

Whom the Good Lord a hand lends, no one in the way stands
(If God does not give, the pig will not eat
Russian proverb)

Nothing matures like betrayal.
Boris Strugatsky

PART I

CHAPTER 1

"Ramseeees!!!" my cell screamed. "Ramseees!!! Fuck!! Whassuuup, maaan!!!"

That was Vova. He always cries bloody murder. And he's also a terrible swearer. It's useless to fight both habits. By the time I left the army, I had almost overcome this bad habit.

"Fuck, Vova! Your yelling is making my ear fall off!" Knowing the reason for the call, I smiled and pulled the phone away from my ear. "Hiya, you blockhead!"

"Fuck, sorry, Ramses!" he lowered his voice, chuckling with embarrassment. "Yooo, Ramses... I mean, are we going to the 'Skies' tonight, or what?!"

Vovka deliberately mangles words, drawing vowels, saying "yooo" and "whassuuup". It comes out funny, he is always clowning around.

"But of course, what kind of question is that, Vladimir?" I played along in a serious tone. "Ten o'clock at the hotel, as usual."

"Deeal! Greet! All riiight! Seee yaa!" he drawled his vowels even harder, and we said goodbye until the evening.

It was Friday, April 29, 2005. But it didn't matter. Vovka and I were upbeat party animals, hanging out in clubs five days a week. It just happened, and that's how it always happens – at some point in life, Fate brings the right people together. Vovka and I turned out to be the right people for two reasons: work and bachelor life. I wasn't married, and Vovka was recently divorced. I had seen his ex-wife, a very attractive girl, only once, more than three years ago, when I ran into them together on a country beach. I was driving my car, so I took the couple downtown. Afterwards, Vovka, obviously fighting a bout of jealousy, confessed that his wife had called me handsome. The situation was only amusing; I wasn't in the habit of ogling taken women. Squat, about one hundred and seventy centimeters tall, stocky, with hair everywhere, even all over his back, pot-bellied, with a bulldog's jaw, cold, gray, tenacious, and deep-set, predatory eyes – Vovka, like all men who are insecure around women, acted the other way around, constantly bragging and playing macho. But what kind of macho is he!? He also spoke very loudly. My father once said that it was a rural habit. Any emotional story Vovka would tell in a minute would turn into an obscene yelling. As a result, people around us would stare at us, I would feel uncomfortable, and I would blush and scold my friend. Vovka would calm down for a few minutes, but nature would take its course and everything would repeat itself with endless regularity. Actually, there are very few people who don't use foul language. We should build a monument to them. First of all, my father – he never swore. After all, he spent more than a quarter of a century in the army! So there you have it.

I met Vovka again after the army about three years ago. We served in different units of the same division and didn't know each other personally. But one day I went with my father to one

of the wholesale depots. I entered the director's office and saw a familiar face. Vovka recognized me at once. We were glad to see each other, and we got to talking outside. As luck would have it, Vovka turned out to be the deputy commercial director of the "Pelican" wholesale company of household chemicals. His boss, Andrey Petrovich, a big, tall man with a face red from drinking alcohol and watery eyes, indifferent to everything, hinted through Vovka about five percent extra if we wanted to sell our goods in the "Pelican". It was a single-option offer, and my father and I immediately agreed. Everything happened quickly, and the next day we took the first batch of goods to the depot.

And then Vovka divorced his wife. Honestly, they never looked like a couple. Vovka met his future wife in the army at a disco, they got married like everyone else and divorced like everyone else, but without children. Vovka rented a one-room apartment near his work and indulged in the pleasures of bachelor life. He was a terrible womanizer, and a dirty one at that. Well, you know, that's when the perception of women is all vulgar talk and greasy jokes. Vovka held a grudge. The meaning of his life was simplified to four things: money, women, hunting and camouflage. In that order exactly. All the days at work, Vovka rushed around with his hair disheveled, thinking about how to make a lot of money. And snatching also meant "making money". That was basically where Vovka put all his mighty energy. At the same time, he kept an eye on all the women he liked and gave them a vibe of desire. Hunting was Vovka's third passion; he could talk about it for hours. Every vacation, Vovka would go to his parents' house in Pskov, wander around the fields and woods with a rifle, and tell everyone about it with great spirit for months on end. His pathological passion for camouflage stemmed from his love of hunting. Anything with a camouflage pattern on it was beautiful to Vovka. When he saw such clothes, he purred with joy and bought them. Vovka's closet was always full of camouflage rags, but he almost never wore them in everyday life. Vovka dressed in bad taste, a little sloppy and simple; he walked with his legs wide apart, shifting from one foot to the other in a bearish way, and wore worn-out shoes.

I arrived at the meeting place in an old, rattling bus. I saw Vovka through the window, walking clumsily along the sidewalk, scratching the back of his head.

"Whassup!" he barked, and with all his might he put his fives in my palm, squeezing it tight. His hands are of the worker type, his fingers are short and inflexible. That's why Vovka always spreads them before shaking hands, making his hand look like a crab.

"Hey, you blockhead! How's it going!?" I replied, a little rudely in our way of speaking.

"You know, all day long at fucking work thinking about how to coin some money!" Vovka ruffled his hair. "Fucked my head off! No fucking clue!"

I laughed, and we wandered across the street at the green light. It was a beautiful, warm evening, already dark, and young people were actively flocking to the nightclubs.

"Oh! Edik is here," I waved my hand in the direction of the "picker-uppers" standing across the street.

"Well, just awesome! We'll ride home drunk on Edik!" Vovka laughed out loud, pretending to be drunk, staggering and hiccupping a few times for good measure.

Edik was a young man of about twenty-two, a short, slender brunette, in his final year at university. He had an attractive face, but he would have looked better if he hadn't smoked, if he hadn't spent all his time curled up behind the wheel, and if he had exercised. Edik drove a white VAZ-2107. Cars were his passion. Trying to improve his own, he was always tinkering with it. The backlights of the "seventh" model Zhiguli car, two red circles, shone through the

rectangular plastic like rocket jets. Everything in the cabin that could glow emitted the same muted red color. The acoustics got with the program: when Edik turned on "Rammstein," the sound reverberated a hundred meters away, and a red sonic hell broke out in the car.

Edik's second passion was women. This puny little guy was one hell of a smooth operator. Edik's eyes gave him away – he would get greasy at the sight of any girl or woman. Edik had a hard time with his girlfriend. They fought as much as they made up. I saw her a few times: skinny as a rail, crooked figure, the girl was hopelessly stupid and ugly. What did he see in her? It's a mystery. Apparently that was the reason why Edik insistently compensated for his relationship with her by getting screwed with other women. I met him about a year ago. As usual, I left the club at night, hammered, and walked in a loop to the hotel, where the "picker-uppers" were always parked. I boozed away the last of my wages at the club, which I honestly told the first driver. I said I would pay him back when I got the money at home. The "picker-uppers" were often cheated out of money this way, and Edik was the only one who gave me a ride. Since then, I haven't had any problems with taxis after the club. I would call Edik and he would pick me up from any place and in any condition. Sometimes he dropped me on the cuff, but I didn't abuse his credit. With Vovka's appearance, Edik had more work: instead of one drunken partygoer, he started driving two of them home.

The club was two blocks away.

"So, how's work? The fucking sales are going through the roof, ain't they?" Vovka shouted excitedly.

"Yeah, it's fucking great right now – the selling season, doing well," I nodded.

"Oooh, bigwigs!!!" Vovka bellowed with a touch of envy, grasped my right elbow with his strong fingers and looked greedily into my face from below.

I could feel Vovka's envy with my skin. He sort of laughed it off. But Vovka was a lousy actor. I wasn't offended by my friend's feeling; it wasn't the envy of a talentless lazybones, but of a man of action. It was as if the stallion in the corral, seeing the wild horses running by, began to circle furiously around the corral, wishing with all his might to be on the other side. For the past two years, our business had been growing slowly but steadily before Vovka's eyes. My father and I belonged to the category of "free" people, working for ourselves. Vovka, on the other hand, was a wage-earner. This depressed him and often made him envious of the "bigwigs".

"What bigwigs? Come on!" I yanked my elbow out of my friend's clutching claw.

"Bigwigs you are, for fuck's sake!!! I know!" he grinned and laughed. "Hee-hee-hee!"

"I would love to see you carrying those stupid boxes with my dad all day long... Last year it was a nightmare, we didn't get home until 8 p.m. every day! And when spring started, it was horrible, loading and unloading these boxes from morning till night! There are a lot of orders, we're working at our limit... Good thing we got rid of retail! Otherwise we'd still be working our butts off on weekends... Although lately we've been delivering on Saturdays... It's a shitty trend... We have to end it, or we'll end up liking it," I laughed. "So we're not bigwigs, but ordinary workers! Bigwigs sit in their offices and my father and I work like shit!"

"Oooh!!! All right, all right, I'm kidding, Ramses!" Vovka turned and whistled, making eyes at the passing girl.

We came to a traffic light, there were no cars, without stopping we continued on our way. After a few minutes there was a movie theater on the left and another traffic light on the right. We stopped and waited for the green light.

"What's new with you at work, anyway?" I asked.

"What new could there be, you were at 'Pelican' yesterday, for fuck's sake!" Vovka began to rub his face with his hand as if he had been asleep. "What the hell can there be? All the same."

The green light came on and we started to cross the street.

"Ah! Wait!" Vovka stopped in the middle of the street. "Daddy bought a new jeep!"

"Daddy" was the owner of the "Pelican", a moneyed man in his fifties, tucked-up, looking like a retired military.

"Let's go, what are you standing here for?" I shoved Vovka under his elbow, laughing softly and snorting.

Vovka became sad and staggered on, rubbing his face again. He always gets sad when someone makes his little dream come true. Vovka likes jeeps.

"Nice outfit?"

"Yea!" he nodded and smiled contentedly. Vovka's "yea" instead of "yes," meant the point of highest approval of something. "Yea!" Vovka made his point; it was unwavering and absolute. I didn't mind, because in his dreams Vovka had already seen himself behind the wheel of such an "armored vehicle", galloping through the valleys and fields and shooting all kinds of beasts.

After crossing the street, we turned left, the club was about thirty meters away.

"How much did he shell out for it?" I asked.

"Two mil!"

"Wow! Darn well!"

"Fuckin' A!" Vovka ruffled his hair. "I want one for me now!"

"Sure you do!" I laughed and patted my friend on the back.

"Oh-ho-ho!" Vovka exclaimed as he saw a group of people in front of him.

"Clear Skies" was a popular club, and since Friday night there had been a steady stream of people at the entrance. Outside, two security guards in black suits stood with their backs to the door. In front of them, a swarm of twenty men roared and buzzed in their drunken voices, their backs pushing against the fronts, which in turn were pushed back by the guards. This could go on until midnight. We approached and I looked through the side window into the club. The guard I knew was standing on the stairs. When our eyes met, I pointed to the entrance. The guard nodded and headed for the door.

"Let these two through!" he said in the gap to the outside, barely able to open the door a few centimeters with his shoulder. The guards responded by pushing the crowd away from the door a bit, and Vovka and I quickly slipped in behind their backs. The sounds of fun and music emanated from the club, and the crowd behind us immediately let out a disgruntled roar. Too late, the door slammed violently behind our backs, once again taking on the onslaught of the crowd.

Clubs are another story. When I was twenty-eight, after a couple of long but unsuccessful relationships, I had been partying for two years. The negative experience of relationships had dulled my desire for new ones for a while, so I plunged into debauchery. I had to admit that the "debauchery" was quite pleasant. If someone were to ask me if I would live those years again, the answer would certainly be "yes". After going through most of the entertainment venues in the city, I found myself at the "Clear Skies". The club strangely attracted people like me, aimlessly hanging out with young people who were tired of nightlife. "Clear Skies" wasn't really any different. But throughout the year, it had twice the attendance of the other clubs in town. Even in the "dead season" of midsummer, when the whole city went to the southern resorts and a few people were miserably spending time elsewhere, "Clear Skies" was half full. In September, as soon as the city population returned, the place was under siege. And all because it was located in a small basement. The streets of the historic center of the city consisted entirely of rows of two-, three-, and four-story houses. The corner of one of these houses was the entrance to "Clear Skies". A heavy wooden door hung from the front of the corner; the side, like a storefront, looked out into the alley with a row of tall windows; above the window display, on an illuminated dark blue background with a golden scattering of stars, was a bright inscription: "Clear Skies". The alley led in the dark to a rectangular paved platform surrounded on all sides by houses. There was a gap between the houses in the far corner, where many hammered ones went to piss. There was a constant, faint stench of urine coming from the alley.

Just outside the door was a steep, straight staircase, about twenty steps down. It ended in a cramped two-by-two-meter space. To the right of the place was the door to the checkroom, a small, narrow cell with the sour face of a check girl always sticking out of the window, propped up by her fist. A cashier sat solemnly here behind the counter. After paying the entrance fee, the customers went through an archway to the left into the club itself. It consisted of three rooms: the first was the main room with tables on the left, about forty meters square, half a meter below the level of the rest of the club; the second was a square room on the right, about thirty meters, also packed with tables; the third and farthest was the dance floor, straight ahead. The central path between the first rooms led to a large bar and then, parallel to it, to a grotto, literally a cave, as if hollowed out in a solid mass of red brick. The grotto was a small square room, about fifteen meters square, with a column in the center. A row of bar stools continued along the right wall of the grotto with two one-meter niches – a waitress bar and a small bar at the end. The left wall of the grotto was solid and ended in the far corner with an arch, behind which was the dance floor, a rectangular two-tiered room of sixty meters. The near half consisted of a two-meter counter on the left wall and a dozen tables in the corners, leaving the middle part free. The far half, like the first room, was a half-meter low and connected to the near half by a three-step wooden staircase with handrails and thick columns on either side of the stairs. This half was reserved for dancing. Two mini-scenes, also half a meter high, protruded from the walls in a half-meter circle. The first was from the right wall in the middle, and the second was from the far left corner. Behind it, in that corner, there was a door with a window, just like the one the check girl had. The door led to a cramped five square meter D.J.'s den. The far right and center walls of the dance floor were mirrored from ceiling to floor.

The restroom at "Clear Skies" was unusually higher than the basement club, on the first floor of the building. From the central walkway in front of the big bar, a flight of stairs led to the right and sharply up, in a semi-roll, and they were a challenge for drunk customers, as more than a few people twisted their legs there and tumbled down the stairs. The steps ended in a tiny square space with two doors leading to the right and left: one to the women's room and one to the men's room.

Visitors were divided into two categories: those who sat at tables in the halls, and those who came light, just to drink, dance, and loiter around the bars and along the walls of the grotto. Two hours before midnight, when the music on the dance floor started playing loudly, the crowd at the bar, in the grotto, and on the dance floor was filled with those who were tired of sitting at their tables. The big bar was immediately crowded. The narrow passage to the grotto and the grotto itself were packed with people. To get to the dance floor, one had to crawl through the dense jumble of living bodies and move stubbornly in the right direction. The density of the living mass was complemented by a pall of tobacco smoke and the loud hum of conversation. The smoke filled the grotto thickly, turning the air into a translucent, acrid fog and gradually spreading throughout the club. In the midst of it all, waitresses with full trays scurried nervously about. They met at their counter to dump their dirty dishes on it and take their next order on a tray. The alcohol conveyor belt started at the big bar, continued at the small bar and on the dance floor when the music started – vodka, less often tequila, even less often whiskey, very often beer, often "screwdriver" and other popular cocktails.

During the day, the place functioned as a cafe; when the music was turned on, it became a club. By midnight, the flow of customers was at its peak, and the place looked like a barrel full of fish, flavored with a sauce of alcohol and tobacco smoke. The perfect time to enter "Clear Skies" was an hour before midnight, when the line for alcohol was not too long, the tipsy customers were not yet drunk, and the peak of the fun was yet to come.

"Howdie!" I slapped the guard's outstretched five.

"Oooh!!!" Vovka roared, then swung his "crab" into the same hand.

"Any girls?" I nodded down.

"To the brim!" the guard ran his finger across his throat.

"Well, in that case, see ya later!" I smiled and stepped down.

"Woow!" came an approving growl from Vovka behind me.

After passing through the archway, we made our way through the air, heated by bodies and music, toward the big bar. A short waitress with a tray over her head and dirty dishes on it skipped nimbly toward us. I glanced at her: "No, not the one I like."

The big bar was already covered with drinkers. I put my hand over their heads and said hello to the bartender. Vovka, standing on tiptoe, repeated the ritual.

"Anyone there?" I glanced at the small counter.

The bartender nodded.

"Well, then we'll go and order something... alcoholic..."

"Yeah, let's knock down a 'screwdriver'!!!" Vovka shouted behind me.

Here his habit of shouting came in handy – the music shook the walls of the place, joined by the hum of conversation, the clatter of dishes, and the almost incessant ringing of the phone on the big counter.

After saying hello to half of the club's regulars, we squeezed through the grotto to the second bartender. I waved to him and took a place at the end of the already long line, in the most comfortable place in the grotto – the archway between the central pillar and the right wall. Vovka began to turn his head excitedly, looking at all the girls passing by. I took out a pack of

"Lucky Strike". Vovka immediately stuck his fingers into it and with a familiar movement pulled out a cigarette for himself. We smoked.

I started smoking late, at the age of 24. I could have avoided it, but I was foolish. I wasn't much of a smoker, five or six cigarettes a day. In the clubs I would smoke more, up to a pack a night. The next morning my head would obviously hurt, and I would have a persistent aversion to cigarettes all day. But in the evening it would go away and everything would start all over again.

"What else is new at your job, anyway!?" I asked Vovka loudly, leaning close to his ear and straining my cords, trying to shout over the rumble of the club.

"What could be new there!" Vovka shrugged off, fidgeting in the archway. "Petrovich pissed me the fuck off, scooping dough for himself! I think I should give him up to Daddy, so he can kick him the fuck out of the depot!"

"What do you mean, scooping for himself? Not sharing it with you? I thought you were swindling the whole thing together..."

"Nah, he's got his own customers there! And he's also in the perfume business, shoving it all over the place through his buddies. He sells it to us here, too, and then he takes the cash and puts it in his pocket..."

"Anything for you at all?" I asked an uncomfortably direct question.

"A few crooks like you... heh-heh-heh..." Vovka began to bore me with a sly, greedy squint of his eyes, "Pay me tribute!"

I gave him a jab on the shoulder, and Vovka, pleased with his words, laughed even harder.

"When will we get our 'screwdriver'!!!??" he suddenly yelled impatiently at the bartender, standing on his tiptoes.

"Soon..." he smiled, twirling the burning glass of sambuca and extinguishing the flame sharply.

The guy, a customer, drank half a glass of sambuca in one gulp, and the girl drank the rest. Leaning against the counter, the guy sucked in the alcoholic fumes from under the glass through a straw. The line watched the action with interest. The guy straightened up, put his arms around the girl, and with a red face and bulging eyes, pulled her into the darkness of the dance floor.

"The usual?" the bartender looked at us.

"Yeah, the usual! And more fucking vodka!" Vovka shouted, pushing his way to the bar and shaking the bartender's hand. The bartender turned away and started to prepare the drinks. In a minute, half-liter plastic glasses with the cocktail were in front of us.

"Two double screwdrivers..." the bartender pointed to them, nonchalantly putting his hands in his pockets and staring at us questioningly. After paying, we took our booze and squeezed back into the archway. The line behind us immediately closed around the counter.

We always ordered a "screwdriver". The drink was an easy way to judge the amount of money in a visitor's pocket, unless, of course, they sipped something expensive from the same glass all evening. The penniless guzzled beer, while those with money showed off their glasses of whiskey or, at least, cognac. Others, trying to prove that they had money, although their faces clearly showed the opposite, threw dust in the eyes of others with a tried and true trick: they ordered a bottle of vodka. I didn't try to prove anything, money was scarce at that time – I drank

"screwdriver", it was cheap and gave the guarantee of a slow intoxication. We drank cognac or whiskey at Vovka's house; he always had some in the fridge. Eventually the "screwdriver" became insufficient, so I switched to a double dose and lured Vovka in as well. The double "screwdriver" contains a hundred grams of vodka and four hundred grains of juice, and these half liters take much longer to drink. I managed to know exactly when I was going to get drunk and when I had enough. It was perfect to drink four or five double "screwdrivers" in one evening, so as not to get too drunk, and to capture the very state of euphoria: when you relax after a day's work; you see and perceive everything perfectly; communication works out just fine; a smile never leaves your face; everyone seems like "brothers," "sisters," "friends," and "girlfriends"; and the whole world seems exclusively rose-tinged. If I had a few too many, my behavior would regress: I would become withdrawn, gloomy, aggressive, my tongue and legs would become slurred, I would become depressed, and I would have silly thoughts in my head. Besides, I could not boast of a strong vestibular apparatus. If there were more than five double "screwdrivers" in an evening, I almost always ended up throwing up. Smoking only exacerbated the effects of the booze. And I smoked cigarettes one by one in the clubs.

I sipped the "screwdriver" on the red grape juice through the straw – so bitter! The bartender really didn't spare the vodka. Vovka and I stood in the archway, smoking and getting high on alcohol. There's nothing to do in clubs when you're sober.

"Listen! If Petrovich gets kicked out by Daddy, then you'll be in his place!?"

"Sure as shit!!!" Vovka stared at me like I was an idiot. "Otherwise why the fuck would I kick him out? So some jackass can sit in his place?"

Vovka sucked in his cocktail and took a drag on a cigarette.

"I'll give the dumbass the fuck up!" he continued, hurt. "Have you seen the chick that comes to Daddy in the big blue Peugeot?"

I thought about it. I remembered. A Sophia Loren-type figure, Gina Lollobrigida-type looks. Even a blind man would notice such a woman – a striking brunette, very middle-aged with outstanding curves and the ability to package and present them beautifully. A well-groomed and stylish lady with "turtle" sunglasses. I often saw her at "Pelican". In the wholesale depot, she looked like a thoroughbred pea-hen in a chicken coop.

"Oh, yeah! I saw her! What was she doing there?!" I asked.

"No idea!" Vovka shrugged his shoulders. "For some reason, she always goes to Daddy's place on the second floor... She has some kind of business... Daddy's drooling all over her!"

