in the gym, and in order to retrieve their flying ball the women frequently ran out to where Nar was devotedly lifting weights. One of them asked him, as she grabbed the ball, why he was drinking milk. Nar explained, and she giggled stupidly. Not long after this the volleyball team took a break, and they settled down not far from Nar. He tried to ignore them, since he felt certain that a large portion of the team was watching him. While pressing his weight, he started drinking his milk in very small, slow swallows, in the manner prescribed in the magazine. At the same time he turned, showing the women, as if by chance, the various sides of his body. The one who had run out after the ball asked him, from where she sat, how long he had been involved in body building. Nar answered her, raising his voice so that she, and the rest, would be able to hear it.

“And is it true that body builders shave their bodies?”

“Yes, you have to for competitions,” Nar confirmed, remembering that it was time for him to shave his chest and armpits.

“And how much milk do you drink?” asked a curious girl.

“One liter per workout,” Nar answered readily, and in order to prolong the conversation added, as he took his next swallow:

“But, you know, the milk that they sell these days is just like water.”

Suddenly all the girls were rolling with laughter. It developed that, when Nar had left the room to use the toilet, the girls had drunk up almost all the milk and replaced it with water, and Nar, on his return, had continued to drink it, suspecting nothing. When the girls explained the joke to him, Nar indulgently joined their laughter, although in his soul he felt uncomfortable – it was the first time that so many women had laughed at him, and it had occurred precisely when he was fully armed – that is, when his body was nearly nude.

This incident contributed to his accumulating dissatisfaction with women. In general, what Nar liked best in a relationship was the beginning, which consisted of admiration for his body. But liaisons soon wearied Nar, because he had to indulge the women and force himself to admire them for some reason. Besides, his workouts and his studies took a lot of energy out of Nar; and the more sharply his muscles protruded and the deeper became his knowledge in the sciences, the more rarely the female body sparked any interest in him. For this reason he began to feel as an importunate reproach to himself the eternal readiness of the female body for intercourse, which some women had had the audacity to point out to him. The greatest pleasure he received was when a woman gave him a massage, since while she was doing this she was perforce admiring his body. But during an embrace it always seemed to him that it was all one to the

woman whether he or another man held her; and the tighter the embrace, the less she could see of his body. Also, Nar was afraid that prolonged movement of the hips, which women so greedily demanded from him, would lead to disproportionate growth of the muscles encircling his waist, and so spoil the silhouette of his figure. He therefore preferred to have the woman sit on top of him, so that his body would be visible to her at all times, and besides in this position it was hardly necessary for him to move at all.

He saw one particular girl for about a year and even considered the possibility of marriage. But one day she mentioned that she had once suffered a uterine infection, and Nar pricked up his ears and began questioning her in detail: how long did it last, had she had to go to the hospital.

“What are you so upset about?” she said in amazement. “This was all a long time ago.”

“But I read that a woman can get sterile from that,” explained Nar. Sometimes he liked to imagine his future son gazing with admiration at his strong father. And the more he thought about it the more he realized that he didn’t want to throw away his life so lightly – if she couldn’t get pregnant it would be better to split up and break off the whole relationship. But he continued to see her; she very conveniently lived next door.

Her birthday arrived, and Nar gave her a very handsome card. He presented her with it in an envelope with such solemn ceremony, and he showered her with so many elaborate

felicitations, that the girl was forced to cut him short. All day Nar tried to find out from her why she was in such a bad mood. And when he phoned her the next day she told him that she didn't want to see him anymore.

“Why?” Nar asked with sincere astonishment. “Maybe I did something wrong – come on, tell me.”

But she had no desire to explain anything and asked that he not phone her in the future. At first he resolved to go to her and demand an explanation, but then it occurred to him that this would be beneath his dignity, and he sat down to write a circumstantial letter, in which he proved with five pages of logic how important it was for them to remain together. “And if this doesn't convince her I don't intend to degrade myself further,” he said to himself, foreseeing quite clearly that she would not reply.