Then he stuck his tongue out of his mouth like a dog and started to "lap up water". I laughed at Vovka's silly look, and the girls who had squeezed through the crowd stared at him. Vovka immediately blushed, got confused, and turned back to the wall, hovering in embarrassment.

The evening went on as usual – we made our way to the dance floor, pumped full of alcohol. The crowd there was already hot, the exhaust was not able to cope with it, and it was getting stuffy. The two mirrored walls fogged up to halfway down the floor like a sauna. The dancers practically merged into one bouncing and squirming mass, from which the sour smell of stale clothes, sweat, cheap perfume, and deodorant wafted in waves. With each passing minute, the general intoxication grew, and the boys danced closer and closer to the girls, who put up less and less resistance. The girls wiggled their bodies invitingly, catching the men's flaming eyes in satisfaction. The guys tried to get closer to the girl they liked, to merge with her in a common rhythm. If there was no reciprocity, rejected by one, the guys would catch the next girl in their

lust focus and move toward her. The rejected one's place was immediately taken by the next. An endless merry-go-round of sweaty, drunken faces in a roar of music and strobe lights flashed before my inebriated mind. The dancing of the couples formed looked more and more like an imitation of sexual intercourse. Couples were kissing each other hotly in the corners. I participated in the drunken roundabout of lust with everyone: someone's breasts, someone's thighs, someone's cool ass, horrible perfume, beautiful lips, rough hands, sticky waist skin, smoky voice, drunken eyes, beautiful hair, angular movements. I tried in vain to remember names. Vovka was here somewhere. A few times in the evening he and I went outside for some air and a smoke. It was a whirl, crowding, endless motion, the grotto full of people, waitresses swearing at everyone in a row in a strained voice. The one I liked looked at me. The drink began to put pressure on my bladder. I left Vovka in the archway and went to the restroom. But at the first steps of the steep staircase I ran into a line. Twenty minutes of agony, and I finally reached the toilet: one urinal was locked and full of urine, the cubicle was occupied. I relieved myself into the second and only working urinal. I was a little shaky, but I seemed to hit the urinal, trying not to breathe because of the horrible smell in the toilet. The cleaning lady, an elderly, creaky, stooped woman with hair dyed with cheap henna, came into the toilet with a rag on a mop and began angrily scrubbing and cursing. Her impetuosity confused everyone, even the most drunk and aggressive guys. Mumbling unintelligibly and hastily buttoning their pants, they began to slip out of the restroom. I could not pee in front of a woman, so I hastily stopped halfway through, pretended to be done, and made my way to the sink full of water and crumpled toilet paper. After washing my hands, I headed for the stairs. Not wanting to fall, I concentrated on grabbing the railing and climbing down, found Vovka, nodded to him, and we rushed outside again for some fresh air.

Five double "screwdrivers" and half a pack of cigarettes – I was drunk. Vovka seemed to be as well. Time flew by quickly, and people began to disperse. We sat in front of the glass of the entrance, resting our asses on the metal canopy. At the end of the alley, insecure, half-drunk shadows flashed by one or two, either easing themselves or kissing. The heavy front door banged periodically, letting the noisy crowd out of the club. Some left cheerfully, some wandered aimlessly away, disappearing unnoticed into the night, while others, like us, went outside for some air and a smoke. There was a drunken buzz all around, and the air was saturated with adrenaline. We returned to the club.

It was three in the morning. The music died down, the silence immediately hit my ears and became oppressive. Vovka and I said goodbye to everyone we could see, and finally left the club. I love the city at night. Especially when it's warm. You can take a leisurely walk and chat. Especially when you're drunk you have a lot to talk about. I looked at Vovka, he was rocking. I took out my cell phone, called Edik, and told him we were coming.

"That waitress was staring at you!" Vovka said unexpectedly.

"Well, yeah, I guess so... She's all right," I nodded, pretending to be indifferent.

"Yeah, all eyes and lips!" Vovka's face was full of satisfaction.

"Come on, she's a nice girl!" I defended her reflexively.

"Did I say she wasn't nice or what!? Not ugly, a nice, pretty girl!"

"That's what I'm saying, she's nice! I like her..." I confessed on purpose, hoping to satisfy my friend's interest a little and to extinguish it at the same time, but it turned out to be the opposite.

"Why don't you get to know her then? Come over, blah blah, allow me to introduce myself, madam! I'm a bigwig, dough comes out of my ears, I want you!" Vovka exclaimed, showing his ability to vulgarize everything.

I hummed and shoved him on the shoulder. Vovka played along, wiggled as if he were wobbly, made a loop on the pavement with his jelly legs, and grinned contentedly as he walked next to me again.

"Why the hurry, she's not going anywhere, we see her there every day..." I shrugged it off, but the thought stuck in my head and I started to think about it.

"They work by the week, watch it, it's Friday, so she'll work for two more days. Otherwise you'll screw up your happiness!" Vovka urged me.

"Well, I'll get to know her in a week then..." I continued imitating indifference.

"Do you even know her name?" Vovka wouldn't let up.

"I don't. I'll find out later."

"What a fellow! Watch out, or the lipped one will be taken!" my friend taunted me again.

"She looked at me... she won't be taken..." I retorted, smiling.

"She's got a nice ass, too!"

"You've examined it all, haven't you?"

"Well, what's wrong with that? I like a girl to have stuff."

"Who doesn't? So, am I staying with you?" I changed the subject.

"Fuck, Ramses, sure thing!" Vovka shrugged, took his hands out of his pockets and spread them apart. "I don't mind, the red couch is waiting for you!"

We turned the corner, and there was a line of cars along the curb. Edik's "seventh" was in the middle, with the glowing tail "boosters". Vovka and I promptly opened the doors of the car and stumbled noisily inside. Edik was sitting behind the wheel, fiddling with the dashboard. He gave us a melancholy look and immediately returned to his work.

"Well, boogied to your heart's content?" Edik smiled.

"Yeeeah!!!" Vovka roared from the back seat, panting loudly and fidgeting.

"We're fucking crashed!" I confessed as I settled into the front seat.

"Well, that goes without saying..." Edik summarized philosophically, stopped rummaging under the steering wheel, stared at me with unblinking eyes, and smiled. "Let's go?"

I nodded, stretching my face into a stupid, drunken, satisfied smile.

"And turn up the fucking music!!!" drunk Vovka yelled directly into my ear from behind.

Edik pressed his fingers on the radio buttons, turned the key in the ignition, the first melodic motifs of the song filled the interior, the engine revolutions jumped up with a roar, the percussive sound hit my ears like a sledgehammer from the speakers:

Getadelt wird wer Schmerzen kennt

Vom Feuer das die Haut verbrennt

Ich werf ein Licht

In mein Gesicht

Ein heisser Schrei

Feuer frei!

The car sped off and raced through the empty streets.

Bang! Bang!

"Just don't throw up..." I thought, gripping the door handle tighter. We were racing, making sharp turns. I wasn't thinking about safety – Edik was an excellent driver, I was worried about my stomach – I felt a little queasy.

Vovka lived in a semi-criminal working-class neighborhood, which was full of shabby brick four-, three-, and two-story "Khrushchevka" buildings. He rented a cramped corner apartment on the top fourth floor of one of these buildings.

Edik pulled up at the bus stop – we arrived. I was glad that it was Saturday and that I could sleep off the last week at Vovka's house until noon. I still felt dizzy, so I opened the door and got some fresh air. Vovka climbed out of the back seat, grunting and cursing. After getting the money, Edik drove away, leaving us alone in the silence of the night. We walked deeper into the sleeping yards, two hundred meters straight to Vovka's house.

It was almost pitch black in the courtyard, and not a single streetlight was on. There was no canopy over the metal door, and a hollow pin in the wall above it was all that was left of the light bulb. We went inside. A bulb was flickering on the first-floor landing, and there was a smell of dampness. The old entrances always stank. Everything in these "Khrushchevka" buildings is bad: small floor areas, narrow staircases with different inclinations, stairs of different heights and depths, and cramped apartments.

We walked up. We were both out of breath almost immediately. My heart was pounding in my ears. I gasped heavily and held on to the railing. The alcohol in my blood prevented me from walking smoothly. Vovka sniffed noisily behind me. We both stomped loudly.

We finally made it. I wanted to sleep so badly. I quickly stripped down to my underwear, visited the bathroom, and staggered into the kitchen, thirsty for tea. I took a cigarette, sat down on a creaky old wooden chair with a back, and lit up. Vovka came in next, in camouflage underwear, looking around the kitchen, drunkenly scratching his hairy belly, and lit up, too. We sat facing each other and waited for the kettle to boil.

"Wanna some cheese?" Vovka laughed soundlessly.

"Will you shut up about your fucking cheese?" I laughed, too.

"Why? There's plenty of cheese!" Vovka continued and opened the fridge. It was full of cheese. Several large round wheels took up almost the entire space. I laughed again.

"I mean, we have to eat it, it will go bad!" Vovka added, as if to apologize.

"Why did you bring so much? You could have taken some..."

"It's a freeloader, man! How could I not take it?" Vovka scratched the back of his head in surprise. "They would have thrown it away anyway, they wrote it off, I had to take it. And the cheese is good: 'Dorblu', 'Parmesan', it's not our cheap shit. Sure thing, I had to take it."

I kept giggling. The kettle boiled, the switch flicked.

"Now you have to chew cheese all day, every day!"

"Fuck, Ramses, I munch it all the time! Fucking sick of it!" Vovka laughed, poured the tea into cups, tossed a tea bag into each and handed one to me. We started to drink the tea, took a sip and then a drag on our cigarettes.

"Finish it and then turn in for the night..." I muttered. "I can barely keep my eyes open..."

"Well... the red couch is fucking waiting for you! Hee-hee-hee-hee!" Vovka laughed again.

"No fucking hospitality... You can't just lie down on this couch and give me your airfield as a guest..." I laughed, in a friendly way. "It's a fleabag, not a couch."

"Well, there is no other. You're welcome to all we have."

We finished our drinks and cigarettes and went to bed. I lay down on the old couch, which creaked under me. My ribs pressed through the fabric into the crooked spring, and I began to think of her, but Vovka's snoring from the bed knocked me down, too.

"Do you have any Citramon?" I said in the morning, without opening my eyes.

Vovka was already fumbling around in the kitchen, rattling the dishes.

I opened my eyes with difficulty and looked around.

"Headache or what!?" there was a rumble from the kitchen in reply.

"Yeah, terribly splintering... What time is it?"

"Half past ten already!" Vovka barked in a military manner. "Get up now!"

The sun flooded the room with light and enveloping warmth through the windows. I got up and the sun-kissed carpet warmed my feet. I took a pill and went to the bathroom, and from there to the kitchen, where Vovka was drinking tea and eating sandwiches, as usual.

"Cheese?" I asked sleepily, trying to make a joke.

Vovka nodded affirmatively, muttered unintelligibly, and smiled with a full mouth.

"We'll eat it for a year. Should I take some home?" I said.

Vovka nodded excitedly and immediately went to the fridge.

"No, no, no! I was just kidding!" I started waving it off.

Vovka instantly became sad, stopped chewing, and rolled the wheel of cheese back up.

A day off. It's spring outside. There was no hurry. Both of us in our underwear, we sat and drank tea. My headache had eased noticeably, and I didn't feel like going home at all.

"How is your old man?" Vovka asked suddenly. "Still scolding you?"

"Yeah, fucking fighting on a regular basis," I said sluggishly. "He pissed me off. Always picking on all kinds of shit, this and that. I can't work with him anymore. I wish I could go somewhere else, but I can't give it all up. It's a good thing we quit retail. Did I tell you we quit retail?"

"Yeah, you said something like that," Vovka interjected between chewing sounds. "You mean, quit for good? Where will you put the goods then?"

"I don't know, we just sold the kiosk yesterday," I shrugged and told the whole story of the sale, which caused Vovka to burst out laughing with satisfaction.

Tea is a good thing! I used to cure myself with it all the time after drinking too much alcohol and smoking cigarettes. And this time, while sipping sweet tea, I gradually came to my senses.

"Fuuuck!!! What time is it!?!?" I almost screamed all of a sudden.

Vovka stared at me in surprise, then turned and looked over his shoulder at the clock built into the gas boiler: "Half past eleven, why?"

"Damn it, I forgot!" I jumped up and immediately sat down. "We have to be at 'Sasha' at three today! 'Sasha' is closing up! We have to pick up the goods and pay them off!"

"'Sasha' is closing up!?" Vovka was even more surprised. "And why is that!?"

I began to chew my sandwich anxiously and drink my tea greedily, answering Vovka's questions at the same time. When I finished my sandwich, I rushed into the room. I put on my jeans, T-shirt and hoodie, grabbed my cell phone and dialed the number from memory.

"Strange, why would 'Sasha' close up?" came from the kitchen as the call ended.

"Yeah, I was surprised too, so unexpected, nice business, worked for so long, and then suddenly blam!" I said, returned to the kitchen, finished my tea in a few sips and added, "Okay, I'm out! Going out tonight!?"

"Damn it, Ramses, you bet!"

"Okay, I'll call you when I'm done, bye!"

I shoved my feet into my shoes and ran out the door.

CHAPTER 2

By the end of 1998, my father had been retired from the military for a year. Prior to his retirement, he had often expressed his desire to go into business after his service. Each time, I warmly supported my father, but being young and green, I could only give him verbal approval. I believed in my father with all my heart, I believed in his quick success, my father was a very knowledgeable and intelligent man. As for me, I was very attracted to commercial activities, I wanted to dive into the boundless and uncharted sea of business after graduation. In the meantime, I still had a year and a half to go to night classes at the university. I thought that during this time, my father would start his own business, and it would be time for me to help him with everything after graduation. But life decided otherwise. While I was finishing my fourth year and working part-time in a firm, my father managed to go from being the deputy director of a wholesale company to a "picker-upper" – a man who moonlights as a taxi driver with his own car. I did not pay much attention to this fact. The situation in the country was difficult at that time, and everyone had to work wherever they could. Casual earnings did not save the situation, only my father's military pension helped our family. I remember his condition at that time – depression, confusion, guilt – all this was in my father's eyes. But he was moved by his ability and desire to work. My father was naturally a hardworking and persistent man, and he was not intimidated by work. But every advantage in a man is his potential disadvantage, and vice versa. The disadvantage of my father's industriousness was that he was overzealous, so he often did not take the most economical way in terms of effort. It is not for nothing that people say, "Leave work to the lazy, and they will find the easiest solution." There is truth in this saying, as I was later convinced more than once.

In August 1998, the well-known crisis hit the country and turned my seven hundred ruble salary into pocket change. In the innocence of my age, I expected at least a small increase in my salary from the stingy director of the firm. Soon, realizing that my expectations were in vain, I began to shirk work. The director figured it out and fired me by September 1998.

As a former student with no experience and no connections, the only jobs I could see were jobs with lots of work and little money, a prospect I was not happy about. I started looking through newspapers and magazines, trying to find something interesting. I was driven by the feeling that if I looked, something would certainly turn up. In early September I came across an advertisement: "A certain brewery representative office is offering a job for sales agents." I showed the ad to my father and he was interested. The next morning we were talking to a large and overweight man of about thirty-five. The job was simple: pick up the beer from the representative office at a fixed price, add any markup you want, and sell it to any outlets. There was one condition: financial responsibility for the goods and a money-back guarantee. About fifteen people responded to the ad, all with their own trucks. Most of them came with minibuses, one with a pickup. They all looked at our VAZ-2102 with amazement – it was clearly a desperate decision to transport beer in crates in a passenger car. My father and I took up the cause with enthusiasm. I made up for my complete lack of personal experience with the unwavering faith in my father's experience and authority. We took out the back seats of our second model Zhiguli car and started loading the crates of beer into it. The division of labor also happened naturally: my father wrote the bills right there in the car,

was the driver and the loader; I, who was only the loader, always tried to carry more crates than my father to equalize the amount of work. The work was intense and hectic – it was exhausting, but the excitement, new impressions and interest were so overwhelming that I didn't feel tired; I was eager to be independent and gain much-needed experience. A week later, four of the fifteen sales agents remained. The fat man worked with the big wholesalers himself and left everyone else to the agents – small wholesalers and retailers. My father and I found a few more or less decent outlets and started supplying them with beer. The fat man was surprised and wondered where we were putting his beer in such quantities, but we kept quiet. After a month, my father and I were the only agents left. By the end of October, the seasonality of beer was over, sales dropped many times over, and Fatty shut down the business. The two months' earnings were only enough to cover our current living expenses. We had to think of something, and a simple thought struck me: "What if we repeated the scheme?" I perked up, my brain started working in the intended direction: I needed a working brewery near our city. Not a very successful one, but a half-dead one. I understood that there was no chance to "fly" into a decent, well-promoted production facility without money. The search began, and once again I started poking around in newspapers and magazines, and my intuition didn't let me down. At the beginning of November I found an advertisement: "Eletsky Brewery invites regional dealers." I showed the ad to my father and said: "Call them!" I was only 21 at the time. I quickly realized that no one in the business took me seriously, so I urged my father to put my ideas into practice. The idea worked: we were invited to a meeting. We calculated the funds available, estimated the distance there and back – we had just enough money for gasoline. On a damp day, driven by an icy blizzard, we set out for Elets. We quickly found the brewery. It turned out to be quite an enterprise – a production facility on its last legs, on the verge of technical deterioration and financial collapse. We were met by the commercial director, a man in his forties, with a beer belly, a flabby body, a puffy face with sagging cheeks and watery eyes. We agreed quickly. My father communicated, and I nodded only occasionally, rejoicing inwardly at the intuition that had worked. We received the main condition – the goods for sale, in return we promised to bring back the same number of crates of empty beer bottles, and in payment we load out sugar in sacks. We drove home happy – it worked!

In January we began to look for a warehouse. We had only two thousand rubles, which was my father's military pension for that month. That was it. We drove around the city, leafed through the newspapers, and ended up at a former vegetable depot about twenty minutes from our house. The depot was one of the newest in the city. All the wholesale depots I'd been to were teeming with commercial activity, but this one was surprisingly empty. We met with the director, walked around the premises, and chose a warehouse – a huge one, four hundred meters, but we rented only a quarter of it. While my father talked at length with the director, I went out of the warehouse and looked around – the depot seemed to be asleep. Across the street was an auto repair shop. In the one-story building at the entrance to the depot, there was a small wholesale food company. We became the third tenant, my father gave them two thousand as payment for February, and our adventure began.

The first batch arrived on the tenth of February, the factory's old GAZ-66 bringing eighty crates in the canopy. The beer was unpasteurised and had a short shelf life of only seven days. In fact, it was a very risky business if you think about it: a customer would not

normally buy beer in a shop if it was nearing its last, seventh day; a fresh batch was made at the factory in the morning and brought in on the afternoon of the first day; we had only five days to sell it. 1999 was the peak year for general wholesalers. We had made arrangements in advance with the major wholesalers in the city to deliver beer for sale. It turned out that my father and I had to deliver each batch of beer on the first day, the second day at the latest. The next day the wholesalers would put the goods on display and start selling them, and by all accounts they should have sold everything in two or three days at the most. Ideally by the end of the fourth day. In this case, retailers could only trade on the fifth and sixth days. If the beer did not leave the depot by the end of the fourth day, we would almost certainly take it back after it had expired. There was a risk of loss. In negotiations with the brewery, we reserved the right to return up to a tenth of each batch of overdue product. We had to work hard. The GAZ-66 had a maximum capacity of one hundred and twenty crates, and it would come to us full from May. We took fifteen at a time, which meant eight trips. The depots sold beer in different ways: some sold fifteen crates in two days, others ten, others five. So there were more trips. Usually it was like this: we managed to make two or three runs on the day of arrival. The rest had to be done on the second day. That meant between five and eight trips, depending on the weather and sales. If we did eight trips on the second day, it was tough, we were exhausted. In those days there was no traffic on the city roads and we drove fast. My father was an excellent driver and I was a brisk loader and expediter.

By the end of the spring we were supplying beer to all the major wholesalers in the city. The quality was not so good, so we took the market by the price and kept it 10% below the competition. The money from beer sales was barely enough to rent the warehouse and pay for petrol. The only thing that saved us was sugar, which we used to pay for the beer at a very high markup. The sugar trade was as wild and chaotic as anything else. Homemade signs adorned the streets: "Sugar 320", "Sugar 310", "Sugar 330". Stop at the sign of the warehouse you like and buy a sack. It's as simple as that.

In April, new tenants, specifically sugar traders, moved into the neighboring warehouse. There were two of them – tall, strong men in their thirties. They made a billboard out of two pallets, stuck a piece of paper on each side with the word "sugar" and the price below it, and placed it in front of the entrance to the warehouse. The neighbors immediately started trading. First passenger cars went to them, then small wholesale buyers showed up in their GAZelle pickups. I nicknamed our neighbors "the sugar guys" and they nicknamed us "the beer guys".

The main one was a big, active fellow with a short haircut and impudent, bulging eyes. He was broad in the shoulders, fleshy, and pot-bellied. He walked with his arms outstretched at his sides, changing the ease of his movements for vigor and pressure. He cursed a lot, and with relish, he drove his silver Mercedes up to the warehouse, braking sharply. And he drove away just as spectacularly. He got out of the car vigorously, but with an exaggerated laziness, grudgingly giving his hand for a shake as if incidentally to emphasize his importance. He even counted money dramatically – he took a bundle of bills from his briefcase with a rubber band, broke it in half with the fingers of one hand, deftly moved the thumb of the same hand, pushed a bill to the side, picked it up by the corner with the fingers of the other hand, and flipped it back to himself. The bills in his hands rustled like a counting machine.

In addition to sugar, my father and I made money with a bottle trick. A light beer bottle was half the price of a dark bottle – green or brown. The brewery would take either one as proof of sale. When I saw the opportunity to make money, I immediately offered my father to deliver only light bottles to the brewery. While the big beer wholesalers had a standard margin of ten or twenty percent, we were squeezing seventy percent out of our tiny turnover of sugar and light bottles. But as soon as our business reached the point of maximum efficiency, it slowly began to collapse before it had even begun.

In the summer of that year, I defended my diploma and received higher education. The day was dazzlingly sunny and warm. Everything happened quickly, I got the last "A" in my grade book and walked out of the classroom. My parents were waiting for me in the foyer of the first floor of the institute. My father shook my hand, my mother hugged and kissed me, and we drove home. For a long time, I felt that my diploma was the most important document in my life, and that it would soon change it beyond recognition. That day, I rejoiced like a child, opening it every minute and looking at every letter and number. When I got home, I carefully placed the diploma into my desk, not expecting to take it out but twice in the next thirteen years.

In six months of work, I got to know all the major players in the beer business. It was still chaotic, but the leading companies had already emerged. At the end of the summer, sales began to decline – revenues dropped and we were faced with the prospect of eating up the summer's profits. An opportunity arose: we came across a large beer wholesaler in the region. By buying beer from him and transporting it to the retail outlets, we were able to make up some of the lost income. My curiosity never waned and I quickly figured out how the wholesaler worked. Immediately, my mind began to wander and I knew we had to do something similar, albeit on a smaller scale. It all came down to finances. We could not do without them for a qualitative change in the business. We needed a good product from a large beer producer. But such goods could only be sold for money, which was not yet available. The only option was to start picking up half-dead factories and get goods for sale, or – which looked fantastic – to get to know the director or owner of a large factory and negotiate preferential terms.

The half-empty depot gradually came to life as more and more tenants moved in. A fruit wholesaler settled in the back of the warehouse. The next warehouse after ours was occupied by a household chemical company. We continued to work, but I couldn't help but feel that our business was shaky. It was only the price difference between sugar and beer bottles that kept us afloat. This went on until mid-autumn. And then a competitor came along. One day I walked into the sales area of the wholesale depot and saw an unfamiliar bottle of beer in the window. I was used to ours being the cheapest, but this was new and cheaper. I looked at the label, it was made in a cannery in a village in the Lipetsk region. "A cannery brews beer?" And then I saw the expiration date on the new beer: one month! The label under the name said "pasteurized". "Where in a poky hole of a place did they get the equipment to pasteurize beer?" Two days later, the situation became threatening. The new beer, which appeared only in the largest wholesale depots in the city, immediately reduced our sales there

to almost nothing. While my father and I were broodingly removing our expired goods from the depots, the village beer, which had ruined our week of trading, sold out and disappeared. Everything went back to normal, and a month later the situation repeated itself. There were literally piles of country beer in the depots. I walked around the storage facilities and counted the crates – fifty, eighty, what did they need so much for when we were bringing in ten or fifteen at most? No matter how you looked at it, it turned out that the rural beer supplier was either one sandwich short of a picnic or new to the business. Something had to be done about the supply of cheap beer.

As the classics say, "If you can't resist something, lead it"!

That's a good point.

I copied the phone number of the cannery from the label on the bottle and gave it to my father. It was not the first time, but he managed to get through to the director, and the next day off work, we went to the Lipetsk region. Negotiations went quickly, and at the end of the visit we found out that our competitor was an Armenian. He delivered tractor tires to the factory and took the beer under barter arrangements. "Too bad," I lamented, realizing that the competitor could always sell beer below the purchase price just to get rid of it. They refused to barter with us, saying that the brewery didn't need anything anymore. The return of beer bottles and sugar were not needed either. The factory did not have its own transport, so the only option was to hire one. But we still bargained for acceptable terms, agreed to take beer in batches, and promised to come back next week for the first one. Just about the whole factory saw us off on our way back.

A week later, we distributed the first batch of new beer to the competitor's unused depots, and I began tracking his leftovers around the city. It quickly became clear that the competitor's batch would expire in two weeks, and he would not sell all of his product in that time. And so it turned out that as soon as his beer ran out, we brought in fresh beer. The competitor's beer was taken off the market, and it sat in storage gathering dust for another two weeks, until the competitor took it out and disappeared himself, having made a loss.

We worked through the winter with relative stability. The price of sugar fell slowly and steadily, and in the middle of spring it reached an absolute record – two hundred and sixty rubles per sack. Now we had one hundred and twenty rubles for each sack of sugar sent to the Eletsy Brewery. We kept quiet about this markup, because we knew that "the sugar guys", who were facing stiff competition, had only twenty rubles per sack. They did well, and their production grew steadily. It was only thanks to sugar that we survived the seasonal slump in sales.

Although the director of the cannery assured us that the barter for tires was a one-time event and would not happen again, the Armenian showed up in May. He again received beer in exchange for tires and filled half of the depots of the city with it. The price was lower than ours. My father called the factory and was very indignant on the phone, listening to excuses. He faulted the director for his decency and for going back on his word, received shouting in response, and ended the conversation. We had to solve the problem ourselves. We tracked down the Armenian who came to our depot in a dirty "ninety-nine" with the left mirror torn off. We proposed the simplest solution: he would transfer his beer to us at a fixed price, we would sell it and pay for the goods. It was a win-win: the competitor got the money and we got the price control. Dumping is always bad for trade. To my surprise, the Armenian didn't

agree, raised the price extortionately and offered to buy all his beer at once. We refused; it was easier to wait a few weeks for the competitor's beer to expire and the problem would go away. So we did. Two weeks later, the Armenian's product disappeared from the windows of the wholesalers, and piles of dusty crates with white flakes of sediment on the bottoms of the bottles sat in their depots for a long time. The competitor was gone for good.

In the summer of 2000, there was a serious sugar trouble. Its lowest price lasted for a month. At the beginning of the summer, it gradually returned to two hundred and eighty and continued to rise. At first, people didn't really react to the increase. As soon as the price exceeded three hundred and twenty, the demand grew and customers flocked to "the sugar guys". After each update of the numbers on the billboards, I became gloomy as our profits from sugar melted away. In the summer, we were helped by the beer itself, which sold three times as much as in the winter. July, sugar three hundred and forty, three hundred and sixty. The city rustled with panic, and a pilgrimage of customers began to gather at "the sugar guys": the heat, the daily line of two or three cars at the warehouse: one pulls away, the next is already rolling to the end of the line. If the passenger cars usually came for a maximum of three sacks of sugar, now they shoved it in not by weight but by volume – three sacks in the trunk and three in the back seat of the car. When their rear bodyworks were almost down to the asphalt, the cars drove away, scraping their mufflers on the ground. The large number of retirees in line was noticeable, and after a day or two they reappeared, obviously stocking up. I began to recognize some of them by sight. The "GAZelles", with a capacity of one and a half tons, loaded two or two and a half. Sugar was hastily bought all over the city. "The sugar guys" rubbed their hands with glee and spent the whole day running between the warehouse, the office and the sugar factories. In August the price peaked: three hundred and eighty rubles per sack. It was as if people were going crazy. Once or twice a day, trucks with goods would arrive at "the sugar guys". The loaders were working at full tilt in no time – first unloading the sacks from the trucks onto pallets, then rolling them into the warehouse on a trolley, then rolling them out again and loading the sacks from the pallets into the buyers' cars – over forty tons for four men a day. Sales continued to grow, and by the last week of August, "the sugar guys" were buying and selling two truckloads a day. The loaders worked themselves to death; the pallets of sacks were no longer rolled into the warehouse, but stood outside, blocking half of the warehouse's central driveway. In their moments of rest, the dust-black loaders either lay exhausted on the sacks of sugar or ran to us one by one for beer. Those who bought a bottle would open it quickly, throw back their heads, and gulp down the contents. "Hell of a job," I thought to myself as I watched the next bottle of beer disappear into the stomach of the loader.

"That's quite a job you got there!" I said sympathetically.

After gulping down half a liter, the loader immediately bought several more bottles.

"And you think we've always worked as loaders?" he said suddenly, drinking half of the second bottle, more slowly this time, and staring at me.

I was surprised by the question and wondered what I was actually thinking.

"We used to be in business too..." the guy went on, meaning by "we" some of the others lying on the sacks, pointing in their direction with the bottle in his hand, and boastfully adding, "We had everything! We had business. We started out together..."

He waved again in the direction of his buddies.

"Um-hum..." I let out something vague and nodded.

"We got money right away," the loader added sadly, without bragging. "And as soon as the money came in, it all started: baths, saunas, chicks..."

I kept silent; it was clear. The story sounded true for many such cases.

"We had to move ahead, keep the money in the business, but we..." the guy waved the bottle in annoyance, took a swig, and went outside to join the others.

"We had everything!" the phrase echoed in my brain, cutting me to the bone with awareness. I shuddered at its simplicity and inevitability, and decided for myself that I would do my best not to find myself in a similar situation.

The sugar psychosis continued. While "the sugar guys" usually worked until six, they began to stay until eight or even nine in the evening. People would reach out to them until dusk. As for my father and me, it was a sad time because the profits from the sugar barter had dropped to zero. The limit had been reached. We bought and shipped only one batch at the limit price, because it collapsed in our city – yesterday papers with the numbers "380" hung everywhere, and the next morning – "260". The buyers were gone like the wind. There was a "sugar break" in the city. The neighbors became sad. I understood them; appetite comes with eating. Ordinary shoppers had once again fallen into a simple economic trap – yielding to panic and herd instinct, they thoughtlessly grabbed the goods in stock at the highest price, squandering their savings. Only the occasional car pulled up for sugar, a loader lazily taking out a sack and putting it in the trunk of the customer's car. The other loaders sat outside in their shorts on empty beer crates, sunbathing and nibbling sunflower seeds. A lazy, hot wind carried pieces of packing polyethylene and bags around the depot. With only one month of big beer sales ahead of us, September, my father and I toiled every day, trying to make money.

We were lucky with the weather, but unlucky with the barter – the brewery announced that starting in October they would only accept money to offset beer sales. And since that was the case, there was no point in selling beer at all. The news came as a bolt from the blue. After all the expenses and the rent for the warehouse, the profits from the sale of the beer itself would only be enough to keep us on our feet. We didn't want to spin our wheels, development was a crying need for us. In the same month, the thin hopes for the rural beer melted away, the brewery was going to raise the selling price in October – the end of the beer business was coming. And, as is often the case, Fate allowed us to earn a small severance bonus.

The second Saturday in September is our city day. In the two weeks leading up to the holiday, there was always good alcohol wholesale – the retail stores bought up the supplies. Suddenly, the city ran out of cheap local beer. Two days later, the wholesalers bought up a week's supply of ours as well. Three days before the holiday, there was no cheap beer in the depots, and all that was left was to bring in the rural beer as a matter of urgency. Early in the morning I jumped into the cab of the "ZiL" car with the driver I already knew, and we drove off. It took me two hours to load the car and I was very tired: the factory loaders were drunk and only carried crates of beer from the shop to the side of the car. I worked alone in the body, taking the crates from the edge and carrying them deep into the car, where I placed them in rows and columns under the top of the tent as high as my height would allow. The last three rows I made at the edge. "Absolutely packed... four hundred and seventy crates,"

the words ran through my head as I sat down tiredly in the cab. We started our return trip at noon. "Three hours of driving, I'll drop a hundred on the left bank, that's four... then another hundred crates on the right, and the rest to the warehouse... It's okay, I have to make it by six, I think I can make it..." I estimated, finally relaxed, came back to reality, and immediately felt that the car was overloaded. The engine pulled well, the overload felt in the measured rocking of the body to the rhythm of the curves and irregularities of the road. The leaf springs on the rear axle squeaked pitifully. A couple of times I looked in the side mirror and saw that the wheels were so pressed down that it looked like we were driving on half-flat tires. Finally, as we left the regional roads for the highway, the ZiL began to ride softer, bouncing less. I closed my eyes and dozed off.

We were about twenty kilometers into the city when the right rear tire blew. It was a big explosion. We stopped. There was a fist-sized gaping hole in the right outer tire, with cord sticking out. The car was leaning slightly on its side, one of a pair of inner tires sagging for two. I looked at my watch – there was still time. After replacing the wheel, we drove on. It was four o'clock. For ten minutes we drove in gloomy silence, and I kept squinting in the mirror. Just as we were relaxing from what had happened, a second explosion went off. Again from my side, but already the inner rear. We couldn't replace it without unloading the car. The driver slowed down instinctively. I looked intently in the mirror – the wheel, which was still intact, was shrinking so much that it seemed to me it would explode next. But it held. We had another forty minutes to get to the first depot. The driver and I looked at each other and decided to continue on one wheel at our own risk. With such a high center of gravity, we'd probably tip over if it exploded too. "If only we could get there in time..." I was nervous because I knew that the depot accepted goods until five o'clock.

It was ten to five when we crawled into the depot area. As soon as the truck touched the ramp at the back of the warehouse, I was relieved that we had made it. The driver opened the back, the loaders reached for the goods, and the unloading began. I was standing nearby. A few meters of the floor had been emptied when the driver came back and looked inside the body.

"Well, should I take them out?" I nodded at the solid wall of crates. I didn't want to put too much load on the rear axle, and leaving the crates in high rows was dangerous.

"No, that's okay, we'll get there, they won't fall over!" the driver confidently brushed me off.

"How's the wheel? Still holding up?" I said.

"It's okay, it's much easier now, we'll make it!" the driver lightened up.

I looked down, the wheel lifted slightly, a few tons less in the back of the truck after all. As soon as the loaders were finished, I quickly handed over the goods, ran to the office, signed the papers, jumped into the cab of the ZiL, impatiently blurted out: "Let's go!"

The truck drove slowly out of the depot gate, turned left, and joined the stream of cars. Three hundred meters later, at a large T-intersection, we ran a red light and stopped. The hard trip and two blown tires made me nervous, and just then I felt a wave of relaxation sweep through my mind and body. I exhaled tiredly, wanting only one thing – to end this endless day and go home. Green. The driver abruptly released the clutch and the truck jerked. There was a rumble, a clang, a clink, and a crackle of shattering glass in the back.

"They fell over after all!" I blurted out with a flash of anger. The driver looked at me startled. I was angry at him for telling me not to move the beer crates, angry at myself for listening to the man and being lazy, and now I was losing money and had at least half an hour of extra work. The car rolled through the intersection almost by inertia, I heard the pouring sound, and I looked in the mirror – the beer was flowing through the cracks in the bodywork onto the asphalt.

"Stop right after the intersection!" I said with restraint, trying to suppress a flash of anger. Two wheels, damaged goods – it was clearly a bad trip. We pulled off to the side of the wide dirt road under the shade of a large tree. From the cab, I stared at the long yellow foam tail stretching across the intersection. It was still pouring from the back of the car, and the smell of beer hit my nose. The driver came over, lamented a bit for the sake of decency, made a sad face, and untied the awning from behind. I reached inside. The crates were lying like dominoes. The top ones were fine. Most of the bottles in the bottom ones were broken, and the rest had flown out of the crumpled crates and were rolling around. I stared at the picture for a minute, wondering where to begin.

"We have to take down some of these crates!" I said to the driver, who was standing outside looking guilty. "I'll give them to you and you put them on the ground and then we'll throw them back in!"

People stared at us curiously from the passing cars. The smell of beer wafted across the intersection. I gathered intact bottles from under my feet into the empty crate boxes. I pulled some of the half-empty crates out to make more room underfoot. The bottom crates still wouldn't move. I carefully climbed on top of the rubble. I pushed the top of the fallen rows back upright. It swayed a little and then fell back into place. So, one by one, I put half of the rows back. There was a mess of crates, bottles and broken glass underneath. I jumped down to the ground and assessed the damage – it wasn't that bad, no more than ten crates were broken. I was relieved. The driver was off somewhere. I went through the crates on the ground. Half the bottles were broken. I stacked the broken glass in a pile on the lawn, a janitor would clean it up, I filled the crates and put them in the back of the truck. The empty crates followed. The driver, who suddenly appeared, tied up the tent and we drove to the right bank. We didn't lose much time, it was about six o'clock. Forty minutes later we were at the second depot, unloaded, and arrived at our warehouse at nine o'clock. My father was waiting for us in our "second". As he and I unloaded the beer, I told him everything to get it off my chest, subconsciously looking for support. In his typical dry manner, he pointed out my mistakes, told me what I should and shouldn't have done. Everything was flaring up inside me, but I remained silent. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. The one who does nothing is never wrong. It hurt me that instead of moral support, I received the expected rebuke. I suddenly realized that this had always been the case. No matter what I did, my father would meticulously find fault in my actions and blame me. That was his nature.

We paid the driver and he left. It was getting dark. The only people left in the depot were us and the guards, since everyone had closed the warehouses and left long ago. The only light coming out onto the street was ours. We rolled our beers into the warehouse and got home around midnight. I took a shower, ate dinner, and went right to sleep, and I had no dreams.

The loss of the trip didn't stop us from making good money on the last batch, two-thirds of which sold out before the holiday, the rest two weeks after.

In October, my father and I made a firm decision to close down the beer business. Surprisingly, the decision was not difficult for me, as I intuitively recognized one of the most important rules of business: if a business is no longer profitable, you have to stop it before it starts to drain you of money, time and effort. Or it needs to be transformed and taken to a whole new level. We didn't have the money for the second option. Besides, I didn't see selling beer as the business of a lifetime. I had a clear understanding that my dad and I were going to do commercially profitable operations on anything and everything until we made enough money to start something significant.

We settled accounts with the factories. We loaded the empty crates and the expired beer into the car, and my father took them to Elets. I was left alone in the warehouse, I went in, it was empty. Suddenly I felt the same. I went outside. The day was sunny, warm and calm. Life in the depot seemed to stand still on a working day, not a soul around. I lit a cigarette.

After I finished smoking, I closed the warehouse and walked home. Our beer business was over.

CHAPTER 3

The end of October 2000. What should I do next? As usual, I began to leaf through all the commercial publications. "Grocery store invites business partners. The store has a processing shop." I showed the ad to my father, who thought about it, scratched his nose and said: "Hmm, interesting." I put the phone in my father's hand, he called the number, made an appointment, and off we went.

The small, semi-basement store was conveniently located at the end of a nine-story brick building, past which the flow of people from the bus stop to the courtyards passed. The steps of the entrance led down to the canopy. Behind the front door was a thirty-meter square sales room with empty stalls. From there, two corridors led to the back room: the closer one led to the left to the storage room; the farther one led straight up a short staircase, which immediately turned right at a right angle, and after three more steps emerged on the first floor of the building to the back room and the second exit from the store, the technical one. Its iron door led to an inner courtyard, perfect for parking and delivering goods. The store gave a mixed impression; it wasn't bad, but it looked sloppy. As if it had been run by someone slovenly. I turned over what I saw in my mind, and I understood that the store was supposed to make a good profit, but everything in it was neglected: shabby walls that hadn't been repaired in a long time, bedraggled stalls, a noisy and straining old refrigerator, and cockroaches, which I saw several times on my first visit. The husband and wife who placed the ad turned out to be just like the surroundings: a man of medium height, of common build, with a machine haircut, whose unintelligent eyes made me understand immediately that he was not in charge of the business, but his perky wife, a woman of small stature, a full-bodied brunette with a short cut of curly hair. Unlike her husband, the woman made an impression as a person of active habits. Both looked about forty years old. The woman had a daughter, about six years old, who was almost a copy of her mother's face. My intuition immediately told me that the husband was not the girl's father. It turned out later that he was an ex-convict. The whole family came out to meet us, dressed as if they were at home: the woman in a blue and white robe and slippers; the man in black baggy tights tucked into his socks, slippers, and a light baize shirt. The girl ran out of the darkness of the far corridor in pantyhose, a sweater, and a frayed doll in her hand. Scrubby, untidy, in stale clothes... A typical working family. What on earth were they doing in this business, and how did they get into it?

"Where's the shop here!?" I remembered, turned around and looked into the watery eyes of the woman. "You said in your ad that there was a meat-processing shop."

She waved her arms, averted her slightly vacant gaze, and walked toward the storage room. In the next corridor was another door, innocuous-looking. The woman opened it. I let my father and the man go in front of me and entered last. I liked what I saw: a fully equipped shop, about fifty meters square. The equipment didn't look new, but it worked. It seemed that the shop was located just below the back room of the store. I hung around, curious, while my father, as a former military man of the home front, was excited about it. I understood his attitude; if the shop was given a head start, it would be possible to set up semi-finished goods production with a minimum of money. Our own production! The shop turned out to be the factor that got us to agree. Personally, I was not happy about the prospect of having to deal with endless inspections. After the beer hassle, I intuitively began to lean toward products

with a long shelf life or no shelf life at all. I began to develop a persistent aversion to foodstuffs.

We made a simple agreement with our future partners: we provide the money for the goods and the turnover, they provide the store, and we share the profit. We started in the first days of November. We set up an office in the back room of the store. It was cramped: an old heavy safe in the corner, a shabby couch across from it, a scruffy coffee table and two armchairs in the middle. In the first week we ordered and received all the goods we needed from the wholesalers, cleaned the place, washed the windows and put everything in order. Almost immediately, the peculiarities of the newly minted partners began to emerge. The man turned out to be lazy and clumsy in the economic sense, unable and unwilling to do anything. He quickly assumed the role of a leader, began to walk around aimlessly, and gave orders to everyone. About five scars were visible on the man's head, disturbing the growth of hair. It turned out that his wife had arranged them for him. With an ax. She actually had tried to kill her husband with an ax some time before. He told us the origin of the scars without embarrassment and even with a certain cockiness. The woman turned out to be a silent schizophrenic. Logical persuasion did not work for her, she immediately turned to screaming and emotion. By the end of the first week, we realized that our partners were shitty entrepreneurs. Their backstory revealed new facts every day. The family used to live somewhere in the region, a year ago the woman suddenly decided to go into business, encouraged her husband to sell the only thing they had – an apartment – and rent this store. So, with a child to maintain, they found themselves homeless and crammed into a small room in the store, the entrance to which I only noticed in a dark corner of the staircase when the woman showed it to me. Within a year, the proceeds from the apartment and the money invested in the goods had been successfully eaten up, and the ad appeared in the newspaper, to which my father and I responded. It became clear that if he and I were going to keep the store afloat, we would have to do all the business ourselves. There was no accounting department as such, before us the records were kept in different notebooks and in bits and pieces, it was impossible to get a handle on it. We started the new accounting, the business slowly but surely moved from a dead point – buyers began to come, revenues began to grow. And then all the strangeness of our partners began to show, because of which they were actually in such deep shit. As soon as we brought in the goods, the products began to disappear. The man and the woman denied it for a long time, the man even became demonstratively indignant, but under the pressure of the facts he shut up, and both were forced to admit the theft. But they did it cleverly – they blamed it all on their daughter. The sales room and the storage room were separated from the upper space – the living room and the back room – by a door, which we proposed to lock with a padlock on the side of the hall. The partners reluctantly agreed. The disappearances stopped for a week and then started again – a miserable excuse for a family had nothing to eat. By the end of the second week, it was clear that we had to leave the store, and the sooner the better. The bull-calf incident finally solved everything. One weekday morning we drove up to the back exit and knocked on the door. As usual, the woman opened. We went into the back room and began to sort out the morning's bills, one of which was frozen in my father's hands.