The most expensive item in Nar's budget was food. He had to maintain hefty muscles – and they required a rich and abundant diet. His stomach accepted chopped meat grudgingly, and insistently demanded brisket, filet, and other choice cuts of meat. If a bowl of fruit happened to sit in front of him he was incapable of stopping until he had eaten all of it. So he behaved at friends' houses with feigned casualness, as if everyone in the room possessed an appetite equal to his own. On being invited to eat he agreed at once, but always added: “Only a very little bit for me, please.” While waiting for the soup he helped himself to the largest piece of bread, which he thoroughly smeared with a thick layer of butter, until the surface of the bread

was completely invisible. Then he covered the butter with thick chunks of meat or sausage – cheese he despised as low calorie. After this Nar graciously accepted a bowl of soup, consented to a second helping, thoroughly cleaned his plate after seconds and was ready for dessert. He loved chocolate, but tried not to eat much of it for fear that it would ruin his teeth. Since eating fruit nonstop was awkward for him, Nar would get up from the table and then, as he chatted with one person or another, would contrive to walk past the bowl of fruit and help himself, as if unconsciously, now to an apple, now to a pear, now to some third item. Thanks to his considerable digestive capacity, Nar's muscles were soon bursting from beneath the thin film of his skin, which was somehow reminiscent not so much of a film as of a fine-meshed net thrown over the muscles and held in place by blood vessels.

On one of his summer vacations Nar went to relax by the seaside with a friend. They spent all their days on the beach, where they tried to make the acquaintance of every goodlooking girl. Spotting his latest victim lounging in the sun, Nar led the attack. His friend was a little behind him, and Nar, brandishing his muscles and blocking the sun with his hulk, intoned in a solemn, official-sounding bass:

“I hope we won't disturb you if we recline in the neighborhood of your charming back.”

Every time he did this his friend winced inwardly at the stiffness of this opening, the more so when the girl responded

with obvious irony; so the friend would start talking himself, thus saving the situation. His body looked like a weakling's with Nar as backdrop, but Nar's friend had a knack for conversing with any girl whatever as though he had known her from early childhood. Nar simply could not understand why girls so often gave preference to his friend, and, feeling wounded, tried hard not to look it and straightened his shoulders.

Once a day they ate in a restaurant, and they had agreed for the sake of convenience that each day one of them would pay for both; they would take turns. Thus it developed that when it was Nar's turn to pay he ate twice as much as his friend, and when it was his friend's turn to pay he ate three times as much. The friend noticed this, but felt awkward about discussing it. Something similar happened with the food they cooked at home, since again they split the cost fifty-fifty.

One evening, as he was preparing to go out for a stroll, Nar was sitting by the mirror, and, having cruelly disposed of an unwanted pimple, was patching the crater with an ointment of some sort. His friend approached and asked for some ointment, since the skin between his toes was chapped from spending time on the beach. Not budging from the mirror, Nar said, "I can't give you any; it's very expensive ointment. I had a lot of trouble getting it, and I only use it on my face."

This staggered the friend, who said slowly, "You're a rotten shit."

"You watch what you're saying." Nar turned toward him

menacingly, holding the tube of ointment between two fingers.

Until it was time for them to leave the resort Nar's friend spoke with him no more, although Nar frequently turned to him with remarks like "I don't understand why you're mad at me" – until the friend finally explained that he didn't wish to know him any longer. After this revelation Nar shut up out of pride.

In place of friendship, Nar was beginning to feel something else surrounding him. After working out, while washing in the shower, Nar often became aware of admiring glances from men. Their glances were flattering to him, like the glances of women, and he managed to suppress the feeling of embarrassment that they roused in him for some unknown reason. One day in the locker room, as he was carefully toweling himself after showering, a man struck up a conversation with him. The man's back was covered with bushy hair, and his chest was completely hairless. Nar had noticed him before, since they habitually exercised at the same hour. Nar had observed that the man watched him with a fixed stare while he worked out, and had interpreted this as the natural admiration of an amateur for the musculature of a professional. And indeed, the man now began to compliment Nar on his physical attainments and clapped him on the shoulder. Then his hand slid to Nar's waist and after this he gently touched Nar's buttocks and significantly looked him in the eye. At this the true nature of his admiration dawned upon Nar, and he violently pulled away from the man. And when the latter put out his hand again, Nar hit him with all his strength,

and the man struck his back against a locker.

“Get away!” Nar bellowed with menace in his voice, although really he felt no rancor.