"What is this payment, for what meat?" he asked the woman.

"We bought a bull-calf," she said, looking at us with her usual distracted look.

"What bull-calf!?" my father stared at the woman, sitting in a chair by the safe.

I listened while standing in the corner of the room, squeamishness preventing me from sitting in an armchair. I never got used to the dirt in the store, and only on rare occasions of extreme fatigue did I sit down on the scruffy furniture in the room.

"Suppliers came here, they slaughtered a bull calf in the morning. They brought it to us and we bought it," the woman began to mutter, her eyes darting around anxiously.

"The whole bull calf!?" my father's eyes popped out of their sockets.

"Well, yeah, what's the big deal? We're going to cut it up and sell it through the store," the woman explained nonchalantly, but began to fidget with her robe.

"How are we supposed to sell it through the store!?" my father's eyes glazed over and froze on the woman's face. "How much meat do we sell a day!?"

The woman hesitated. My father's face hardened, his teeth clenched – these signs of growing anger were familiar to me. My father repeated the question.

"Well, I don't know, about twenty kilos, I guess..." the woman mumbled, smelling a rat.

"Twenty!?" my father raised his voice. "Ten at the most! Ten! We just started working, we don't have many customers yet. How much does the bull calf weigh!?"

The woman remained silent. My father repeated the question.

"Three hundred and eighty kilograms," the woman said reluctantly.

"Where are we supposed to put all this meat? Is it whole? Did you buy the live weight!?" my father pressed, his face blushing.

The man emerged from the closet below to hear the noise. He stopped on the steps in the doorway and listened intently, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Well, yeah, the whole thing is in the shop," the woman cheered, rising to a falsetto voice. "It's all right, we'll cut it up and sell it! I have the right to buy goods, too!"

"Who's going to cut it up!?" my father stepped forward, almost shouting, his gaze fixed on the woman's face, and then he jabbed his finger at her husband, barking. "He!?"

"No, I don't know how..." the man immediately put his hands out in front of him and disappeared back into the closet.

"So who's going to cut up the bull calf!!?" my father snapped at the bewildered woman again.

"I have the right to buy goods, too!!!" the woman protested. "I saw fit to buy it!!!"

"Then go and cut it up!!!" my father flipped out.

"I don't know how!!!" the woman screamed and followed her husband. The store was quiet. My father looked at me, put his arms around his head, elbows on the table, and froze. Then he lifted his head, swore softly, and looked at me again.

"What are we going to do?" he said, at a loss.

I didn't realize the complexity of the situation, so I was completely calm. I understood everything simply – the case was a mess and it had to be dealt with!

"Let's go to the shop," I muttered, pushing off the wall with my shoulder.

"Right!" my father exclaimed in relief, as if my words had snapped him out of his stupor. My father, as if he had received an order and obeyed the instincts of years of military service, immediately jumped to his feet, ready to carry it out. It was probably at that moment

that I first noticed this peculiarity of his. We went into the shop. There was not a sound coming from the closet.

For ten minutes we just stared at the carcass. It lay on a large cutting table, glistening with veterinary seals. I had no idea even where to poke the knife into the carcass, but all I knew was that it had to be cut as quickly as possible, we had to put the meat in the refrigerator, and then think about selling it. It was good that my father had the experience. I was only fit to be an apprentice.

"All right, tell me what to do..." I nodded at him. "You take charge and I'll help..."

We fiddled with the carcass all day – cutting, chopping, putting the meat in boxes and taking them to the refrigerator. In the evening, the bull calf was completely cut up. We did the most important thing, which was to preserve the meat. I was very tired, we drove home mostly in silence.

New day, new task – to quickly sell the meat in small wholesale. A tenth of it was left for sale through the store. My father negotiated with traders at one of the markets, and we took most of the two hundred kilograms to them. When they realized that it was a stalemate, they lowered the prices to the limit. Having earned nothing, we only got our money back. We were left with the bones and the most expensive meat.

"The tenderloin should be taken straight to a cafe or restaurant," I suggested, and the next day we sold it to one of the cafes. A day later, my father sold the bones to someone. All in all, we almost got back the money the woman had spent on the bull calf, and ended up with a small loss.

December came. The store's sales were almost frozen at a minimum profit, and food from the store room kept disappearing. One day, my father, the woman, her husband and their daughter gathered in the back room. My father informed the partners that we were leaving the store and offered to advertise for a replacement. The reaction was predictable: the man fidgeted in his chair and, with an angry expression on his face, spoke in a desperate tone about how, by taking the money for the goods that would be sold, my father and I were leaving them, poor people, alone with the remnants of unsellable goods. To stop the blabbing, we offered to take all the goods, even the ones the woman had irrationally bought with our money, and then part ways for good. The man immediately howled that it wasn't right, and what about the store without the goods, and what would they live on anyway. I smiled inwardly; the man was a common slacker, accustomed to living at the expense of others, and unwilling to accept that he would no longer be carried on the shoulders of others. The woman didn't mind much, just mumbled something and then fell silent, her eyes downcast. When he was left alone, the man also gave up. So said, so done. My father and I put an ad in the paper and waited for a response. By the end of the first week, we had received five phone calls to no avail. The atmosphere in the store was tense, the woman was stiff, the man looked at us unkindly. My only thought was to find a "chump" who would buy the goods and free us from our inadequate business partners. The odds of success seemed long, but I believed in miracles, and another call came at the beginning of the second week. My father was on the phone and a deep male voice expressed a desire to come up to see the store. That evening two men entered the store. I looked at them and realized that they had money. We talked for ten minutes and it became clear that they were eager to start their own business. One was a tall, big guy in his thirties with the pink, smooth face of a well-fed office worker. The other,

scrawny and of medium height, looked like a quiet office weasel. The young men actually worked in management positions at a large candy company. Their inner drive for self-fulfillment pushed them from a high-paying, stable but hired job to the shaky ground of entrepreneurship. Not abandoning the first, they chose to practice the second, a wise decision. The whole time we were talking to the guests and showing them around the store, our partners were expressing an annoyed indifference to what was going on. The woman was silent, and the man with the disdainful expression on his face made a few disparaging remarks about us, clearly intended for the ears of the guests. Anger grew within me, and a lingering feeling that if the deal fell through, the man would secretly feel joy and satisfaction. The tension grew. My father and I tried our best to ignore the man's outbursts. In reality, I just wanted to punch him in the face. The guests left after saying they would think about it and call us. I was nervous for two days. On the morning of the third day, the bigger guy called and agreed to buy our share. My heart was beating with joy so fast it almost jumped out of my chest. That same evening, the duo came back and discussed the details of the deal with me, my father, and the woman. The woman's husband didn't show his face all day, and later, whenever we met, he defiantly ignored me and my father. The deal was simple: the new companions would buy all the goods, my father and I would get the money, and we would be free to go.

"Except we don't buy the candy," the big guy said. "We have our own, we sell candy, you know..."

"Okay, we'll take the candy," I nodded immediately. "You're okay with the rest of the goods, right? Let's count it and balance it out?"

"Yes, let's count the rest," the big guy nodded.

Later, outside, without the woman and the man, we agreed with our substitutes that they would buy the goods not at the purchase price, but at a ten percent markup. I explained the markup by saying that the goods were already in the store, so they wouldn't have to spend time finding them, pricing them, and delivering them. They agreed and set up the deal for tomorrow. My father and I drove home elated – we were only twenty-four hours away from the freedom that was flickering before us.

The next day, from morning to night, we counted the goods in the store. Neither the man nor the woman were present, they resentfully left it to us. And then came the moment of handing over the money – I, my father and the two substitutes froze in the middle of the sales room.

"So, how much do we owe you with the markup?" the big guy said.

My father typed the total amount into a calculator, added the interest, and showed him the resulting figure. The guy nodded and reached into his pocket for the money.

"What markup exactly!?" a voice came from behind us. Everyone flinched and turned around. The man appeared at the most inappropriate moment, like a jack in the box. The big guy's hand, which had been reaching for the money, froze halfway out of his pocket.

"What do you mean, what markup?" my father said with restraint, but clenched his jaw. "We agreed with the guys that we would sell them the goods at a ten percent markup."

"I don't get it, why on earth are you selling the goods at such a markup?" the man came closer with a challenging voice and a businesslike air. Now I was the one who wanted to hit him with an ax.

For the finale, the asshole had decided to do dirt on us, and I could see it in his eyes. My insides immediately boiled over. I turned my head to the side so I wouldn't say anything rude.

"What do you mean, why at such a markup!?" my father glared at the man. "We negotiated this markup with the guys beforehand, and they agreed. The markup is for us bringing the goods here in our car from the wholesale depots to the store."

"No, it won't do!" the man said excitedly, his eyes glittering.

The substitutes immediately turned their attention to him. The big guy stuffed the money into his pocket. I began to pace nervously around the sales room, just to avoid seeing the man's satisfied mug. My father's face froze in incomprehension, his lower jaw dropping in confusion.

"What do you mean, it won't do!?" my father got angry. "Did you transport the goods!? Did you carry it!? You didn't lift a finger to do anything but walk around telling us what to do!"

My father went on a rampage. I understood him perfectly, but arguing in front of potential buyers was the worst thing that could happen to a deal, there was a chance to screw it up. And that was exactly what the man wanted. My father had to be stopped fast.

"I didn't do anything!? This is my store! I am the boss here!" the man spread his arms in a wide gesture and walked along the counter, but just in case, on the other side of my father.

"Come on, Dad," I said loudly, waving my hand. "Just little nothings of life!"

The man pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket and twirled it nervously between his fingers. Everyone looked at me.

"If ten percent is a lot, what markup would suit you?" I said.

The man was a little confused by the point-blank question, but quickly regained his composure.

"None of it will suit me! The product must be sold without a markup! No markup, then I agree!" he immediately dropped the phrase at the height of his importance.

"All right, it's a deal," I nodded calmly, routinely turning the conversation to the big guy. "How much did we get without a markup? What was it?"

The shared tension dissipated and everyone froze at a loss. The man was astonished – the question was solved in an instant and his person fell out of the spotlight. My father and the big guy looked at the notebook. My father called out the amount, and the guy agreed and nodded.

"Well, that's it, pay up then, and let's go!" I said even more routinely. "We still have to pick up the unaccepted goods and go home, and it's already dark. We've been here all day..."

The phrase worked – the big guy finally pulled out a wad of cash.

"It's just that I have dollars, is that okay?" he said, as if apologizing. "I didn't have time to change them into rubles..."

"Whatever! Dad, just count it at the exchange rate, is all! I'll go get the candy in the car," I said at once, not giving the man time to think, and began to pick up the goods vigorously. The big guy counted out the money and handed it to my father. I put on my jacket and walked out the back door to my car with a few boxes in my hands. It was dark everywhere, daylight had long since gone out. After loading the goods, we drove home.

"I'm starting to freak out," I said as the "second" pulled out of the yard, my whole body shaking. My fingers were twitching like crazy and I clenched them into fists, but it didn't help.

"I'm freaking out myself!" my father replied immediately.

We drove down the snowy county road in near total darkness, only catching large snowflakes in our headlights. They rushed toward us and swirled mesmerizingly over the hood. Shivering was quickly replaced by euphoria and my heart pounded with joy. Freedom! My whole being rejoiced at the word, as if we had jumped out of a bad dream that had happened to us through a ridiculous mistake. We just wanted to get rid of the remnants of it and move forward without looking back. A great weight was lifted from our shoulders. We didn't say another word until we got home. Like an enchanted man, I stared at the snow flying toward me, trying to make out every single snowflake. I liked them all, they were beautiful. The snow was beautiful. The winter road in the headlights was beautiful. I was in the best, most comfortable car in the world. Everything in me was filled with a sense of beauty, and it was as if time had stopped. It was only two weeks until New Year's Eve. I was perfectly happy.

For the next week, my father and I slept off the fatigue of the previous days. There was no hurry. We counted the money, and the loss from the store was twenty thousand rubles. It was a lot. In two months we had lost almost half of what we had earned in two years of selling beer.

"Yeah, it sucks..." I sighed, sitting in the kitchen with my father. "If I had known it was going to be like this... Who knew... Well, it's no big deal, we'll make money..."

My father, after counting the rest of the money, gave me a long accusatory speech, saying that I was thick-headed and that once something got into my head, it was impossible to change my mind. I was indignant, I objected, I said that we made the same decision together and that neither of us was to blame, it just happened that way. But we remained unconvinced after the brief argument, and I left the kitchen with a bitter taste in my mouth, feeling my father's heavy, displeased gaze on the back of my head. My reflex was to do something immediately, to start a new business, to distract myself from the failure that had occurred. I searched my mind for at least one idea, but to no avail – my brain was in a state of emptiness and indifference. The approach of New Year's Eve somehow lifted my spirits. We indulged in the hustle and bustle of the holiday, spending a little money on presents for ourselves and my mother. I spent New Year's Eve at home, eating tangerines in front of the TV.

"What should we do next?" was the question that came to mind after the holidays. There was no answer. I looked through all the magazines and newspapers I could find, with no result. My father, to my surprise, did the same. On the second day of the search, he came to me with a newspaper in his hands and showed me an advertisement about someone selling used car tires in the Baltic States and offered to buy them there and sell them in our city. I was not impressed by the idea, I saw many disadvantages in it: little money of our own; regular car trips over long distances; transportation of cash; a completely new and unfamiliar business. I rejected the offer, realizing that it was more reasonable to use the experience we already had with the city's wholesale depots. A day later, my father put another ad under my

nose, inviting loggers to the logging sites in the north. My father liked the idea, but I didn't. One of us was to stay in the city, and the other was to go north, take over the logging site, hire and manage the logging crews. The one who stayed here was to get the logs, store them, and sell them. My father was so serious about the idea that he immediately bought a complete set of warm clothes and a nice, expensive down jacket. The work seemed complicated to me, and I didn't like the idea of us splitting up, since we worked so well together. I also realized that I would not be able to handle my part of the work, and I told my father. That was the end of our excitement.

I decided to get a job. Not finding any really interesting positions, I got a job with a shady company. The company rented two shabby rooms in a large administrative building of a defunct factory. Two of the owners of the company sat in one room, and ten other employees occupied the other room. When I asked what the organization did, the answer was that it did everything. "Everything means nothing," I suspected, but I needed the money, so I decided not to jump to conclusions. All the employees were sitting at personal desks. They pointed me to an empty desk and chair and explained the job: I had to call everyone and their sister and offer what we had. But did we have anything? I never saw a warehouse of products. The staff called other organizations and offered the goods on the price list. The list of offers was very surprising – from nuts and bolts to elevators. After a few days I had the impression that the whole world was trading through this room. An incomprehensible job, no one sold anything, the activity was like a self-sufficient process. Making calls for the sake of making calls, going to work for the sake of going to work. The question of payment seemed even more obscure, I was told that I would be paid by the piece and when I sold something. How do you sell something that is not there? After hanging on the phone for the first three days, I could already draw conclusions: the company's employee turnover was high, no one stayed longer than three months, none of the employees had seen their salaries yet. I gave up calling and, like everyone else, started imitating activity. By the end of the first week, I realized I was wasting my time. And then I was called into the next room. It was an event after all. The two owners told me that the company was participating in a tender to supply medical equipment to the city's hospitals, and that I needed to go on a business trip to Moscow to gather information. Technically, I could have refused. I understood that I would not see any money anyway, but my desire to relax, to go to Moscow and at least get some impressions prevailed. I was given the address of a company apartment and a travel allowance for three days.

Another Monday morning I arrived in the capital. I found the apartment at the address, an ordinary one-room apartment on the first floor of a "Khrushchevka" building. The door was opened by a relative of one of the company executives. I greeted the guy, left my things by the bed, and went straight out to run errands. After a day of running around, I returned in the evening, ate dinner, and lay down on the bed. Although I was tired, but my idleness had lasted only half an hour, I looked around the room: two beds, a closet, a table and two chairs. On the floor by the table was a pile of thick commercial magazines. I picked up a few and began to leaf through them. I became interested and didn't even realize that I was seriously looking for ads. My inner voice kept pushing me back to the path of my own business. I was increasingly drawn back to real work. After reflecting on my experience with beer, I came to a simple understanding: we needed a first party supplier, a manufacturer or an importer;

delivery of the goods by the supplier himself; the goods should have a long shelf life; delivery on deferred or partial prepayment terms or, even better, on sale. Only the regions could give us such conditions. Moscow, as the city with the toughest contract terms, was immediately rejected. Since our city was on a federal highway, I had to look for a supplier on the other side of Moscow. In the course of the evening I went through the whole pile. Three ads looked interesting, and one of them was the right one – a small household chemical company was looking for regional distributors for their products. I went to the phone on the table and called home, told my father about the ad, gave my reasons for starting the job, and he agreed.

"Okay, call Krasnodar! Get the price from them, make the arrangements, I'll come in a couple of days, you tell me everything," I summarized.

The next day I ran around Moscow again, and when I got back I immediately called home.

"Well, good news," my father's voice sounded happy. "I talked to the owner of the company... Anyway, we made a deal..."

My chest rumbled, and I was not mistaken – intuition was guiding me once again. I spent the next few minutes meticulously questioning my father about the nuances of the negotiations.

"We agreed that we would order the goods, they would bring them to us, we would pay half immediately and the other half upon realization, and before ordering the next batch, we would pay the previous one in full," my father explained.

"Great!" I blurted out. "Just what we need! I'll come back and we'll get started!"

Early the next morning I found myself at home, took a shower, had breakfast, discussed a pending case with my father, then raked up all the documents I had collected in Moscow and drove to the company to work. I reported on my work and asked to go home to rest after the business trip. On the way, I bought some fresh newspapers and when I got home for lunch, I started reading them. Ten minutes and I found the right one – a one-line ad saying that a manufacturer from Krasnodar was looking for regional distributors. The phone number was different. The company turned out to be almost a copy of the first one, and with better prices. We reached an agreement with the owner even faster. So overnight, the prospect of a new business came out of nowhere. The rush of energy and the feeling of a new chapter in my life completely took over. I called the office where I had been hanging around for the past two weeks and told them I was quitting.

CHAPTER 4

By that time, I had already understood one thing clearly: working for someone else is the worst future a person can choose. You only have to build and develop your own business. The sooner the better. And no matter how much you want to reach the heights of life in the blink of an eye, you must be prepared for a long road. The basis of any business is a progressive movement and Chance. Progressive movement means to set only those tasks that are feasible. After accomplishing them, it is necessary to set the next tasks and move on to the next step. And so on until the second factor – Chance – comes into play. One must always wait for it and feel its approach. And when it comes, do not hesitate. Chance will immediately take you to a new level, just hold on tight on your way up. Intuition feels the Chance, they're on the same team. The ability to listen to intuition, to sense the Chance is as necessary as the ability to move progressively. If the latter skill is the ability to be a stayer, then Chance is a sprinter. If you are always a stayer, you will run less in your life than you could, and if you are only a sprinter, life will kick you to the curb on one of the turns. I realized that Fate had given us another *carte blanche* that we had to use, we were going to run a stayer race to a new Chance. And we needed a fax machine. There was less and less money every day. We bought the cheapest one we could find. I was so proud – now we have a fax machine! And I wanted to use it as soon as possible.

Looking for a warehouse, we drove to the previous depot without thinking twice. It was noticeably revived; about a third of the warehouses were already occupied. The "sugar guys" were working, the food wholesalers had disappeared, the neighbors with household chemicals were still occupying part of the huge warehouse.

Suddenly we had a rental problem. We needed a small warehouse and none was available. Once again, chance came to our rescue: the "sugar guys," who had used their summer earnings to buy a store in another part of the city in the winter and opened a second store there, offered us a lease. It was very cost-effective, and we didn't hesitate to accept.

Spring came early that year, with temperatures even above freezing at night. The warming sun quickly cleared the roads of ice and snow. The first truck arrived after the March 8 holiday, bringing four pallets of goods for sale. Within an hour and a half, my father and I were excitedly unloading everything into the store. I was in a state of euphoria – the work had begun! A week later, another car arrived from the second company. We paid for half of the batch and had about five thousand rubles left. Just enough to live on for a month.

We toured the wholesale depots, offered new goods, quickly signed sales contracts, and within two weeks we had the depots filled with the goods. We were still running our business in the same primitive way: no Internet, no cell phone, no computer. The fax machine was our only office equipment. Cell phones were expensive, and only the very wealthy could afford them. My father kept the books, recording all the movements of the goods in a notebook by waybills. We continued to write them by hand. Shipments were infrequent, there were few bills, and the accounting took little time. A normal working day was as follows: we called customers in the morning, collected orders, prepared waybills at home, drove to the warehouse, loaded the goods into the "second" and delivered them.

The "sugar guys" store was in an inconvenient location, so we hung around there for a month and decided to try our luck again at the previous depot. But there were still no small warehouses available. And then we ran into our former neighbors again. Of the entire warehouse, they rented only the section closest to the entrance for household chemicals. The empty back meters went into a dull, dark void. We were offered to rent any space in their warehouse, we agreed, and within two days we moved our inventory in.

It got warmer every day. The goods were selling little by little. But money was scarce – to pay one supplier, we used the money of another, and vice versa. In addition to the mixed depots in the city, there were more grocery stores and specialized stores for household chemicals, perfumes, and housewares. They also accepted goods for sale. Money came slowly, but sometimes there was no other way – no one would buy new goods from unknown suppliers. It is always difficult to get started.

After gathering some information about the specialized depots, we first visited the largest one, "Arbalest". After wandering through the busy corridors of the two-story building, my father and I met the manager of the purchasing and sales department. Phlegmatic, about thirty years old, tall, balding and therefore with a machine haircut, kind-hearted, he listened to us and immediately ordered to "try" the first batch of detergents. When I realized the size of the order, I almost jumped for joy, because the manager had ordered a third of our stock of the product, adding a minute later that he had ordered it for a week or ten days. The next day we stuffed thirty packs into the "second" to the gills and took them to "Arbalest". The car sank almost to the ground. The storekeepers and loaders at the depot, when they saw it, just grunted and shook their heads.

The second place we visited a few days later was "Mongoose", also a fairly large company. We quickly reached an agreement with the managers and received exactly the same order.

In addition to a couple large depots, there were about two dozen medium and small wholesalers that we wanted to visit.

"There's a fax for you, bismissmen!" my mother said loudly and ironically as my father and I appeared on the doorstep. Just like that – bismissmen, a deliberate distortion of the word.

Another working day was over and I wanted to get out of my clothes and into a hot bath as soon as possible. I went to wash my hands. A minute later, when I came out of the bathroom, I saw my father reading a piece of paper that had been torn off crookedly.

"What is it that they sent us?" I said.

My father read the lines and remained silent.

I stepped closer and ran my eyes over the text.

"Dear partners, we are pleased to inform you that our company has started the production of laundry blue in 200 ml containers, pack of 30 pieces. Hope for further fruitful cooperation". And at the bottom was the signature of the director of the second company.

I was terribly excited, but then I realized that I had no idea why they needed such a product, so I said irritably, "Damn, big thrill all right! Laundry blue!" and went to my room.

"Ooh!" came from behind me. "That's interesting!"

"Laundry blue!?" I was surprised and came back. "What's so interesting about it!?"

My father sat down on the old couch, worn at the corners, and crossed his legs.

"This stuff should sell well. I remember when I was a kid, my mom used to use it to whitewash the walls and ceilings in the house. It's a good product!" he said loudly, pointing his finger at the sheet. He nearly pierced it. And then he started to dangle his foot in his slipper.

"What's with the blue if you have to whitewash it? It's blue, isn't it?" I stared at my father.

"They put it in the whitewash on purpose, to give it a slightly bluish color, otherwise the walls would turn yellow," my father said in a proud tone, and from his inner satisfaction he jerked his foot even harder. The slipper wiggled its heel, jumped off his foot and bounced away.

"Sure..." I mumbled and went to the kitchen.

I remained critical of the new product, but I trusted my father's confidence. He offered to order thirty boxes. We received them in the second shipment and sold them within a few days. I felt the adrenaline rush again; we had to move fast. Once a month we would get a truckload of goods. Wait a month? No way! I encouraged my father to call the manufacturer and order just the blue, without waiting for a scheduled delivery. We had not paid for the previous batch, so we negotiated a concession with the owner of the company: we agreed to pay for half the batch in advance and the rest upon sale. We barely scraped together the money we needed, transferred it to the company's account, and waited for the car. On the day the "GAZelle" was to arrive in our city, we walked around the apartment as if tied to the phone, waiting for the call. The convenience of a cell phone was becoming more obvious every day, but we still couldn't afford one. To give away eight to ten thousand for a phone, a third of all the money we had? What was there to work with? An unattainable luxury.

The "GAZelle" crawled into the depot almost on its back axle. "That's quite a load," I grunted and opened the warehouse gate. Our instincts were right; the entire batch was sold through "Arbalest" and "Mongoose" within two weeks. That's how we first got a feel for our product intuition – sales of the blue were increasing rapidly. There was a catastrophic shortage of money and almost no inventory, so we did the best we could.

The rest of our lives went on as usual. My parents fought from time to time, and I avoided their squabbles by spending my free time away from home.

In the spring of 2001, our sales were growing, the first significant revenues were coming in, and hardly noticeable amounts of free money were appearing. Understanding that they should not lie idle, I again delved into commercial information and, following the tried-and-true technology, came across a small manufacturer of cheap detergents from Moscow. The price he told me on the phone was not bad, but taking into account the delivery, the profit turned out to be miserable. I thought about it, the problem had to be solved. And then it hit me: barter!

The beginning of the "aughties" was the heyday of barter schemes in the country. Such trade had many advantages, the most important of which was the acceleration of turnover by several times for the same money. Barter was accompanied by price chaos. In the murky waters of prices, the most shrewd made a fortune. The high markup on our goods allowed us to work in barter. I told my father about the idea, and he called Moscow again. The scheme worked and lasted all summer. Once a month we rented a "GAZelle", loaded it

with goods, and I went to Moscow with the driver. We would leave at ten in the evening, and by six in the morning we would be on the Moscow Ring Road, unloading and loading before lunch, and leaving Moscow in the afternoon.

By the end of the summer, our inventory had swollen considerably. We were working with almost every major company in the city. Business was growing and the neighbors in the warehouse started staring at us – it was time to find our own warehouse and move out. Walking around the area of the depot, we found a small warehouse that was perfect for us – seventy meters in area and with two entrances. The first had an empty doorway, the remains of the door hanging dully on its rusty hinges. The second entrance had a double iron gate with a lock. As if on cue, the depot administration decided to rent out the warehouse in September. Although there was a lot of work to be done to bring it up to code, we decided to move in.

In two days, the rental agreement was prepared and we ordered a new metal door for the entrance with rusty hinges. While my father drove the goods, I cleaned all the rooms in the warehouse. The next day, the door was ready. It was installed, my father left with the goods again, and I spent a few hours painting the door a rusty brown color. The next day was spent moving the goods. The warehouse turned out to be just the right place – compact, in the middle of the depot, and not on a main thoroughfare. The rent was no longer nominal, but now we had our own warehouse.

At the same time, the unpleasant news came that the second manufacturer was closing down. Its owner decided to go out of business. He brought us some leftover goods to sell, which should have been enough for a couple of months.

That's how we lost one of our suppliers.

Autumn came. The petty squabbles between my parents continued. We had also lost the Moscow manufacturer of cheap powders. I started looking again: I was not satisfied with building my business on a single supplier with only one really strong product line. After a long, unsuccessful search, I clung to the first one that met the key factor: the goods for sale. It was a small producer of chips from the Rostov region. I brought my father an advertisement, he called the phone number, and within a week we had our first shipment. It was clear that this product was temporary and would only allow us to keep our heads above water.

Chips added four wholesale depots to our client list. Two of them were located in former movie theaters and were quite weak. The third was "Pelican", a grocery depot with an excise warehouse, which specialized in alcohol, but also had a good turnover in other goods. The fourth depot dealt only in wholesale and only in food – two thirds of the chips went through it right away. The depots in the cinemas did not last long. At the end of September, rumors of their imminent closure spread throughout the city, and I suggested to my father that we get the goods out of there. No sooner had we done so than the depots were closed a week later, and many of the suppliers never saw their goods or their money.

At "Pelican", chips were selling so-so, but there was also a department of household chemicals, which we loaded with our goods. Sales at "Pelican" went up, and the total income froze at a minimum tolerable level. The uncertainty of the business was once again very much in evidence.

Two notable events happened that fall: my father and I had our first big fight, and we finally bought a cell phone. I don't remember the reason for the fight, but it was because of

the difficult business situation. A crisis always makes things worse. After the quarrel, both of us were in a tense state for a few days, talking dryly and only about business. After a few weeks everything was forgotten, we returned to normal communication, but because of the quarrel the purchase of a cell phone was spontaneous and unseemly. The weather was warm and dry at the beginning of October. It was six o'clock in the evening. We returned to the depot and stopped at our warehouse. The work week ended with a very pleasant ritual – a tour of the wholesale depots and a collection of money. On Friday night, the depot looked deserted; everyone had left work early. My father, looking for the man he needed from the depot administration, searched almost the entire territory – in vain, he was long gone. I walked patiently near the depot administration building, squinting in the warm rays of the setting sun, waiting for my father.

"He's nowhere to be found!" he finally stopped looking and walked over, spreading his arms and slapping them on his hips. "For cripes sake!"

"It's Friday after all... Everybody went home long ago, including this one..." I said, staring at the red disk of the sun and blinking my eyes alternately. "Why on earth would he be here..."

The weather was fabulous. Stillness. Not a breeze. It was warm, like summer was coming back.

"Do you need him right now or what?" I asked.

"Not really. He asked me to stop by tonight, he has a matter to discuss," my father said absentmindedly as he continued to look around.

"Yeah, just another piece of cake..." I brushed him off a little irritated and walked slowly along the sidewalk away from my father, putting one shoe next to the other and moving in an imaginary straight line.

There was tension in the air between us. We had quarreled, so to speak, but neither of us apologized to the other or gave up our positions. Both of us just swallowed the lump of contradictions with an effort of will because the common cause demanded it.

I knew exactly what I was annoyed about: my father's overcommitment. That in itself was a good and necessary quality. But everything has to be in moderation. Lack of commitment is bad, as is overcommitment, and the extremes weigh heavily. My father's fussy commitment fell on the fresh soil of our scolding and caused me a fit of irritation. That's why I turned away from him and measured my steps – I was struggling with the reaction, and it was boiling inside me. I held back my emotions, trying not to think about the fact that the agreement with my father had simply been forgotten, that the other man had long since returned home, and that my father, absent-minded and oblivious to the obvious, was rushing around the depot with his overcommitment, knowing that no one needed it, not wanting to put up with it, and therefore getting angry. In order not to get all worked up, I switched to a positive thought – I started thinking about the upcoming Friday night and the two days off. "I should go to a nightclub tonight, just to chill out," I decided, and switched to another pleasant thought: the desire to buy a cell phone. The question was obviously overdue and was discussed with my father, who was in favor of it. There was money in the glove compartment of the "second" and the thought of it and the phone tickled my brain pleasantly.

"I'll go look for him again, okay!?" came from behind me.

"Go look..." I nodded, turned around, and walked back along the imaginary line.

"If you see him, stop him and tell him I'm looking for him," my father added.

"Uh-huh," I muttered without raising my head.

My father turned around and went deeper into the depot. I immediately forgot about the imaginary line and just started hanging around the building. The silence in the depot made even the local dogs lie down on the grass of the big lawn and doze off. The thought of the phone became more and more insistent.

A "ninety-nine" slowly pulled into the depot gate and turned in my direction. The owner, a guy a couple of years younger, was a good friend of mine. He came over and we got to talking. I told him I wanted to buy a cell phone. My friend called his friend at a cell phone store and she said that the phone model I was interested in was in stock and could be purchased at a discount. The thought of the phone whirled in my head like a teddy-go-round, and I looked around for my father. He was already walking back at a leisurely pace. Then everything happened quickly and spontaneously – I wheeled the money out of my father, got into my friend's car, and we drove to the city center.

We had barely entered the shop before closing time when a magical dream began to come true – a new cell phone appeared on the table in front of me, it was unpacked, turned on and checked. I twisted the phone in my hands and looked at the tiny display window. There, like the heart of the device, the antenna indicator in the form of the letter "T" was flashing. The handset was weighty and pleasant to the touch. "SONY", I read under the display and ran my fingers over the convex letters. The purchase was completed, I paid eight thousand rubles and received the coveted box in my hands: "There, my first cell phone! Yes, for the two of us with my father, but it doesn't matter – it's our own phone. We deserved it."

On the way back, I took the phone out of the box several times, examined it, and happily looked out the window. It seemed to me that everyone in the neighboring cars could see my purchase even through the door and looked at me respectfully. At that moment, at the age of twenty-four, I felt like a kid who had finally been given a long-awaited train set.

At home, I solemnly handed the box to my father. He sluggishly began to turn it in his hands. I grabbed the box, quickly unpacked it, and placed the contents on the table in front of him. His eyes remained indifferent. I knew it was because of the previous argument. "Hurt people get the short end of the stick," I thought angrily and left the room. I wanted to prolong the small happiness that had come over me a little earlier than I'd planned, which made it feel so much better. My father's indifference seemed to want to rob me of the euphoria I deserved, so I took a quick shower and headed downtown – it didn't matter where I was or what I did, as long as I could keep the feeling of joy alive for as long as possible. At ten p.m. my head in the clouds brought me back down to earth in the flow of people on one of the main streets of the city and I looked around. A neon sign across the street caught my eye, "Clear Skies". I had never been to that place, so I crossed the street and ducked under the sign.

CHAPTER 5

The time from November 2001 to the end of February 2002 can be described with one word: routine. A plain and dreary period of life. Chips compensated only half of the producers' losses. The only household chemical that sold well was laundry blue. Our net profits were close to zero. The state of things was reflected in our mood; my father and I looked gloomy. My parents still had occasional but regular scandals. To save money on parking, we rolled the "second" into the warehouse. There was plenty of room; all of our goods fit on four pallets. My father decided to take care of the chassis, and the two of us put the car on its side in the warehouse. It looked a little weird to onlookers. My father in his overalls tightened the nuts and I helped. The temperature in the warehouse was street level, but the four walls made it comfortable. Boxes of chips still occupied the next room. The lousy and dreary time, we counted the days until spring, which promised the first seasonal piece of jack on the blue. Easter 2002 was supposed to be late, which promised a long "season" of sales. It always started with spring and ended with Easter. We calculated the amount of blue we needed: eight hundred packages. A ten-ton truck could hold one thousand two hundred. Ordering a full car, we were promised delivery within a week, otherwise we would have to wait indefinitely for the connecting trip. Spring had already begun and time was running out, so I suggested we take a chance. My father agreed and we ordered a car full of the laundry blue. We had to scrape together the money again, we were late paying for the chips, and this was the only way we could get the amount we needed.

This year the spring was early and dry, and the weather favored us. At ten o'clock on Friday morning, March 8, the "MAZ" truck was already parked in front of our warehouse, loaded to the cover with goods. We had never received so many goods at one time. I looked at the blue spot all over the car body and realized that this shipment was something more than we were used to. For four and a half hours, my father and I unloaded the goods, pallets of which took up the entire warehouse. Tired but happy, we drove home. The feeling of accomplishing something meaningful never left me. No sooner had I eaten dinner than I was lulled to sleep. I woke up at eight o'clock in the evening, lying uncomfortably on the couch in my clothes. I remembered that March 8th was on the calendar, and it was Friday, so I took a quick shower, and an hour later, I made my way to the bar through a thick cloud of tobacco smoke and women's perfume at the "Clear Skies".

It was a hot time in the business and sales of the blue soared, doubling by April for all of our customers. Just before the season, we added two new wholesalers, "Sasha" and "Fluffy," located at opposite ends of the city. The first rented a one-story building on the left bank for a warehouse. The second was located in the basement of a two-story building in the southwest part of the city.

"Sasha" looked modest: two cramped rooms and a long corridor leading into the darkness of the storerooms. Three girls were sitting in the first room. In the second we met two young men. One was a swarthy, broad-shouldered fellow in a black jacket, sitting at a desk with his hands on his head. The other was tall and blond, hanging around another table, and as soon as I knocked on the door and entered, he left the room.

"Hello," I said.

"Good afternoon," my father added.

"Good afternoon," the swarthy fellow exhaled loudly, removed his hands from his close-cropped head, and leaned back in his chair. Then he blinked his eyes, wiggled them, looked at both of us in turn, and rubbed his eyes with the knuckles of his slightly chubby fingers.

"Who can I talk to about the business proposal?" I started with an already hackneyed phrase.

The guy removed his fingers from his eyes, blinked again, and sniffed his nose.

"You can talk to me," he said.

I gave the standard speech about our product, pulled out the price list and handed it to the guy, who went into a deep study of the piece of paper. The second one came back into the room.

"What is this?" he said, also staring at the price list.

"Well... they offer..." said the swarthy one.

"What would we need it for!?" the blond guy blurted out. "We already have all this."

"Quick fella, the second one is softer, we better communicate with him, we can't negotiate with this one," I concluded right away.

"No, I think the blue is an interesting item... It sells well here..." the swarthy guy said thoughtfully.

"Well, it's up to you, I have to dash, I'll be back in an hour!" the blond guy snapped and went out.

We made a quick deal with Sergey, that was the swarthy guy's name. He turned out to be favorably disposed and immediately ordered ten packs to try out.

The manager of "Fluffy" was a brunette, about one hundred and eighty centimeters tall, athletic, wiry, with stiff features. "Dishonest, secretive, we have to be careful with him," I gave my inner verdict during the first contact.

We exchanged a firm handshake. The dialog was short and to the point: I showed him the price list, the manager evaluated it in a second, said that he was interested in the blue and not in the rest, and ordered ten packs. The manager, an experienced businessman, immediately rejected the terms of sale, said that payment would be made on delivery of each batch, and got us an additional discount on the spot.

The next day "Sasha" and "Fluffy" received the goods.

Our cell phone came to life, incoming calls started pouring in: the manager of "Arbalest" called asking for the blue; "Mongoose" called asking for the blue; everyone called. As soon as a new order came in, my father would start writing bills: he would sit down at the table, take two forms, put a copy sheet between them, and painstakingly draw a single line in his ministerial handwriting. I watched my father's hand movements, his gaze, his facial expressions, and I found myself thinking that he enjoyed the ritual, as if he was even swelling with pride.

As expected, the two major clients absorbed four-fifths of the blue, while sales at other firms lagged far behind. New customers behaved differently during the season. Sergey from "Sasha" used to place an order once a week. The initiative did not come from him, I called him. And I did not get used to his work schedule right away: if I called before eleven in the morning, a girl from "Sasha" answered the phone and said, "Sergey is not here yet"; if I

called after an hour or two, the girl's voice told me, "Sergey has already left". That's how I learned that Sergey could only be found in the office between eleven and one.

The "Fluffy" manager, on the other hand, would call himself, and when I called, he was always there and answered the phone right away. I was quickly imbued with his business acumen. But there are two sides to every coin. And the other side of the manager of the "Fluffy" soon appeared. Three days after the first test batch, our cell phone rang.

"Yes, hello!?" I picked up the phone.

"Hey, Roma!" he said in a crisp, cheerful voice. "You brought us ten packs of blueish the other day, but we're already out. Could you bring us some more!?"

"You ran out of it so fast!" I was glad and said hello in return. "That's good news! Yes, I can bring you some more, of course, how much!?"

"Thirty boxes if you have them!"

"Of course, I have it!" I said and promised to bring it the same day.

"Blueish ," was my thought at the end of the conversation. I tensed subtly, listening to the fleeting emotion. We delivered the goods to them.

"Hey, Roma, bring us seventy more packlings of blueish, please!" a week later, at the end of March, the cheerful voice of the "Fluffy" manager was on the phone again.

We carried out the order the next day. "Blueish, packling," the words whirled in my head. Just words. But they clung to my consciousness, as if scratching with their softness. Another week later, we drove seventy packages to "Fluffy" again. The goods were taken in two trips, thirty-five packages was the maximum the "second" could hold.

The blue season flew by. The May holidays were approaching and they came just in time because we were exhausted after two months of hard work and had sold almost everything. We had just over a hundred packages left in the warehouse. The "second" could hardly cope with the increased volume of transportation, so we thought about buying a "GAZelle". We did not have enough money for a new one, only for a used one, two or three years old. We could spare a hundred or a hundred and ten thousand to buy it, the whole seasonal income.

During the May holidays, we received the unpleasant news that the chips manufacturer would no longer be working with us as of June, the start of the season for their product, and production capacity was low. Our business was again dependent on a single strong product position, so I got into the habit of looking for new suppliers.

In Rostov-on-Don there was a small company that produced various things that were not commercially interesting at all, but one thing interested me: a cleaning paste. In our city this product was sold in large quantities. The working conditions were quickly agreed. But there was a problem: the manufacturer didn't have his own transport, and it was expensive to rent a car. We thought about it and realized that we were at a dead end, but the problem was solved: we bought a "GAZelle"!

Joy was overflowing. A milestone had been reached for my father and me. We had been working toward it for more than four years. The purchase itself was mundane. In the third week of May, my father found an acceptable option in a newspaper ad for an almost two-year-old car for one hundred and fifteen thousand rubles. We had planned to go as low as one hundred and five, but there were cars a year or two older for that money. We tried to lower the price. It didn't work. In addition to the eighty thousand in hand, my father had to

withdraw all the pension money he had saved, thirty thousand, from his savings book. We scraped together another five at the very last moment. It was a Friday, sunny and warm, just like my mood on the day of the purchase. Summer was fast approaching. By noon we were the proud owners of a "GAZelle". I did the same thing I did when I bought the cell phone: while my father drove the "GAZelle" home, I looked around the interior. We have a practically new car. Comfortable chairs, high clearance. It was unusual and pleasant to look out the window at passing cars. After the "second" the cabin of the "GAZelle" seemed huge and spacious. The car had two external peculiarities. The first was a cover that could be lowered by a third of a meter to fit into a standard garage. The second was a steering wheel from a "BMW".

The next week, at six in the morning on Wednesday, May 29, we headed south. The day promised to be beautiful. The sun had risen an hour earlier, hovering in the east over the tops of the city's high-rise buildings. The "GAZelle" moved briskly through the sleepy city, outpacing the half-empty trolleybuses. I looked through the window at the passing streets, still in the joy of buying a car. The city was quickly behind us and we headed down the wide highway. It was a rather rash decision to drive six hundred kilometers in a car we didn't know, and the problems began after an hour of monotonous driving on the highway – the car began to warm up. The arrow on the engine temperature gauge crept into the red zone, and we were forced to stop. My father opened the hood and stared thoughtfully inside. I, being a complete ignoramus about cars, just stood aside. My father checked the oil and water level – everything was normal. We waited for half an hour, the engine cooled down, we drove on, and after half an hour we stopped again, the engine was almost boiling. My father went under the hood again, I, trying not to get nervous, got out of the car and stood nearby. Almost immediately, we were both smoking. Trucks rushed by, showering us with bouncing waves of warm air. The cause of the overheating could not be found. We waited half an hour, slowed down, and decided to stop at a nearby repair shop. The arrow on the water thermometer crept up.