“Idiot!” the man said calmly. And, supporting his bruised back with his arm, he went off to his own locker at the other end of the room. Nar hastily dressed and went out to the street in confusion. As he walked he thought that, probably, everything that he had previously interpreted as friendly masculine admiration for his well-developed body was in fact far from friendly. He recalled how several times in the men’s shower, men had started talking with him, admiring his body with too bright a gleam in their eyes. Once a man had slapped him on the rump, but this was by way of a joke – “look,” he said, “even here you have muscles” – and Nar, who had been on the point of getting angry, had calmed down at once since the slap had been in jest.

Nar also remembered the wisecracks of friends on the subject of his walk. He had tried to create a manly gait for himself, but the wisecracks claimed that he wiggled in back, like a woman. Nar walked back and forth in front of a mirror, and what others called wiggling Nar saw as well-defined workings of the muscles of the buttocks. And now, as he walked along the street, he tried to picture himself from the side – not that he was thinking of changing the way he walked; he was merely trying to ascertain, by glancing at passersby, who among them might find his walk seductive. These thoughts struck him as indecent, but he comforted his embarrassed conscience by reminding it that he

couldn't be responsible for other people's feelings, just because he happened to have such a handsome body.

Nar constantly returned in thought to the incident in the locker room, and was forced to admit that he had felt no revulsion, but only a sort of reflex terror. Furthermore, this aggressive admiration for his body, the like of which he never got from women, suited his taste. In female admiration he always sensed excessive tenderness and a latent cupidity which inevitably led to a desire to be admired by him in return. The female body excited him to the degree that it was adapted for meshing with his own. Lately he often caught himself thinking that the female body impressed him more and more as something alien. He compared it with his own body, and found his own decidedly more to his liking; so, when the picture of that man's body rose suddenly and unexpectedly to his mind, it seemed somehow nearer to him, because it more closely resembled his own.

For a month now Nar had not gone out with women, since he was intensively preparing for an important championship. Nar was firmly convinced that sexual relations were detrimental to his physique. He measured with a tape his waist, chest, calves and neck, and gleefully confirmed that his measurements approximated the ideal, as laid down in his special tables. When he glimpsed his aggressive admirer while working out, Nar pointedly refused to notice him. The man in return merely smiled, but never approached or tried to start a conversation.

In the championship Nar took fourth place, which, generally

speaking, was not bad, but it carried with it none of the applause and other rewards conferred on the first three prizewinners. So Nar was out of spirits; the most upsetting thing to him was that he had not been invited on stage when the winners were announced, and that he had received none of the flowers and kisses that were being handed out by pretty girls. Wrapped in these gloomy thoughts, Nar failed to notice when someone approached him. And only when he felt someone's hand in his shoulder did he turn around sharply. Before him stood his man.

“What do you want?” Nar said rudely, and tensed his muscles.

“They were unfair to you,” said the man, with fervent inspiration. “I was there and saw everything. The first prize should have been yours. Nobody has a more beautiful body than you.”

Nar involuntarily felt a hot pleasure in these words, and out of habit cast a glance at his reflection in the mirror on the opposite wall. “There's no harm in just talking with him a little,” Nar said to himself. Aloud he said:

“I was sure myself that I would get first prize. I have ideal proportions.”

“That's it, exactly, ideal,” the man took up eagerly.

“Listen, I've always wanted to photograph you. I'm a professional photographer, and I have a little studio at home. I think that you need to send photos of yourself to some magazines. Only through the press can you achieve true recognition.”

Nar's heart began to beat faster than usual. "Recognition" – that was so precisely the right word. His ideal musculature deserved universal recognition. Nar imagined to himself how people would open a magazine, look at his enormous muscles and begin to burn with undying envy and irresistible delight.

"If you want, I'll do some trial photographs," Nar heard.

"When?" The word shot out of him.

"Now, if you like."

It occurred to Nar that this was the first time in his life that he had experienced such persistent interest in himself, and the sensation was extremely pleasant. "Probably women feel like this when I come on to them," he said to himself.

And although he knew that the offer to photograph his body was not wholly innocent, Nar tried to suppress this knowledge with the iron rod of logic, and told himself that if the fellow gave him any trouble he'd show him who was boss.