After a while we finally crawled into the repair shop and the cause of the engine overheating was quickly found – the sensor. It was replaced and we drove on, well behind schedule. At half past three we were two thirds of the way there. There were about two hundred kilometers to go when the cell phone lost its signal. I started to get nervous – we were without communication, way behind schedule, and the work day was coming to an end. At twenty to six we drove into the city and stopped at the first phone booth. I called the company's office and they promised to wait for us. An hour and a half later we were there, and then we found out that the goods were in the company's production warehouse, which was on the left bank of the city. We drove there at dusk – the director's car went first, and we followed. As soon as we were on the left bank, surrounded by depots and warehouses, an impenetrable darkness fell over the city. The road was terrible. We crawled forward behind the two headlights of the passenger car until we reached the right depot. My father drove the "GAZelle" to the loading ramp, I unfastened the cover and jumped into the back. Loading began. My father took the boxes to the ramp and handed them to me. Crouching down, I stacked them in the back. We quickly loaded a ton and a half. I got out of the back with sore

back muscles and couldn't straighten up for a while. "I'm going to have to crawl around in the back like this all the time," I thought unflatteringly of the inconvenience of the low cover.

We were on our way back. We crossed the high bridge over the Don with the big ship passing underneath in bright lights, and about two in the morning we left the city and stopped by the side of the road. We were both tired and sleepy.

It was clear that only one of us would be able to sleep in the cabin.

"I'll get in the back," I said, and my father objected as a formality and immediately agreed. I grabbed my jacket and, trying not to crumple the boxes of goods, crawled on top of them into the back. My father closed the cover and I was left in complete darkness and silence. I didn't get a good night's sleep; first I lay down on my jacket and tossed and turned on it, protecting my sides from the sharp corners of the boxes. As soon as I found a comfortable position, I began to freeze. My shirt, after sweating in the hot sun during the day, quickly became cold. Suffering like this for a while, I grabbed my jacket and pulled it over me. The crumpled corners of the cardboard were digging into me again, but it was getting warmer. I curled up as tightly as I could and dozed off, trying not to think about the pain of the boxes here and there.

I woke up from the cold just before dawn. My back was completely frozen. I climbed out of the car and started doing whatever I could to warm up. "Six o'clock, I guess," I decided, waving my arms harder. After about ten minutes, I had warmed up a bit. I didn't feel like getting in the back, so I started walking back and forth behind the car in a half-asleep state, peeking into the cab for a change – my father was asleep, his legs tucked up and covered by his jacket. I looked around. A few cars were already rolling down the road, waitresses were bustling around the tables of roadside cafes, and somewhere the smoke from braziers was already rising into the sky. I wanted to sleep. I climbed into the back of the car and slept for a few hours. I got out at nine o'clock, approached the cabin, and my father, as if sensing it, immediately opened his eyes.

The return trip took eight hours and was uneventful. We put the "GAZelle" with the goods in the parking lot, left everything as it was, and wandered home tired. I took a shower, ate and fell asleep in a moment. We slept a long time and didn't get to the warehouse until noon the next day. I looked in the back, opened the nearest package, pulled out a plastic bucket of paste, and took the lid off.

"What a load of crap they gave us," I said, twisting the bucket in my hands.

My father was silent, looked into the container, almost sighed, and began to unload the car. I continued to stare at the white lumps floating in the oily yellow-green liquid. "What is this, how are we going to sell it?" I thought nervously, regretting the money I had paid in advance. It was comforting to know that the first batch would be sold anyway, and I wouldn't have to deal with the next one. To distract myself from my gloomy thoughts, I also got to work.

Summer had begun. The heat flowed over the asphalt of the city, enveloping us in pleasant warmth. Now, whenever we found ourselves in a parking lot, we climbed into the "GAZelle". The "second", like an old horse after several years of hard work, stood in a nearby place, finally getting its well-deserved rest.

The business situation remained uncertain. After the great blue season, sales had fallen back, bringing us to a minimum income. We were stuck at a classic point – small profits did not allow us to take on a high turnover product, the lack of such a product did not give us a chance to make a good profit. I was constantly analyzing the situation, looking for the next unconventional move, but nothing came up. Then we decided that if we could not increase income, we would have to reduce expenses. It was possible to save money on the rent of the warehouse, half of which was empty. We went to the management of the depot and expressed our desire to have a subtenant in the warehouse. They promised to help us. I had little faith in the success of the venture, so I immediately forgot the fact of the conversation.

In June we pulled off an important deal. Remembering the successful experience of barter deliveries to Moscow, I thought about repeating it. My father supported the idea. After calling the big wholesalers in the capital, I made a deal with one of them. At the end of June, at five in the morning, the two of us drove to Moscow in the "GAZelle" with two hundred packages of the blue in the back. By noon we were there, unloaded and loaded, and at five o'clock we were on our way back. With only one stop for dinner at a roadside cafe, we headed to our city after midnight. The last hour of the trip was difficult, we were terribly sleepy, fought it and made it before it overcame us.

The next day we slept until noon, then went to the warehouse and unloaded. Everything went well, we negotiated a good price with the Moscow company, and we planned our next trip in a month. The goods we brought were immediately put on sale, scattered among the wholesale depots.

In the last days of June I met up with a former army acquaintance of mine. We went to the "Pelican" as usual with another load of goods. My father backed the "GAZelle" up to the conveyor belt in the basement, turned off the engine and reached for a cigarette. I went into the office building with the papers. When I finished the paperwork, I jumped out into the street and ran into Vovka. We both stared at each other, hesitated and froze.

"Hi!" we said almost simultaneously and shook hands.

There was an awkward moment. We knew each other and we didn't. Something had to be said next. But what?

"You were in the second unit, right?" I started. "Sorry, I don't know your name, I remember your face, but I don't know your name..."

"Vladimir!" he introduced himself formally, adding his last name.

I also introduced myself.

"I saw your father here once, he was unloading there," Vovka waved his hand behind him, in the direction of the household chemicals warehouse.

"Well, yeah, we work together, we bring you the goods!" I said.

"Ooh! You bring us goods?" Vovka was surprised and his eyes widened.

"Yes, we deliver goods to the depot, we're your suppliers..." I smiled.

"I thought you were driving someone else's stuff, and there you go, oooh!"

"Yeah, well, there you go," I summarized, playing with the unloading permit in my hands.

"And this?" Vova snatched the paper out of my hands. "Did they sign it?"

I nodded.

"Ahh... Petrovich's signature, I see..." Vovka shoved the piece of paper back into my hands without interest, shut up, I did not answer, and he added, "All right, then, go unload!"

"Okay, I'll go unload and you come over if you want and we'll talk!?" I suggested, spreading my arms.

"Yeah... All right!" Vovka waved vaguely and left for the office.

I went back to my father. The unloading was in full swing, and in five minutes it was over. The transporter pulled the last boxes down with a creak and a hiss and then went quiet. I entered the warehouse, marked the paperwork, and went back to the car. My father was already tying up the cover. Vovka was hanging around.

"Amazing, I say!" he turned to me. "It turns out that Anatoly Vasilievich says you've been supplying us with goods for a long time, but why have I never spotted you?"

"How should I know?" I answered complacently, and to play along with Vovka, I asked my father seriously, "Dad, why didn't he spot us? It's not like we were hiding..."

"I don't know," my father joined in the prank, speaking indifferently. "Maybe he works here as a loader, and who would give such important information to a loader?"

Vovka's eyes studied us for a few seconds, looking at my father, then at me. It took him a while to realize that we were joking, and then he relaxed and smiled.

"Well, the thing is, I work as, just think of it...!" Vovka held up his crooked little index finger, "Deputy Commercial Director for Household Chemicals and Housewares!"

"How did you manage to miss us then, Vova!?" I said reproachfully, with a hint of disappointment.

"Well, here we are!" he grinned.

We hit it off right away. That's how it usually works between people – either you get close immediately or you don't. In no time we made contact, relaxed, and in ten minutes we were standing at the "GAZelle" making chin music like old buddies.

"It's Andrey Petrovich there, isn't it?" I nodded toward the office.

"Oh, yeah, Petrovich, right!" Vovka rubbed his eye roughly with the palm of his hand until it turned red, adjusted the buckle on his belt – it was a military leather belt with a star on the buckle. Vovka poked his foot in the front wheel of the "GAZelle", looked through the lowered window into the cabin, and continued. "Well, he's just supposed to be my director, but he's doing who knows what! Daddy brought him over from 'Mercury' for some reason!"

"Daddy? What Daddy?" I didn't understand.

"Well, Daddy! The owner of the "Pelican"! Daddy's got a shit-ton of money!" Vovka said, and at the word "money" his eyes flashed with excitement.

Vovka spiced his speech with a lot of profanity. He shouted curses loudly, and they flew like lumps of dirt from under the tractor wheels in all directions. I, who had long been used to swearing and was not ashamed to hear it, shuddered and felt ashamed because my father was here. I would look at him from time to time, and my father would openly grimace at Vovka's cursing and, unable to bear it, would soon step aside and delicately do something in the cab of the "GAZelle".

We had to go. We shook hands with Vovka firmly.

"All right, Roman, come by more often! Nice to meet you! Call me if there's anything!" Vovka took his cell phone out of his back pocket and shook it. The phone was

similar to ours, also black with a retractable antenna and bulky. After politely saying goodbye to my father, Vovka staggered to the office. The "GAZelle" overtook him, my father honked, I looked in the side mirror, Vovka raised his hand and we turned the corner.

The business situation became more or less stable. The only thing that puzzled me was the delay in the next order from the "Fluffy" manager. His scrupulousness and accuracy in his work had even become something of a benchmark for me among clients. By all accounts, the call should have been a week ago, but there's nothing. We succeeded in selling the blue, filling nearly three-quarters of the market in and around the city. And sales continued to grow. We quickly became monopolists. This factor served its purpose – my father suggested that we raise the price. I hadn't thought of such a move. We always sold the blue at a third of the price of our competitors. I was so used to the existing price that I was surprised when my father first expressed his idea. My father made his case, and it sounded reasonable. I listened to him and we argued for some time about the pros and cons of such a move. I said that the price was already set, that everyone was used to it, and that there was no point in "breaking" the market unnecessarily. My father talked about the possibility of additional profits. I insisted that such an increase would be difficult to explain because the manufacturer had not raised the selling price. We would have to make up a nice story, which I did not want to do. The idea of extra profits did not impress me very much; the long-term sustainability of our position was what I saw as important. Will the price increase have a negative impact? How could I foresee it? My father insisted and gave me feasible arguments. I began to hesitate, remembering the words of one of the managers of wholesale depots: if customers start to like the product, then the price does not play a big role, the product will be taken. There was a grain of truth in it. Only our competitors could create problems for us, but we had almost none. The only thing left to do was to find a plausible reason to raise the price.

My father insisted.

I agreed.

At the beginning of July the owner of the Krasnodar manufacturing company was passing through our city and decided to get to know each other personally. The meeting took place at a motel on the outskirts of the city. From the outside it looked like a meeting of contrasts: a respectable man in an expensive cream-colored suit and a snow-white shirt in a brand-new beige "Passat" and us, casually dressed for work in an old painted "second". After greetings and handshakes, he invited us into his car. I almost didn't participate in the conversation, only occasionally adding insignificant phrases – mostly I listened. The whole dialog was reduced to the usual verbal "swings". The guest urged us to increase sales. My father replied that it was difficult to do without advertising. In response, we heard a story about how production costs were high, there was not enough money, and therefore the only advertising was booklets that should be distributed.

"You take your booklets and distribute them yourself. Do we have nothing better to do?" I mentally objected with pleasure.

My father, on the other hand, responded in a measured, calm, thorough, and thoughtful way. He had true composure. I would have hit the ceiling long ago, and I would have shot my mouth off, speaking straight from the shoulder. Feeling such impulses within me, I was diligently silent and distracted myself by studying the car.

"Anyway, where were we, Anatoly Vasilievich?" said the guest. "You need to increase the volume of sales, and we'll help you in any way we can."

"Yes, and for our part, we promise to try to sell your products, to promote them as best we can. And you, for your part, should support us. If people from our region call you, please refer them to us. After all, we are your exclusive representatives," my father said, giving a speech as if it were written, sighing loudly and hopelessly.

"It's a deal, Anatoly Vasilievich," he held out his hand to my father. "You are our representative here, we will cooperate."

I also shook hands with the guest, got out of the "Passat" first, and wandered to the "second".

"Pointless conversation! It's all gibble and gabble," I said on the way home, staring out the window of the car.

"Well, what did you expect us to talk about?" my father objected calmly. "He has his duties, we have ours. The main thing is that he confirmed that we are the only ones in our city, that's important, and the rest is nothing."

"Yeah, I get it," I nodded, thinking and staring out the window.

A feeling of imbalance gnawed at me. I am against this feeling in everything. It sucks – the imbalance of effort and demands, rights and responsibilities. For example, they give you a product and tell you to sell it, do your best, sell it well and sell a lot. The more the better. And it will be good. It will be good for those who own the product. And you, well, you get the money you make and a "thank you". Thanks do not fill a purse. And no help at all. Everything would look fair if it were not for the demands made on you in return. And the demands are such as if this help is being given. Opportunities are given for a penny, but they demand for a dollar. And they minimize their obligations. This one too, I felt it, he wriggled and made himself out to be our boss, on top of it. There was a feeling of unreliability. I chased away the thought that the guest from Krasnodar would immediately forget all our verbal agreements at the first favorable offer. I felt sorry for our hope. For some reason, it was this company that I hoped everything would turn out with as it should, not as it had before. I wanted it to work. I wanted it so badly that it burned inside me. And the more bitter was the feeling of disappointment and anxiety that had built up inside me. I chased those thoughts away, but they only went away for a while. There was no visible reason for such feelings, but my heart wasn't at ease. The sense of reliability of the structure we had built melted away in the most important place for me – the source.

All the way home I had spiritual torments until I got tired. Self-chastisement turns out to be terribly tiring. More than work. It's a stupid trait, it only gets in the way. "I have to get rid of it," I thought and sighed heavily.

In mid-July, as planned, we decided to raise the price of the blue. Naturally, we started with the big customers and went to "Arbalest" first.

"Well, are we going together or am I alone?" I looked at my father as we parked the "GAZelle" on the depot grounds.

"Go alone, will you? No need for me to go there," he said. "You seem to be friends there already. I'll just sit here and have a smoke."

I got out of the car and, escaping the intense heat, dove into the coolness of the building. On the second floor, the manager's office struggled lazily against the stuffiness – in the middle of the room was a fan, shaking its head monotonously, blowing the hot air into the corners. I walked in, everyone froze, recognized me, and went back to their business. My manager was relaxing, clicking the mouse, attacking another enemy castle in a computer game. After saying hello, I sat down in a chair next to his desk. And, feeling my heart pounding unaccustomedly from the lies I had prepared, I informed the manager as casually as possible about the increase in the price of the blue.

"How much will it cost then?" he stopped playing.

I told him the price was ten percent more. The guy picked up the calculator, ran his fingers over it, and exclaimed: "A bit pricey."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, 'Fluffy' is offering your blue for less and in barter."

The sentence hit me over the head with a sledgehammer. I staggered for a moment and immediately tried to remain calm on the outside. Microseconds passed. Time froze and then began to tick away at breakneck speed, as if in a countdown. Thoughts followed, "How is it that 'Fluffy' is offering this blue?? Where did they get it?? Maybe they bartered it from another city? They couldn't have gotten it from the manufacturer, could they? Well, I never! There you are! How come?! Phew, I've got to think of something fast! We've got to hold on to 'Arbalest'! If they hit us from such a fat place, we'll lose almost half of our volume." Another second. I think I've got it together.

"How much is he offering?" I asked in the same casual manner, feeling my inner trembling and watching another dance of his fingers on the buttons of the calculator. The manager showed me a number on the screen.

"Our old price, a little cheaper, an understandable move, what a jerk," I mentally scolded the "Fluffy" manager. "He knows we don't barter, so he offered a lower price and bartered at the same time to make sure he could beat us out of the item.

One more second and I found a solution.

"Hmm, interesting, but if that's the case, of course we won't raise the price. Apparently 'Fluffy' bought it at the old price," I lied, wriggling out, trying to save face. It came out crappy! From the beginning I had tried to build an honest and trusting relationship with all of our customers, and this was the first time I had lied outright, given in to my father's persuasion, and I was immediately screwed. "Damn it, Dad, this price increase, I'm sitting here, getting out of it like a fool!" I got angry at him, imagining him sitting carefree in the "GAZelle", smoking a cigarette under the warm rays of the sun. "He's there and I'm here! He made it up, and I have to roll with the punches!" the anger burned in my mind.

"I'll settle the issue of the price increase with the manufacturer, if that's the situation," I continued, understanding that the matter had to be settled and that I had to get the manager's agreement and offer him the best possible working conditions right away. "So where do we stand? I'll leave you with our old price, which is cheaper than 'Fluffy's'. And we can start bartering. Agreed?"

"Well, yeah, all right, keep it that way for now," he said phlegmatically, turning to the monitor screen and continuing to click his mouse.

"How much do you want me to bring in, what are your leftovers?" I said in an even more casual tone, pushing the manager to the end, knowing I had to get the order right away.

"Well, thirty packs would be all right, I guess," he said.

"Okay, I'll drop it off tomorrow," I nodded and walked out of the office at a leisurely pace down the long, rumbling hallway. As I turned onto the stairs, my pretended composure vanished and my heart thundered. The thoughts in my head immediately turned into a whirlwind, and I ran down the stairs as if following them.

My father was standing at the entrance of the building, smoking, relaxed.

"Let's go to the car, we need to talk," I slurred as I headed to the "GAZelle". My father didn't move. I turned and walked toward him.

My father took a leisurely drag on his cigarette, exhaled the smoke slowly, looked at me and calmly said, "What happened?"

"Let's go to the car and talk!" I said again, my emotions boiling up inside me.

My father, as if on purpose, repeated the unhurried ritual one more time: he inhaled, exhaled, threw his cigarette in the trash, and walked to the car. And his every move was so slow, so measured. Nothing in the world could make my father do anything a little faster. Surely he could respond to my excitement in other ways – by being imbued with it, by being interested in the news, by smoking faster, by walking to the car more energetically. But no! It seemed to me that I had been jumping around the closed passenger door of the "GAZelle" for ages, waiting for my father, but he had only walked half of the twenty meters.

"Why on earth are you walking so slowly?" I mentally burst out.

At last we were in the cabin.

"Damn it, we're screwed with the price increase!" I started where it all started, babbling about what had happened. "I told him about the price increase, and he said that 'Fluffy' had offered him cheaper blue by barter. Fancy that! I totally freaked out!"

My father stared at me without blinking. I spoke out, shut up, froze in a counter stare, waiting for his reaction. My father was silent and stared at me. I stared at him. I was waiting for a reaction! It didn't come, I couldn't stand it, I continued, feeling the uncontrollable release of adrenaline: "In short, I had to walk back with this price increase! Why did you even think of this stupid price increase!? We should have sold it as it was! No, you had to create a problem for yourself! I barely got out of it!"

My father's gaze changed, becoming attentive and prickly.

"I said that we would keep the old price, but that we would also take goods from him by barter! There's no other way out at all!" I summed up and took a breath. "You know how much blue he ordered?"

"How much?" my father said, reached for a cigarette, lit it – he was getting nervous.

"Thirty packs! That means he's already taken about that many from 'Fluffy'! He halved the order! That 'Fluffy' asshole followed our trail, saw that the blue was selling well, and called Krasnodar! And they shipped it! How come!? We signed a contract with them after all! The owner himself came some time ago! He promised us! Sitting there in the car, nodding with an intelligent mug, saying that everything is fine and that they only work with us! And here he comes! How's that!? I don't get it!"

"How, how... That's how," my father said with the same nonchalance, hesitated for a few seconds, and then added, "Where are we going to put the barter goods now?"

"What difference does it make where!?" I stared at him, confused. "Won't we find somewhere to put it!? We'll find something! There's 'Peresvet' after all, Vova in 'Pelican', I don't know... These little wholesalers! We'll figure it out! We'll just have to bustle for a while!"

"What are we going to get here at 'Arbalest'?" my father asked another question in the same measured tone that pissed me off even more.

"What does it matter what!?" I got angry, not understanding why he was asking questions we needed to find answers to. "We'll figure out what to get! We'll take the price list, check it out, choose what we need, and shovel it into the depots, that's all! That's not the point! The point is, that asshole at "Fluffy" is shitting on us. He secretly called Krasnodar behind our backs, and those bastards were so happy that they shipped it to him! Why would he do that!?"

"That's just the way it is. That's the kind of partner we have. What did you expect?"

"I expected to work properly!"

"They got an offer, so they agreed. Anyone would have, you would and I would..."

"Maybe I would, but I wouldn't have made a vow of eternal friendship! Why would he do that!? Well, okay, if you decide to ship it, then call and warn us!"

"What for?"

"What do you mean, what for!?! So that we may know, so that we may somehow be prepared! Rearrange our work! Or do they think our city is so big that they could ship it to somebody else and nobody would know? Every man and his dog knows each other here!"

"They didn't think anything. They just want the money, that's all. There is a customer, why not sell the product. It's production, the product has to be sold."

"Assholes!"

"All right, let's go home," my father exhaled loudly, took a drag, and threw his cigarette out the window.

I was in a lousy mood all the way home. I stared sullenly out the window and thought about what had happened, interrupting my thoughts periodically with emotional rants about "bastards" and "assholes". It was the first time this had happened in our work, and I couldn't wrap my head around it.

"So now this 'Fluffy' asshole is going to start offering everyone blue for barter!?"

"Naturally," my father said.

"Awesome! Naturally," I echoed his intonation, calming down and starting to think rationally. "He's going to destroy our whole market... We'll have to prepare for that. Well, we'll have to barter with everyone, there's no other way. Otherwise, everyone will give up on us and start working with 'Fluffy'. He'll be so happy. Unbelievable, we boosted the product and now everyone and their sister is looking for tidbits to grab a piece for themselves."

"Well, what did you expect... of course," said my father, pounding out dry phrases in a moralistic manner instead of support, and thus irritating me incessantly.

"What did you expect, of course!" I repeated after him in a deliberately grotesque manner. "I didn't expect anything! I wanted to do it the normal way! We don't pry into other people's goods! I don't give a damn who, where and what they sell! Let them do it! Why would they meddle with us!?"

"Did you really want everyone to be as honest and decent as you are?" my father didn't respond to my outburst, adding even more dryly, "That's not going to happen."

"Yes, I did! What's wrong with it!? Is it so hard!? If you want to trade, just find the goods, drive them around, and sell them at the depots! Why take it out of someone else's mouth?"

The sounds of my indignation were drowned out by the clatter of the wheels on the concrete slabs as we pulled into the parking lot. We left the "GAZelle" and walked home. Emotions wouldn't let me go, and I paced around the apartment, still being outraged. I was angry at everyone: at the owner of the production with his pathetic vanity and empty assurances; at the manager of "Fluffy" for his silky smile in my face and double-dealing behind my back; at the manager of "Arbalest" for his apathy and indifference; at my father for his reckless attempt to raise prices, in which he had involved me. My head was swirling with thoughts and my mind was restless. The thoughts were crushing my head from within and I desperately needed a distraction, an escape from the excitement, irritation and negativity. The decision came immediately, at ten o'clock in the evening I was already in the "Clear Skies". I wanted a drink. I made my way to the bar. Salt, tequila and lemon – lick, drink, chew. "Fucking assholes!" it raged in my head. I was tipsy.

CHAPTER 6

The events began to unfold in a predictable manner – the new competitor made a commercial offer to all our customers, and we had to make our own, even more favorable offer as a matter of urgency. The barter was a success – we fought back our customers. Now we had to think about what to do with the exchanged goods. All the companies sold them either wholesale from their warehouses or through their retail outlets. We did not trade from the warehouse and had no retail outlets of our own. There was only one way out: grocery stores with household chemical departments. There were three of them in the city: "Peresvet", "Mercury" and "Pelican". Vovka worked in the last one in the right position. At "Mercury", the commercial director was in charge of household chemicals, and our relationship with him was purely business. It was unclear whether he would accept our barter goods or not. "Peresvet" stood out – a large, modern depot that was somehow overlooked by all the big wholesalers of household chemicals, and the goods were supplied there by entrepreneurs like us. Moreover, "Peresvet's" sales were the largest of all the grocery stores. We couldn't think of a better place to sell barter.

"Why not, let's do it, of course! I'm all for it! I never refuse such offers!" Vovka smiled happily, his eyes shining with joy as soon as I gave him a hint about the money. After unloading, we left the "Pelican" area and stood in the square behind the gate. Vovka followed us out, away from prying eyes and ears. My friendship with him developed quickly. We immediately found a common language and felt mutual sympathy. Vovka turned out to be a straightforward guy, cheerful and energetic. It was easy and interesting to be with him.

"Well, what's up there, crooks, tell me!" he said, waddling up to the "GAZelle" on his short legs. I was almost used to his way of talking.

It was hot. While we waited for Vovka, we opened both doors of the cabin wide to make it less stuffy inside. My father was smoking, standing near the driver's side of the cab. I walked around on the crunchy gravel on my side. It was like time had stopped. The end of the working day. Occasionally, cars loaded with goods would crawl out of the gates of the depot, pass by, and disappear into the city streets.

"How come we are crooks?" I asked, pretending to be serious.

"Yeah, who else are you!?" Vovka laughed, his little eyes darting from me to my father. "You resell goods from one company to another, you pocket the dough, you don't produce anything... Slackers! Crooks!"

We laughed, exchanged a few witty jokes, and got down to business.

"Well, let's hear your story," Vovka put his foot on the step of the "GAZelle", put his hand in the window opening of the door and began to swing it back and forth.

I told him the gist of the matter and offered him three percent for his services. He rolled his eyes dramatically and glanced at me.

"Five!?" Vovka blurted out and froze, smiling with cunning eyes.

"It's a deal. Five," I beamed from ear to ear at his mops and mows.

Vovka continued playing: first he frowned for a few seconds, as if thinking, stopped swinging the car door, and then smiled greedily.

"What can I say!? The offer is interesting, my dear bigwigs! I'll consider it!" he burst out laughing. I laughed too. My father, who had finished smoking, came closer and began to tell Vovka the whole story, including "the dirty trick that 'Fluffy' had played on us" and the fact that "the problem had to be solved somehow".

"Yeah, I got it, Anatoly Vasilievich, I got it," Vovka shook his disheveled head, as if to fight the slowness of my father's speech.

"It all happened so unexpectedly," he habitually scratched his head and grunted in embarrassment. "We had an agreement with the manufacturer and a contract, but you see what kind of people we work with. We have to get out of this."

"I got it, I got it, Anatoly Vasilievich!" Vovka ruffled his hair even more with his hand. "We'll figure it out! I'll think about it! All right!"

"Vova, see what you can take from us, so as not to disadvantage the others, otherwise they will eye you askance," I interrupted my father's groaning, which otherwise would have continued for another hour, exhausting with its tedium.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Vovka perked up. "Petrovich is sitting there, that mole, burrowed in, fat fucking chance of getting him out of there! He controls everything, I have to share with him, there's no getting around him."

"Well, talk to him, I think he won't mind..." I suggested.

"Who!? Petrovich!?" Vovka burst out laughing again. "As if! He'd sell his own mother if he had to, for fuck's sake! He's a helluva cunning bastard! I'll get him out of his place, and then I'll have everything in my hands, and I won't have to share with him! Fucking A!"

Vovka clapped his hands together and rubbed them eagerly. I laughed; I liked his flighty temperament more and more. Vovka suddenly appeared in my life as a counterbalance to my father, shining in all colors and nourishing me with much-needed emotions in the midst of routine.

It turned out that he was on friendly terms with the commercial director of "Mercury". I asked Vovka to check with him about buying barter from us, and he promised to help.

At the end of July we went back to Moscow with the goods. Everything was the same as last time – we left at five in the morning and arrived at noon. We unloaded quickly, but there was a delay in loading – we didn't leave until four o'clock on the way back. At half past seven we stopped at a cafe and had dinner. We were way behind schedule, so we wouldn't be home until midnight.

The next four hours passed without a break. The time passed midnight, when it was about forty kilometers to our city, and I was pulled to sleep. I resisted, but my eyelids got heavier, I blinked slower and slower each time, my head pulled down. I rubbed my face with my hands and lowered the side window a little. There was an immediate draught in the cabin, as my father's window was also open. The cool air quickly penetrated my shirt, my back went cold and I shivered. "I had to close the window, otherwise I'll get a draft, my neck will be stiff and I won't be able to turn my head tomorrow," I thought to myself and closed the window. My head cleared and the sleep receded. I looked at my father, who was smoking. We had both been without sleep for almost twenty-four hours. "If I'm so sleepy, how is my dad holding on? He's driving all the way, too," I thought, and immediately felt a pang of guilt

for sitting idle. It was an idiotic situation. My driving skills were not good enough to drive the "GAZelle" on the highway, especially at a time when I was literally dozing off. I understood that, but my conscience twisted my soul. I took a closer look at my father. He was also drowsy. His eyelids moved more and more slowly.

"Are you okay, Dad?" I said, interrupting the drowsy hum of the engine. "Are you tired?"

My father flinched and I could tell he was as tired as I was, more so, but he held on and didn't show it.

"So so," he slurred, as if he was learning to speak again. "I feel sleepy. But it won't be long now. What's the rest of the way, thirty kilometers?"

My father finished his cigarette and blinked his sleep away.

A blue road sign floated out of the darkness of the curb.

"There's a sign!" I exclaimed, pointing my finger. "Thirty-one kilometers to go. Here comes the police checkpoint!"

"Let's probably stop there," my father said uncertainly. "Get some fresh air, get out, stretch, 'cause my leg is falling off, it's stiff."

"Of course, let's do it!" I gave him my unquestioning agreement. And there was a reason for that, one of my father's main character traits was diligence. It was a good quality, but he had hypertrophied it. My father's diligence could also be to his own detriment. And on this trip, if I hadn't agreed to stop, if I had resisted, my father would have turned himself inside out, pressing the pedal with his stiff leg, struggling with sleep, but driving the car on.

Checkpoint! A stationary police checkpoint twenty kilometers from the city. Rows of trucks were parked on the side of the road, some stopped for the night, others just for a short rest. Just past the checkpoint we pulled over to the side of the road. I got out of the car and the bliss of the walk spread over my tired body. We stopped just in time; sleep had crept up on us so close that it would have definitely won the rest of the way. I walked along the side of the road, breathing in the night air – sleep receded, my head cleared. My father lit a cigarette. So did I. In ten minutes, the cool breeze had finally cheered me up.

"Well, shall we go?" he threw away his cigarette butt and looked at me.

"How are you, Dad? Do you feel sleepy?" I looked at his face, his eyes tired, red with a net of blood vessels, but they didn't seem sleepy.

"I'm okay, there's not much left, we'll make it!" he said cheerfully.

We moved on. The electric glow of the city was already visible ahead. The highway went straight, two lines in each direction, with dashed markings indicating the lines and solid markings around the edges indicating the limits of the asphalt. The opposite directions were separated by a ditch about a meter and a half deep and about five wide. We were in the left lane of the two, closer to the ditch. It was eighty on the speedometer. We passed some cars in the next lane. They were trailing along at sixty. The lane markings to my right were jumping backwards monotonously. I stared at them and it had a hypnotic effect. The first few minutes after the stop were brisk. Then I warmed up and it sent me to sleep. I closed my eyelids a little, held them for a few seconds, then opened them. The flicker of the marking lines weighed them down more and more. I looked at my father. He wasn't smoking. He was sitting up straight, holding the wheel with both hands, watching the road. Sleep, along with the warmth of the cabin, crept up my back and into my head, and I thought worse and worse.

The city was getting closer. "Just a little more, we're almost there, I want to sleep, I'll lie down right away, I'll sleep until I'm sick of it, Dad's tired too, why am I so clumsy and don't drive, I have to watch the road, I have to open the window, it's cold, I can do it," my thoughts crawled into my head like mush. Shih, shih, shih – the white lines to the right whizzed by. I stared at them, my eyelids flushed with sleep. I closed my eyes. "I'll just sit like this for a while, and then I'll open them, a little more, now, now," the sleepy thought barely stirred. With difficulty, only halfway, I opened my eyes, not thinking clearly, and looked at my father. He was still sitting upright, looking ahead and driving. I felt terribly embarrassed and ashamed. I'm a young guy sitting next to my fifty-year-old father, who's been driving for a thousand kilometers and hasn't fallen asleep, and I'm dozing off! I turned my eyes back to the road. Shih, shih, shih – the right lines flashed on the dark, unlit road. No passing cars, no oncoming traffic. No one. Just us and the lines. Shih, shih, shih. "Just a minute, I can't take it anymore, I'll be like this, a minute with my eyes closed, a minute with them open, that's okay, I'll have time to sleep for a minute, and I'll endure a minute." I closed my eyes. It felt so good. The pleasure flowed from my closed eyes down my body, and I greedily caught every moment of my microsleep. "A minute must have passed, hasn't passed yet, another ten seconds and just about, ten seconds must have passed, they haven't, only half, four seconds left, three, no not three yet, four, a little more, now three, now, three, three, so far three, three, two, yes two... two... I'm about to open my eyes... not about to... two more seconds... one... no, two more... just a little longer... Okay, one... I'm about to open my eyes, I have to relax for one last second... it's time... it's not time yet... I'll sleep quickly this second... the last one... but it's a deal... I have to wake up... Open your eyes, open them," my mind pulled itself out of the clammy fog of sleep and started to work after opening my eyes. I could barely open my eyelids. Shih, shih, shih. Lines. Still the same uniformity. "It's so comfortable to look at them, I don't even have to turn my head, it's right in front of me... Why in front of me? Already a little to the left," my thoughts almost froze. "I wonder why the lines are already a little to the left, they were in front of me," another thought struggled to form in the sticky mush of consciousness. And suddenly, a spark! I was startled, jerked! I stared at the lines!

Shih, shih, shih. Still the same measurement, but the lines were under my father and slowly moving to the left under the hood! I figured it out! I didn't realize it yet, but I already understood it, my brain was awake! For a split second, I pulled myself together and looked at my father. He was still sitting upright, with both hands on the steering wheel, driving and... sleeping! My father's eyes were closed!

"Dad!" I touched my father's hand.

He opened his eyes. He opened them calmly, not twitching or anything, just opened them and looked ahead where he was supposed to look, not even turning to me.

"Dad, we're about to fall into a ditch! We're going right!" I looked at the road.

The line of the lane markings slowly came back under the "GAZelle". Here it was under my father's seat, here it was under mine, and here it was where it should be, on the right side of the car. We left the right lane and went back to the left one.

The sleep disappeared as if it had never happened. My body was pumped with adrenaline in a split second. I glanced at my father. He was sitting in the same position, driving the car. Just us and the road. There was no other car, passing or oncoming. Shih, shih,

shih – the unfortunate lines on the right were going a little slower. The speedometer read fifty.

"Rrrrrr!!!" an old passenger car with a burned out muffler flew by on the right.

We perked up.

"Yeah," my father said to himself, gripping the steering wheel with his hands and reaching for a cigarette.

I began to shiver softly. To distract myself, I stared at the multiplying lights of the city. They were coming closer. There was a thoughtful silence in the cabin.

After half an hour, we left the "GAZelle" in the parking lot and went home. We walked in silence. Halfway through, I couldn't take it anymore and said: "You were asleep at the wheel, you know..."

My father gave me a quick look, but didn't answer. Back at home, when we had both showered and were sitting at the table in the kitchen, my father stood up, poured himself some tea, and said: "Yeah..."

I knew what he meant.

"Well, I never, I didn't notice how I fell asleep," my father continued, turning around, putting the kettle on the stove, and adding with a kind of genuine surprise, "And I dreamt that I was driving a car. Can you imagine that?"

I nodded, mechanically chewed my hastily made sandwich, drank my tea, wished my father good night, and waddled off to bed. I collapsed on it and fell into a dream in which the separating line moved inexorably to the left before my eyes, and there was nothing I could do about it.

The blue mess continued in August. Some customers pragmatically "sat on two chairs" and ordered this product from us and from "Fluffy". After switching to barter, we slowed the competitor's expansion, but the situation was precariously balanced. We needed an outside-the-box solution. I thought about it and an idea came to me.

"We need to find another supplier of the blue," I said at breakfast.

"What do you mean, another?" my father froze as he chewed, and then he continued eating.

"Just another one! Surely someone else in Krasnodar is producing either this or the same blue. Too freebee item... A tidbit!"

"How can anyone produce this blue if its name is registered?"

"It doesn't have to be exactly that one!" I began to get worked up, as I often did, surprised at my father's inability to get the gist of the idea instead of getting hung up on the details. "The name can be anything! As long as the bottle and the label are the same, that's all!"

"What are we going to do with it?" my father chewed apathetically.

"What do you mean, what!? We'll replace it with a new one. That's all! We just have to make sure that the new one isn't more expensive than the old one. But if someone there has started producing a similar blue, then the price won't be more expensive, it will probably be cheaper! Otherwise there is no point, we have to squeeze it out of the market. The price will be lower for sure! But how do we find these producers? Okay, finish your meal, we have to go, we'll think of something, as usual. We'll look in magazines, maybe something else, but

we'll find them!" I finished my breakfast and got up from the table. The thought firmly stuck in my head.

"And we should be done with this..." I continued on my way to the parking lot, remembering the meeting with the owner of the household chemical manufacturing company, and grimaced.

"Then what are we going to sell!?" my father stared at me. "We'll think about it when we find a replacement!"

"Well, obviously we'll do it when we find a replacement, not before! Do you think I'm an idiot or what?!" I was getting more and more irritated by the straightforwardness of my father's thinking, which I stumbled over more and more. "That's what I'm saying, we have to find it, and then be done with this one. Look at him, dragging his butt in a new 'Passat', throwing his weight around, all showing off 'we work with you, only with you, you are our representatives, we are interested in you', he pissed in our ears just for the hell of it, asshole! And he shipped it to the first one who called... dumbass!"

"Well, yes," my father agreed delicately. He didn't like it when I used strong language. I tried not to, of course, and I didn't swear in front of my father, but sometimes, when I felt overwhelmed, I allowed myself a few strong words.

"Okay, we'll look," I concluded.

With the transition to barter came the downside: the workload doubled. Now, to make the same profit, we had to do more work, transport more goods, and work more hours. I immediately tried to minimize all unnecessary activities, and I succeeded. When I received goods back from customers, I tried to take only what was needed to sell at other wholesale depots. In this way, we avoided transshipment of barter through our warehouse. The issue with "Mercury" had not been solved yet, Vovka had not called. In order to get the maximum profit from barter goods, I developed a pricing system. It took into account all the nuances: who, where, and what discounts they gave on similar goods, and how much they could be sold to which depots. I memorized all the numbers and kept them in my head. We kept writing bills by hand, and it was tiring and annoying. After all, the invoices were big now, with many items. We had to write a lot, not at our table at home, but in the cab of the "GAZelle". And I was the one who had to do it. My father, who was only a driver, quickly became unfamiliar with commercial matters. When he began to write a bill, he would ask me for prices on almost every line, making the writing process long and painful for both of us. I would write the invoices quickly, pulling information from my memory. Meanwhile, my father rested and smoked another cigarette.

The matter of selling barter to "Mercury" was solved – Vovka told us about it, he said: "I called Senya, he will take all this tripper from you, three percent to him and you can bring your shit there up the wazoo."

I rejoiced, and Vovka put his hands at his sides and froze near the "GAZelle" with an air of importance. After unloading, we stood in front of the warehouse. Vovka was bored in the office during the summer, and we saw him almost every time we came to "Pelican". We talked about all sorts of nonsense and scoffed like two cronies, which we eventually became, quickly and inconspicuously.

"All right, go on, you crooks!" Vovka sighed, he didn't want to leave. "I have to go, there's a lot to do, some shitty wine has been delivered, the car over there, the loaders can't get together for an hour, half of them are working, half of them are drunk."

"Okay, bye, see ya!" I waved, slammed the door, and my father started the engine.

Vovka waddled to the front. We overtook him. I looked in the side mirror – Vovka stuck his tongue out at me. I stuck my hand out of the window and gave him the middle finger.

The business situation looked stable. I felt secure about "Pelican". We were very lucky with "Peresvet": the big suppliers of household chemicals continued to ignore this depot. The goods there were sold as if they were falling into a bottomless barrel. The prices at "Peresvet" were so high that we were able to make good money even with barter goods. I smelled a chance to make money – while our competitors were fiddling around, we should load "Peresvet" to the limit. So we did, we started to put almost all the barter in one depot, and it started to get scarce. In addition to the blue, we needed good products again for direct sales and to increase the volume of barter – one thing was pulling the other. I remembered the idea of replacing the blue manufacturer, but I had no idea where to find one.

As in any other sphere, a fairly stable circle of players has formed in our city's wholesale trade. While it was large in food wholesale, then it was an order of magnitude smaller and very closed in household chemicals. There were hardly more than a dozen new players. On the contrary, in 2002 the market for household chemicals began to consolidate almost imperceptibly. The process was so smooth that when someone left the game, his business declined for a long time and in front of everyone. No one suddenly went bankrupt or closed down. On the contrary, if a company was growing, the progress was noticeable and had a normal pace. The others understood that the company had a good profit, invested it in development, sales, retail space, and growth continued. There was no rapid growth without outside funding. But there was a vicious circle. Banks were happy to lend to large companies. But these profits allowed them to grow quickly without loans. Small businesses were not given significant loans and were doomed to lag behind the big ones.

In 2002 a curious thing happened – the vicious circle was broken. The trading company "Homeland" suddenly began to grow rapidly. I knew the background of the company from various people. The director of "Homeland", like all small businessmen, at first lived on his hard-earned money. Suddenly, his business began to grow dramatically. Everyone figured it out – there was an infusion of money. Where was it coming from? There were rumors of loans. The company was located on the territory of a small depot, just across the fence from the "Mongoose". It was said that the director of "Homeland" did not rent the depot, but bought it. On its territory, which was not asphalted, barely covered with gravel in the most necessary places, and surrounded by a concrete fence, there was only a gray four-storey building. The lack of windows on three sides of the building only added to its gloomy appearance. It was against this background of information that my interest in "Homeland" arose, and I suggested to my father that we drop by.

Crunching the wheels on the gravel, we parked and got out of the car. Gee. I looked around. "Prison block." The building looked unfinished. There were two openings on the left side to accommodate the size of the truck. There was no gate in the openings. In the middle

of the building was another opening, but with a gate and even a patch of asphalt in front of it: the company's warehouse. A truck was parked in front of the open gate, and workers were bustling about. The office of "Homeland" was on the second floor, and the entrance porch was on the right side of the building. I pulled the iron door toward me, and my father and I stepped inside and found ourselves in the stairwell. Concrete stairs with welded iron railings led up. The floor was lined with pieces of concrete, sand-lime bricks, and hardened cement. It was like being on a construction site. The second floor greeted us with an empty doorway and a long corridor behind it. To the right of the doorway was an unpainted iron door. There was a piece of paper with tape on it that said "Salesroom".

"This way!" I said, pulling the door open.

It was heavy and didn't move immediately; a spring held it from the inside. We entered. The door rattled behind us, announcing our arrival. The interior of the room, one hundred and fifty square meters, did not violate the spirit of the building: cheap, worn linoleum on the floor, unattractive wallpaper. On the left side of the room were four desks with computers, two of which were occupied by girls. Along the walls were white wooden shelves, taller than a man, with samples of goods and paper price tags on each. Nothing superfluous, a typical salesroom. I said hello to the girls and wandered along the shelves. I didn't know what I was looking for, so I studied all the shelves, gathering information. I immediately noticed the low wholesale prices. I quickly estimated the difference; the prices were seven to ten percent below the average price in the city. "Amazing. Where did this luxury come from? Strange!" I wondered, the mystery of the low prices stirring my brain.

I glanced at my father, who was following me, but rather formally, with indifference frozen on his face. It was probably at that moment that my feelings became an immutable fact, and I realized that my father was indifferent to our work together. I was burning with work inside, but my father wasn't. He did his work mechanically, without interest. I felt like a fool. "Like an idiot, I'm poking around these windows, looking for something I don't know myself, but I'm looking, I'm searching, I'm interested, I want to find something here, I don't know what exactly, but I feel like I'm doing the right thing, and he..." the bitter thoughts began to swirl in my head. I didn't want to admit it. But the longer I watched my father in the salesroom of "Homeland" and remembered similar situations in the past, the more convinced I became of the unpleasant fact that my father was indifferent. Not good thoughts. I pushed them to the back of my mind, turned away, exhaled heavily and continued my search.