"Well, OK, but just for a little while," Nar agreed, and again was reminded that women, when asked to go home with him, had frequently answered him thus. The man had not been lying – his apartment consisted of a heap of photographic equipment, in the middle of which sat a large sofa, the sole indication that this was someone's residence. The photographer produced a bottle from somewhere, but Nar refused to drink. All the while the thought would not leave Nar that he was in the position of a woman, and he liked the attention he was getting, the flattery, the wooing.

The photographer unrolled a large screen, plugged in his

bright lamps and told Nar to undress. Nar hurriedly removed his training outfit and remained clad only in his shorts. The photographer, who turned out to have long, deft fingers, looked appraisingly at Nar; and his fingers swallowed the camera and froze for a moment.

“Take off everything. Haven’t you ever heard of a ‘nude study’?”

“I’ve heard of it,” said Nar, and thought, “Oh well, why not?” – and removed his shorts.

Now for the first time he felt a keen embarrassment in the presence of the man, and his ears turned red.

“Come here,” said the photographer, and tenderness could be heard in his voice.

He positioned Nar in front of the screen – an irrefutable pretext for gently touching his body – and then dove under his black velvet hood, while his fingers remained on the camera’s surface to skim over its various parts. Nar struck several different poses, and the photographer clicked the shutter.

“Well, maybe that’s enough for today,” said the photographer, and the bright lights died.

Nar felt uncomfortable in the ensuing half-darkness, and started in the direction of his clothes. But the man turned up at his side and said in a pleading voice as he embraced Nar’s waist, “Allow me to touch your god-like body. Please, don’t go away. I’ll make a celebrity of you – everyone will dream of looking at you. You’ll be rich and famous, and I will guard and cherish your

beauty.”

In his imagination Nar sketched the picture of his life of wealth and fame, and his body felt not the man’s hands, but each of his fingers individually. Nar realized that he would never forgive himself if he let such an opportunity slip, and he tried to go limp.

After an hour Nar, worried and disillusioned, was on his way home. He was worried about the pain the man had caused him; and this pain was not going away. Nar took a taxi, but even sitting down he felt pain. Fear seized him that irreparable harm had been done to his body, that body around whose beauty and health his entire life was built. Nar would have liked to go to a hospital, but shame held him back, and he decided to wait until morning.

And he was disillusioned by the man’s indifference to his body, which had become evident as soon as his desire was quenched. Nar felt cheated, since for a short time he had believed that he had found a human being who really appreciated the beauty of his body.

By morning the pain was almost gone. Nar firmly resolved never to see the photographer again. For three days, as a precaution, he refrained from exercising, waiting until the pain was completely gone. When he first went back to the gym, he saw him right away. They remained at different ends of the gym while working out, and he did not approach Nar, as if perhaps he felt guilty. In the locker room he materialized in front of Nar with a large roll of paper in his hands.

“This is for you,” he said, “your photograph, the size of a whole wall. It turned out fantastically. I have the other photographs at home; if you like, we’ll go look at them.”

Nar accepted the roll: “Thanks for the photo, but nothing of that sort will ever happen again,” he said, and it flashed across his mind that he had honestly earned this photograph.

The photographer didn’t try to insist but only followed Nar’s retreating walk with his eyes.

When he got home Nar spread the roll out flat on the floor. He placed books at the corners, so the photograph would not roll up again; and there before his gaze, staring him right in the face, an ideal body lay revealed. The play of chiaroscuro on the muscles was so skillfully done that they looked even bigger and more prominent than they really were. Nar lifted the photograph from the floor and pinned it to the wall. “I’ll have to make a handsome frame for it,” he thought, stepping back to the opposite wall and unable to tear his delighted gaze away. He studied every sector of his body in the photograph and found not the slightest flaw. He had been shot with a very serious expression on his face, which always appeared when he tensed the muscles of his arm or abdomen. Nar considered that this facial expression gave him a look of handsome nobility. In the photograph his arms were bent at the elbows and raised to the level of his shoulders – the classic pose of the body builder – and the only thing at all out of the ordinary was his nonregulation nudity. Letting his gaze rest on his genital organ, Nar suddenly

realized that it was every bit as beautiful as the other parts of his body. As he thought about this he began to feel a growing lust for himself. His hands instinctively reached for his trousers and undid them. Then, not taking his eyes from the photograph, he brought himself to an ecstasy that staggered him with its power. What he had experienced with women could not be compared with this. And what thrilled him most of all was this delighted admiration which the photograph never ceased to evoke in him even after he had heaved a sigh of relief and release. In fact, this admiration seemed to be growing in strength. After a few minutes his desire revived anew – which also had never happened with him before – usually he required about an hour for this. Nar exulted, gazing at his enormous image; now he identified it with himself, now he saw in it a fabulous demigod. Only now he understood what is subsumed under the word “love.” Love filled his entire soul with an immense joyous lucidity, which was understood by his body as neverending passion. Devouring his image with his eyes and attempting again and again to splash out his rapture, Nar suddenly felt a sharp pain in his chest, and, without having time even to fear for his body, crashed to the floor.

When his body was discovered, and with it the unseemly cause of his death, it was decided that Nar should be buried as quickly as possible and without fanfare. Perhaps because of this decision, the sole mourners at his funeral, aside from the unfortunate parents, who flew in from their home town, were

two official representatives of the college. On the day following the funeral, when his parents came to plant flowers on his grave, they found to their astonishment that a lone white long-stemmed flower was already blooming there.

1984

Translated from Russian by Amy Babich

Nothing In The Mail⁴

The postman arrived around three o'clock. But right after breakfast Sandy was already sitting in front of the window with a book and a bag of popcorn, waiting. The book lay on her knees on the chance that the programs on television might turn out to be boring, but usually the programs attracted her more than the book. It was hard, however, for her to concentrate completely: her fantasies of what might show up in today's mail were too strong. Since childhood she had always felt that the mail would bring her important, glorious news. As a little girl, not able yet to read, she felt her heart stop at the rustling sound of the letters the postman dropped against the metallic wall of the mail slot. Sandy wondered why her mother was in no hurry to pick up the mail, and, why, when she had finally gathered it from the floor and placed the envelopes on the living room table, she waited to open it until she had finished her work in the kitchen. "Maybe the letters are about something amazing and exciting," Sandy thought. Later she realized that it was by no means necessary to open an envelope to know that it contained a bill or unsolicited advertising. But even for the grown-up Sandy, the most detested bill hid within itself a certain mystery and specialness, because it had been sent by mail. Sandy opened envelopes with an ivory-

⁴ *Nothing in the Mail* was published in TWO LINES: A Journal of Translation, issue XII Bodies, San Francisco, 2005, p. 55-73.

handled knife on which she had spent a week's pay, in the superstitious dream that so beautiful and so expensive a knife would attract, by magical means, favorable correspondence. It was like sacrificing to a god. She would painstakingly inspect envelope, stamp, postmark and date of postage, after which she would take out the bill and ascertain its source, the sum demanded, the service rendered, the term allowed for payment, and whether there was a fine for late payment. She would then put it in a file with the other bills she had accumulated.

Sandy had been out of work for a month now. She had quarreled with the manager of the pet shop where she was working, collected all her equipment and walked out, slamming the door. Sandy, a dog-grooming school alumna, had managed to contain herself when her supervisor, who had no specialized training, began making comments to her. Finally Sandy exploded when her supervisor started to show her how to clip the legs of a poodle.

“Clip it yourself! And don't try to teach me!” Sandy screamed in her face, and left the manager to finish clipping the astonished dog.

During her vacation the many dog bites on Sandy's hands had healed, and her skin had rid itself of the minuscule tick-bites that caused pain and itching.

Sandy languished in her leisure. Her mother went to work each morning, complaining that Sandy would loaf around all day again. Sandy tried to hold her peace – after all, her mother did

not demand money, for either room or board.

After a hearty breakfast, Sandy straightened the house, filling the small rooms with her huge body. "What will come in today's mail?" she sweetly titillated herself. A month ago an offer had arrived for her from the distributors of various magazines. With a subscription came automatic participation in a sweepstakes. Sandy had signed up for *Playgirl*, and now awaited with excited shivers not only her first issue of the magazine, but also her possible winnings. She had planned how she would spend the money; first, she would buy a car and rent an apartment downtown. At present she had to ride an hour on the bus to reach the center of town. She often noticed how people looked sideways at her fat body. Her two girlfriends from school had married and borne children, and lived in small towns over two hundred miles away. It was uncomfortable for her to go for a walk by herself, and she went to the movies only rarely.

But Sandy's large body produced large desires, for whose satisfaction life offered meager possibilities. She had eagerly lost her virginity at eighteen with an indiscriminating fifteen-year-old boy, and since that time fate had smiled on her a countable number of times, and these smiles had been momentary and far from charming.

One day the mail fell to the floor more heavily than usual. It was the long-awaited magazine. Sandy leapt up in delight, and the house shook under her weight. She spread open the glossy pages with sweaty fingers. Oh, what she would give for just a

minute with one of these men!

Before curling up with them in the bedroom, she thrust her hand into the mail slot, to check whether a letter might be stuck there. Once there had actually been a letter there, and ever since then Sandy had kept a spark of hope alive by checking the slot several times a day.

She had sent off for a vibrator that struck her fancy in a magazine ad, and had begun awaiting the package with trembling hope, as if it were a date. In the meantime, she routinely beckoned pleasure with her finger.

One morning when she pulled on her jeans, Sandy was unable to fasten the zipper. The jeans had grown unbearably small. Sandy rejoiced that now she had an excuse to roam the shopping mall and buy new jeans. She loved getting out of the house; it distracted her from the tedium of waiting for the mail. And she loved returning home to find mail waiting for her.

But buying jeans did not work out – there were no sizes big enough and she would have to go to a special store where only large sizes were sold. This store was at the other end of town, so Sandy decided to go home – the mail should already be there on her return. Sandy recalled her sensations from several years back, when she had gone on a weeklong vacation trip. All the lonely time of the vacation was colored with the anticipation of collecting the week's mail. "Six times more letters," Sandy calculated, looking at an opened book without knowing what she was reading. What joy and hope to open one envelope and see a

pile of others waiting for you – she had had the feeling that the world, with all its unpredictable, inexhaustible possibilities, had crept in through the mail slot.

At home, the vibrator awaited her in its package. She threw herself on it and began her honeymoon. Later, the vibrator's cold, mechanical efficiency wearied her, and after that Sandy used its services with satisfaction, but without trembling. Only the photographs from Playgirl invested her sensations with any romantic coloring. Later, the melancholy of her isolation overcame her, and she wailed with loud sobs – crying quietly was impossible. Sandy thought that if she could cease to be fat her life would change significantly; she had a pretty face, and men would start to find her attractive. Sandy had accumulated an entire library of books on every conceivable diet, and had passionately adhered to each of them in turn for a week. Several times a day, Sandy clambered onto the scale and watched the indicator, which sped around the numbered dial almost all the way around to zero. But she never succeeded in taking off more than ten pounds, after which she would grow weary of dieting and throw herself with new zest into eating. Each diet resulted in her putting on even more weight. Once she had recourse to a special weight-loss clinic. They put her on a diet, and every day Sandy had to go to the clinic to weigh herself, with the condition that if she had not lost a specified quantity of weight, she must pay a fine. It turned out that every time she went she had to pay. Hence, after paying the fine several times, she decided to waste

no more money.

More than anything Sandy disliked Sundays, because on this day there was no mail delivery. And then, too, her mother was home on Sundays; so Sandy would go out to the nearby shopping mall and gaze at the shop windows and at the men passing by. Through their tight-fitting jeans it was easy to discern their maleness, and Sandy was unable to tear her eyes away from the variety of men's thighs. "What if I went up to someone," she mused, "and said, 'Come on, let's spend the night together' – or – 'Hey, let's go to bed together' – or..." But Sandy knew that she would never have the nerve to do this.

Once she saw a commercial for a computer dating service. Sandy sent off a letter of inquiry, and in a few days received a questionnaire in the mail. This was truly a holiday for her; it opened a season of hope. Sandy read through the questionnaire several times and in the blank for "attitude towards sex" put a check by "very liberal." She couldn't remember what she had checked for the other questions. Sandy sent off the questionnaire with the required fee, and began receiving lists of men's names, addresses, and telephone numbers in the mail. She felt awkward about making the phone calls, but this turned out to be unnecessary – the telephone started to ring every night, non-stop. Sandy's mother watched her suspiciously as she carried the phone into her bedroom. When Sandy returned to the living room, high from her conversation, her mother asked:

"Who was that?"

“None of your business,” answered Sandy.

“It is my business. When you’re earning money and living on your own, then I won’t care.”

“Then don’t care now!”

“I can’t afford not to care – next you’ll be bringing some infection into the house. Who was that on the phone?”

“Someone I know.” Sandy gave in, not wanting to anger her mother, for she was aware of her own financial dependence. But she could offer no good explanation for her sudden abundance of acquaintances, and she was ashamed of her helplessness. So she pretended it was the same acquaintance on the phone every time. Still, there was more than enough material for suspicion. More than once Sandy looked at her mother with hatred, ashamed yet gratified by this emotion.

Most of the men who called asked how much she weighed and, once she told them, expressed no desire to meet. Then she stopped telling her weight, and merely said that she was voluptuous. By this means she succeeded in meeting three men, each of whom tried to end the date upon seeing her. Once, a fellow phoned her and, without asking much of anything, invited her to dinner. He said he would pick her up. Sandy arranged her thick black hair provocatively and put on a dress with sequins. She slathered several layers of makeup on her face. But no one showed up. Her mother’s snide question – for whose benefit was she all dolled up? – let loose Sandy’s tears without relieving her emotions. Sandy had studied herself, and knew that only orgasm

had the power to relax any tension whatever, be it due to anger, sorrow, or anxiety. So she used the vibrator not only to dampen her lust, but also for emotional therapy. She locked herself in her bedroom, and the quivering of the vibrator stilled the quaking of her body.

The next time a new voice called to arrange a rendezvous, Sandy imagined in advance how it might turn out, and decided to meet her date in a bar. First, this would prevent her mother from witnessing yet another fiasco if the date failed to show up, and second, she would at least get to hear some music, after her date, on seeing Sandy, announced that he had an urgent obligation elsewhere. The man gave his name as Bill, and that he would be wearing a leather jacket. Sandy said that she had brown eyes and black hair, and that she would wear a pin that looked like an envelope on her blouse.

Sandy sat at a table in the bar for twenty minutes, observing three men, one of whom was wearing a black leather jacket. She sipped her cocktail and wondered whether this was Bill and whether he would approach her. The men were drinking beer and laughing loudly. Sandy noticed that they were looking at her. She was sure that they were making fun of her weight, and Sandy felt ashamed, as if she were naked. The attention that her heavy body attracted always gave Sandy the sensation of being stripped.

It crossed her mind that a beautiful woman, stared at by all and sundry, must feel as if she were naked. An ordinary woman would attract such strong attention only if she actually appeared

naked in a public place. But ugliness and beauty cancel clothing. These thoughts diverted Sandy and she did not notice the three guys moving right in front of her. Under the laughter of the others, the one in the leather jacket said: "Hey, sweetheart, let's lift some weights together."

"Lift weights?" The trembling Sandy failed to understand. "Are you Bill?"

One second later, Sandy understood the joke and laughed tolerantly. Bill took a swig from his tankard, quenching his laughter with beer, and said: "And you're Sandy."

Sandy nodded.

"Want to ride with us in my car?" asked Bill.

"Sure," said Sandy, astonished at his obvious interest.

Bill whispered something to his friends, and again they burst out laughing. Sandy smelled the rawhide aroma that emanated from Bill's jacket. "Let's go," said Bill, and Sandy hurriedly tossed down her screwdriver.

When she stood up, Bill's friends again howled with laughter, seeing Sandy's hugeness in all its glory.

"Go by yourself," Sandy heard one of the friends say to Bill, when they got to the car.

"And what about you?" asked Bill.

"We'll wait for you here," said the other friend. "Now, make sure you don't lose your head," he added, choking with laughter.

Sandy settled obediently into the worn-out car. "Whereabouts do you live?" asked Bill as they drove away from the bar. Sandy

gave her address.

Bill was silent, and Sandy waited to see what would come next. But then, unable to restrain herself, she asked: “Where are we going?”

“Your place.”

“We can’t. I live with my mother,” said Sandy calmly.

“Shit, we can’t go my place either. Why dincha say so before?” said Bill in annoyance.

“You didn’t ask,” Sandy said, surprised, and timidly offered, “We could stop at a motel.”

“What, are you kidding? Maybe you’ve got the money?”

“No,” said Sandy, and regretted that she lacked those twenty dollars, for which adventure could have been had.

They approached Sandy’s house. “My mom’s asleep,” said Sandy, seeing the dark windows. Cars drove past, their headlights illuminating Bill’s tense face and Sandy’s painted lips.

“He doesn’t even try to kiss me,” she noted to herself, verifying the usual.

At that moment, Bill laid his hand on her shoulder and with the other hand unzipped the fly of his jeans. Sandy happily opened her mouth. “Better than nothing,” she thought, hungrily drinking in the smell she had begun to forget.

Finally Bill pushed away her head and zipped his fly up.

“Success,” said Bill and added, “Well, I gotta go now.”

Sandy got out of the car in silence and headed for the house. She heard Bill start the car without waiting for her to open the

door; she heard a loud acceleration as he took off. As she entered the house she slipped her hand into the mail slot to check whether something had gotten stuck there from the mail she had collected earlier that day. But the slot was empty.

Once the mail brought her a catalog of classes offered at the community center. She noticed that bellydance classes were offered. Sandy thought that this would be a marvelous use for her voluminous stomach. The courses were not expensive and would begin in one month. Sandy signed up and began to dream of how her dancer's art would give her the power to attract men. Before her eyes flashed stills from a film in which belly dancers drew delighted howls from male viewers. But the nearer the starting date for the course approached, the better Sandy realized that her reveries had left out a few details – for example, just where she would display her skill, just who would be watching, and whether her belly would not provoke disgust instead of carnal desire.

In the end, she was seized by her usual shame at exposing her body.

Therefore, Sandy resolved to spend the money she had laid aside for the course on something else, and she bought herself a red silk bathrobe. Since its folds barely covered her, Sandy cinched it with a belt, accenting the waist.

One day Sandy was sitting in her usual place at the window in wait for the postman. He materialized without warning, and as he mounted the steps to the door he stumbled and almost fell down. Thus the thought first entered Sandy's head that the postman was

a man, and not a mere device for distributing mail. He had a beard and a large bald spot, though he looked no older than forty. Some ads had arrived in the mail, and it occurred to Sandy that the only people who gave her a thought were those who wanted to sell her something. There was also an announcement from a girlfriend saying that she was pregnant again. Sandy imagined her swollen belly and immediately recalled the postman's bald spot.

“What if I started talking with him?” Sandy began to fantasize. “No, I can't – he just drops the letters in the slot and walks away fast. I wonder is he married or not? What if I asked him to come in? But no, he wouldn't-he's probably in a hurry to deliver all the letters, and get back as fast as he can to his wife and kids.” Sandy had not made out the facial features under his thick beard, and she tried to guess whether or not he was circumcised.

The next day she awaited the mail delivery with still greater excitement. Just before his expected arrival, Sandy painted her eyes and lips, went out into the yard, and sat down with an open book.

The postman drove up in his jeep and started fiddling around, sorting the mail. Finally he got out of his truck with a heavy sack and, without looking at Sandy, began to approach her door.

“Good afternoon!” she called to him.

“Afternoon,” he muttered, and strode on to the house next door. Sandy had the feeling that she had gone out for a date but that no one had shown up. Suddenly a plan arose in her mind, as if she had been preparing it for a long time, keeping it hidden from

herself until it was complete and ready for embodiment in life.

The next morning, Sandy went to the post office and sent herself a registered letter, consisting of a blank sheet of paper. She was told that the letter might be delivered the same day. On arriving home, Sandy made herself a generous early lunch, then she went into the bathroom and started putting herself in order, aware that makeup brightened her face. Afterwards she remembered that she had not brushed her teeth. She tried not to smudge her makeup, but nonetheless had to repaint her lips. She looked at herself in the mirror and saw not her face, but only her burning eyes. Then Sandy covered her nails with bright polish and, with difficulty, gave herself a pedicure – her stomach was a great hindrance. Then she got up, angry with herself for not doing the pedicure first, and at the same time telling herself that she probably wouldn't need it anyway. Finally, she put her new red bathrobe over her nude body, and tied the belt firmly. She left the folds of the robe half open so her enormous cleavage would be clearly visible. Sandy sat down by the window and almost reached for the potato chips, but found in herself the strength to refrain, so as not to smudge her lipstick. Then yet another idea gleamed in her head, and again Sandy wondered where she could have got it – she began to play with her nipples, which stirred right away and became clearly outlined against the silk of the robe.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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