Stop!

The mental monologue about my father disappeared from my mind in an instant!

I stopped dead at the penultimate shelf and could not believe my eyes: on the shelf, among the tubes and vials, was a familiar blue bottle. Yes, exactly the same as the blue we sold, with a similar label, but a different name. I had found what I was looking for! Bingo! I took a quick look at the price – it was very low. "Perfect, just what we need!" my intuition screamed, and a shiver of anticipation ran through my body. I called my father, barely able to contain my excitement and joy.

"Oh," he said when he saw the bottle.

"Yes, yes, yes," I said quietly, went to the girls, took the price list as a distraction, went back to the shelf and wrote down the manufacturer's contacts. My father leaned against

the shelf and put on his glasses, still looking at the bottle. The glasses slid down the tip of his nose, making my father look like a college professor.

"Come, there's nothing more to do here, it's time to go," I added just as quietly.

We went outside.

"I'll be damned! Did you see that!?" I burst out, babbling nonstop. "Just what we need! Some 'Luxchem' in Krasnodar makes exactly the same blue, and cheaper! As if on cue! The ball comes to the player!"

We got into the car, and as my father started it, within seconds my head was filled with an unimaginable flood of thoughts. I began to feverishly calculate the prospect of a chance find. We drove off.

"What time is it!?" I said impatiently, then looked at the cell myself. "Three twenty-three. Still half past three."

"Half past three," said my father.

"I wonder how late they work? Until six, like everyone else, I guess. We still have time to call them today, we delivered the goods, let's go home!" I babbled.

"Well," my father hesitated with an annoyed look. "Okay, let's go and call. You're always in a hurry. Where's the fire? We can call tomorrow. Why the rush?"

"Why not today!?" I stared at him. "What is there to wait for?"

"All right, we'll call them today," my father agreed irritably.

I looked at him and my euphoria evaporated, shattered with a bang by my father's indifference, his stinginess of emotion, his irritation at my joy. I felt like a child who had been rudely reprimanded by a parent for expressing my joy too strongly and being too happy. I faded away. I turned away and stared foolishly out the window. The warm, pleasant summer air blew into my face and back. I put my right hand out, elbow on the window, and began to catch the oncoming airflow. I squeezed my fingers together, forming a wing-like shape with my palm. The air hit its flatness and threw my hand up in a flash. I placed my palm horizontally and my hand fell lower. I made an angle and the hand soared. Silly, but I played like an undeservedly offended child. I wanted the resentment to go away, and I chased it away with simple, childlike joy. I would change the inclination of my palm, and my hand would rise and fall again. It was my way of keeping the joy of my senses from my father's harsh and dry perception of reality. "We'll get home and call them," I thought, squinting my eyes with joy.

By four o'clock we were home.

"Dad, call!" I said, almost running into my mother in the hallway before I had time to take my shoes off. She was a dance instructor at the children's art center, and she hadn't had much work in the last few years. The pay was low, of course. And it affected the mother's condition. Every year she became more and more irritable, rude and scandalous at the slightest opportunity. My father always got it in the neck more than I did. I didn't understand the reason for their mutual intolerance, but I felt that its origins were very deep. Watching us, my mother froze in the hallway and went into the kitchen. "The mood is bad," I noticed and followed my father into his room. He sat down by the phone and began to dial the number I had written down. The August heat poured into the room from the open balcony, and I went there, sat down on the sun-warmed couch, lit a cigarette, and looked out at the street – beautiful, summer, warm!

"There's no one there. No answer," my father said as he walked out onto the balcony, sat down next to me, and lit a cigarette, too. "They're all gone by now, I guess."

I got a little frustrated. I wanted to get the price list as soon as possible. I took a drag on my cigarette.

My mother came to the balcony.

"Well, bismissmen!?" she said cheerfully, picked up my father's pack of cigarettes that was lying there, took out one for herself, and threw the pack back. "Not going well!?"

Again she wanted to hurt us; I already knew these peculiarities by heart. My mother's attacks came in waves. When we hustled with the "second", she listed us as "bismissmen" who could not do anything, unlike others "who had built a house, and their cars are cool, and their wives do not work". My mother's painful rebukes hit us with hard facts, there was nothing to argue with – we listened stoically. At first I did not notice her attacks. Later, they began to hurt me. The purchase of the "GAZelle" caused my mother's confusion, and for a while the provocations stopped. But after a few months everything went back to normal.

"Why not!?" I muttered, turning to the window. "It's going."

"It's going!?" my mother stood in the middle of the balcony with her eyes fixed on my father, crumpling her cigarette with her fingers. "And you, old chap, why don't you say something!?"

"Everything's fine," my father's voice sounded cautious, and I could feel his jaw muscles tense. "Go already."

"You shouldn't have said that," I realized my father's blunder. My mother was waiting for it, provoking it, waiting for the right word.

"Don't even think about sending me off!" she flashed a match. "Got it!? You!!"

My mother hovered over my seated father, gritting her teeth.

"Look at him, bismissman, my ass! Go on dreaming and sitting around, never getting rich! You'll never have anything, you'll see! Because all people live normally: earning money, supporting children and wives, buying cars, and you sit there, miser, counting every penny, putting it all away somewhere! You'll probably take it with you in your coffin!" she wouldn't let up. When my mother exploded, she was relentless. She would calm down quickly if you did not respond to her outbursts. But it was hard not to react. I understood my father well, and I knew that if I spoke up, the same words would be said to me, but with a little less hatred.

"Mom, come on!" I got up and walked past my mother to my room.

"Don't you shut me up, daddy's darling!!" she lost it in a jiffy. "Freeloading off him, making yourself comfortable! I told you a long time ago, you should work somewhere! No, you just hang around here with your daddy! And your mother is just a washwoman! Do the laundry, cook something to stuff your face with! That's all! That's all you need a mother for!"

I turned around, wanting so badly to say something nasty back. My mother was standing there, waiting for me. It was as if she was feeding on the bad energy. The fights were regular, after which my mother would contentedly retreat to her room.

"I'm already working and making money!" I didn't want to make things worse. "And if you don't want to do the laundry or cook, just say so, we'll do it ourselves! I don't want to hear those words, like 'stuff your face' and all that. If you don't want to cook, don't cook! Just don't yell around here!"

"That's it! Don't need the mother! Right!? You did when you were little, and now that's it, go fuck yourself, mother, huh!?" she came up to me, looking up from below with her myopic, colorless eyes, and flipped me the bird. "Oh, you've got it right about your smart-ass daddy! Here's one for the both of you! Bite it! I'll do what I want, this is my apartment and you don't tell me what to do!"

The fight took its usual grotesque form. I had nothing to say in return. I didn't want to be rude to my mother, but I couldn't listen to the nastiness. I looked at my father, who was sitting on the balcony with his legs crossed, smoking and grinning. After tragedy comes comedy – classic. My mother glared at my father and moved slowly, predatory, back to the balcony.

"What are you laughing at, you old crock!?" she hissed in spittle. My father's smirk worked on her like a red rag to a bull. My father understood that, but that was his answer in this mutual harassment that had begun no one knew when.

"Life is good, isn't it!? Your wife is a fool, isn't she!? A psychopath!? And if she's an idiot, why do you live with her?! Why don't you get out of here, buy an apartment and live as you please! Why don't you buy one!? You're a bismissman after all! You're tough! Fuckton of money! Why are you sitting here with me? Because there's no money! You don't make any money! All wind and piss, I'm the smartest, I'm the smartest! So where's the money?! Jack shit, cause you ain't smart, you're just talking!" my mother tapped her knuckles on her forehead.

I stood in the middle of the room and heard this for the umpteenth time. "When did it all start? I can't remember. Everything was fine, there was a family, things were going well, and then suddenly it started. I'd better go out," I thought, closing the door behind me and going into the kitchen. I ate dinner, went out, got into a share taxi and went downtown. The weather was beautiful. I felt like spending the evening in the club. But it was only sevenish, and I spent about four hours just hanging around the city. I was in a bad mood. On top of that, my stomach hurt. A nasty, nagging pain. When my stomach hurts, there is nothing else I want to think about. I bought a bottle of alcoholic cocktail, sat down on a park bench, smoked a cigarette, and poured the pale green drink into my aching stomach. The pain subsided. It didn't happen often, and I didn't pay much attention to it. I understood that it was caused by irregular meals and snacks on the road. My father had beaten me over the head with his lectures about it. After all, my weak stomach was a legacy from his side of the family. I accepted my father's moralizing, but I did nothing about it. I didn't care.

As expected, there weren't many people at "Clear Skies" on a weekday. I knew all of the club's staff by sight and greeted half of them with a handshake. I didn't have much money with me. I ordered a "screwdriver", walked around the place and hung out at the bar. I left "Clear Skies" after two in the morning, sloshed with alcohol. I climbed the stairs, pushed the heavy wooden door away from me, and found myself in the fresh air of the night-time street. I slowly walked away. I felt like taking a walk, getting some air and sobering up from the alcohol. I crossed the street on the crosswalk and took the usual route to the hotel, where the picker-uppers kept watch. Twenty minutes later, I was home. My parents were asleep, so I quietly undressed and got into bed. As soon as my head touched the pillow, a pleasant wave of relaxation and light fatigue passed through my body. I fell asleep immediately.

In the morning, still in a light slumber, I heard my father's footsteps in the room.

"Are you asleep?" his voice said.

"No," I answered without opening my eyes.

"I called Krasnodar," the voice said, clearing his throat. 'Luxchem'," he cleared his throat again and smacked his lips. "They sent me a price list..."

The remnants of slumber vanished in an instant, I jumped up, opened my eyes, sat down on the bed, and reached for the facsimile papers: "Let me see!"

I quickly ran through two sheets with sleepy eyes.

"Great! Blue! The price is three rubles, super!" I devoured the letters and numbers with my eyes.

"They have cleaning paste, too," my father added.

"Cool! Pasta!" I kept studying the names and prices. "The price isn't great, it should be a little cheaper. Okay, we'll talk about that later. Laundry detergent is cheap, great! Cleaning products are cheap, great."

We hit the bull's-eye! We had found exactly what we were looking for. "Is this the way out!?" my heart was pounding and I was excited, feeling an instant burst of energy.

"So, did you talk to them about the terms!?" I couldn't wait.

"The terms are excellent," my father continued, sitting down in the chair opposite me, his legs crossed, and with no concealed satisfaction. "They give a grace period until the next shipment, but not more than two months. They have their own delivery. The price includes delivery."

"Cool!" I leaned back on the bed, my back against the cool wall, and immediately recoiled. "If they have their own delivery, then the prices are great! Blue for three rubles! We'll finish that 'Fluffy'! The price of paste is also good! There's washing powder and everything else will do. You saw how big the assortment is, and it looks like everything will sell! It's not like that one, nothing for sale but blue! It's a great manufacturer! Don't they work with anybody here?"

"They don't, I found out," my father leaned back in his chair, shaking his leg with an air of importance. "I mentioned the dealership agreement and they agreed to an exclusive dealer."

I almost jumped up on the bed.

"Just what we need!" I blurted out. "Okay, I'll go wash up and we'll talk about it."

I jumped out of the room and hid in the bathroom.

The rest of the day, as we drove around town with the goods, my father and I discussed new prospects. My father agreed that we should stop using the current manufacturer and switch to "Luxchem" products. In addition to the blue, the problem of the Rostov paste of poor quality was solved; now we could also replace it. The two-month deferral in payment was like manna from heaven – we could bring in and sell more goods.

August was living its last days. Once again, I called Moscow to barter and found out the unpleasant news: the "Fluffy" manager had gotten there as well, offered the same blue, but at a lower price, and had even managed to bring in the first batch. I should have been upset, but I wasn't. After what had happened, I didn't care about the Moscow company, the "Fluffy" manager, or the lies of the production owner with his new "Passat". "Let them work," I thought then, and simply broke the news to my father. He reacted the same way.

September continued with the warmth of summer and at the beginning of the month we received our first shipment from "Luxchem" – a very old "MAZ" crawled to our warehouse gate and almost collapsed there. The cabin, long since unpainted on the outside, looked like a living construction kit inside – bundles of wires stretched from the dangling dashboard to the steering column. A multicolored mass of them was bound and tied together with shabby ropes, cords, and pieces of duct tape. A makeshift hull towered behind the cabin. It looked like a barn on wheels, lined with iron sheets on the outside and planks on the inside. "Hell of a truck," I thought. The driver opened the back doors of the "barn" to reveal four tons of cargo.

"How much can you load in it?" I couldn't help asking.

"Ten," he said calmly, wiping his hands of the dirty oil with a rag.

"Ten tons!?" I froze in surprise.

"Yes," the driver didn't change his expression. "There's a trailer, too. Ten tons as well."

"I'll be damned!" I whistled. "How far can you drive that monster?"

"I go to Moscow."

"Wow! You're a hotshot! It's a thousand and a half kilometers one way! And it never breaks down!?"

"It always does," the driver took the papers out of the cab and handed them to me.

"Okay, let's get started," I said, handing the papers to my father and walking into the warehouse. The car pulled up outside, the doors slammed, and I heard cheers.

"Good afternoon!" I returned from the warehouse and shook hands with a short man with blond and gray hair, a high sloping forehead, and a watery, cunning gaze.

"Eduard Dmitrievich," he replied, shaking my hand.

"This is my son Roman!" my father introduced me to the two guests, breaking into a restrained smile. "We work together, you could say it's a family business!"

I extended my hand to the second guest and said, "Roman."

"Aslanbek Akhmedovich," he replied in a cheerful, energetic voice, shaking my hand firmly. "Director of 'Luxchem', Eduard Dmitrievich's partner! He's more of a commercial director, and I'm in charge of production!"

There was a physical resemblance between the partners: they were both about one hundred and seventy centimeters tall, closer to fifty years of age. The only difference was that Eduard Dmitrievich looked like a man far from sports, with his belly visible even through his shirt and his entire physique, while his companion, on the contrary, had the appearance of physical strength and endurance.

The unloading began, the driver got into the "barn" and began handing boxes to my father and me.

"Let me and Eduard Dmitrievich help you, Anatoly Vasilievich," came the director's thick voice from behind me.

"Right, Anatoly Vasilievich, let us help you and Roma," said the other.

The director surprised me! I realized that a man who owned a company and was no stranger to physical labor would rise high. He ignored my objections and those of my father and got to work. Eduard Dmitrievich's face showed a faint flicker of annoyance.

We got it done quickly, in an hour. After unloading, we assured the new suppliers of our sincere desire to promote their products. They, in turn, assured us that we would be the only representatives of their company in the region. All four of us spoke in favor of a long and fruitful collaboration, shook hands again, and then parted ways.

On the drive home, my imagination ran wild, painting the rosiest of prospects – I was so excited, I babbled almost nonstop. My father was mostly silent, barely managing to get a word in between my pauses. I was a fountain of energy and thirst for activity. The way out of the dead end had been found; all we had to do was follow it.

We got to work immediately and energetically, distributing the new products to customers within two weeks. Replacing one blue with another raised no questions; the move worked perfectly. We fixed our situation, made ourselves safe from "Fluffy," and ended our relationship with them. Everything started to sell: cheap laundry detergent, nail polish remover, cleaning powders. We liberally drove up the price of the new products, and it was still the cheapest in the city. We took a chance and won at everything. Sales were so brisk that by the end of the month there was a demand for the next batch.

At the same time, we suddenly found a subtenant in our warehouse. An acquaintance of one of the depot managers was looking for a small space and promised to come over.

CHAPTER 7

The work got so fast that we hardly had time to prepare the waybills – they got big and took a long time to write. In addition, accounting became more complicated: we needed a computer. The growth in sales brought with it a new volume of barter. What to do with it? "Peresvet" was overloaded, "Pelican" was selling badly, only "Mercury" was left. One day we took the goods to "Mercury", my father lit a cigarette and stayed near the "GAZelle" in the parking lot while I went to negotiate. As usual, the door to the commercial director's office was wide open.

"Come on in!" he waved, inviting me in.

Arseny Mikhailovich, a tall man, about one hundred and ninety centimeters tall, with a well-developed musculature visible even through his jacket, sat at his desk in a cramped room six meters square. A second desk faced him, and a third, cluttered with office equipment, leaned against the side wall. The conversation was short and to the point. I immediately told him about Vovka's call. After listening to me and scrutinizing me with an experienced eye, as if scanning me in "friend or foe" mode, Arseny Mikhailovich gave me a quick verdict.

"Yes, we can work, I think!" he said. "We have to decide on the product groups. What can you bring in on a regular basis? Because, as you yourself understand, if I start buying from you, it will have to be regular and the price will have to be ironclad. I won't buy at a bad price, I don't want any trouble."

"Are your prices strictly controlled?" I encouraged the conversation.

"Hoh! Strictly indeed!" Arseny Mikhailovich, bouncing slightly in his chair, craned his neck forward like a goose and fixed his jacket with his hands. "We have special people running around the city, watching and rewriting prices at similar depots. The owners keep an eye on everything."

"Can we go to first name terms?" I clarified, sensing that we were about to make a deal and decided to drop all formalities at once.

"Well, of course we can! Just call me Senya, without the 'Mikhailovich!'" he smiled with two rows of straight white teeth.

"Almost all of them are implanted, the front ones for sure," I noted mechanically, also smiling.

After discussing the nuances, we quickly came to an agreement. Senya impressed me more and more. He was definitely one of those people who knew the business, knew how to run it, and demanded the same from others. It's usually hard to get used to people like that, but when you do, they're a pleasure to work with. Finally, Senya said he would fax over the first order in two hours.

I returned to the parking lot in a great mood. My father was walking by the "GAZelle" and smoking. When he heard me out, he got excited and without taking the cigarette out of his mouth, he said: "Oh!" and took a big drag. The nervous tension of the negotiations subsided and I immediately got hungry. We ordered a glass of instant coffee and two masterpieces of fast food – sausages in dough. My stomach hurt. I hoped that eating would ease the pain. It didn't help. For ten minutes the pain was almost gone, but later, as we drove, my stomach shook from the bumps in the road and the pain returned. The joy of success at

work was overshadowed by a dull, nagging pain. I made it to the parking lot and on the way home I bought some painkiller syrup and drank a few spoonfuls and the pain subsided.

At the very end of the month, we finally bought a trolley for the warehouse. It cost the same money as the phone and was desperately needed. At the beginning of October, a second car from "Luxchem" arrived. Days off were a thing of the past and we began to work every day, enjoying the work and feeling more and more tired in the evenings.

At the same time, the subtenant, a tall man of about thirty-five, with a typical Russian appearance, gray bright eyes, and blond hair, came to visit. His open face with straight features made a pleasant impression. The guest was involved in the wholesale of motorcycle parts. He looked at the rented space and decided to move in. All the next day, we were making deliveries, and the newcomer dropped off his goods at the warehouse.

October passed quietly. The neighbor quickly settled in – he filled the whole area behind the room with motorcycle tires and tubes, placed shelves of goods along the walls of the room and a table with a chair, a laptop and a printer in the middle.

With the beginning of November, there was a hint of winter. The daylight hours were quickly melting away. We would come home from work after dark. There was nothing to do at home. The apartment was oppressive all the time. If my mother started scolding, it would become unbearable and I would want to run away from these four walls. My admonitions and calm tone provoked her anger even more than my silence. I didn't understand what was going on and didn't know what to do. I was nervous, trying to understand the reasons for my mother's attitude towards my father and me, but I couldn't find them, so I ran to "Clear Skies". I didn't realize how I got used to this club. I was drawn to it. I would look forward to the weekend and spend every Saturday night there. Sometimes Fridays too. Money was tight. I had enough for Saturday. Friday wasn't always enough. Somehow I managed to squeeze the most out of what I could afford. How? I would drink only "screwdriver" – fifty grams of vodka and a hundred and fifty of juice – the cheapest alcoholic cocktail I could think of. It cost thirty rubles. I would take about three hundred for the evening, drink six or seven "screwdrivers" and carefully leave at least seventy rubles for a taxi.

One Saturday in November, I got so carried away with alcohol that I ran out of money. At ten o'clock at night, I stood at the bar, sipping my first "screwdriver" from a plastic cup and watching the crowd fill the club. "It'll be packed in two hours," I estimated. And so it was. By then I was on my third "screwdriver" and getting ready for the fourth.

"How about a double?" the barman said, showing me a half-liter plastic glass.

"All right! How much!?" I said.

"Sixty!"

I nodded, got a cocktail, and finished it in half an hour while smoking. I immediately felt better. The two hundred and fifty grams of vodka in my blood demanded fun, and I joined the dense stream of heated bodies that floated onto the dance floor, jerking to a single rhythm. Both mirrored walls were fogged up to a quarter from below. Infected by the general merriment, I bounced around for a few minutes in sheer pleasure, until the stuffiness took over and pushed me out into the fresh air of the street. It was cool. Clarity returned to my head almost immediately. I smoked. The nicotine intensified the state of lightness and

serenity. I didn't want anything. Just to be here and like this. "Everything is fine. No, everything is wonderful!" I walked leisurely with a cigarette in the cold midnight November air, looking around at everyone and everything. I was cold. I went back to the stuffy basement and ordered a double "screwdriver". Half an hour later I did it again. I wanted more. There was a lousy thirty in my pocket. "Screwdriver"? Of course! I drank it quickly and realized I'd had too much. I was drunk. I wanted to get some fresh air and just go home. I slowly walked to the exit, grabbed my jacket from the checkroom, and went outside. Fresh! Two in the morning. I'm downtown without a penny to my name. Walk home? That's an hour and a half away. My legs hurt, I wanted to sleep. I wandered down the street, smoking. "Most of the taxi drivers are near the hotel, I'll go there, get some fresh air, maybe someone will give me a ride, and when we get there, I'll take the money in the house. Why did I drink it all? Too bad I didn't have enough money, I would have drunk more. I got drunk, I'm staggering around, I'll be helicoptering in bed, and I'll have to sleep on my stomach again. Maybe it will air out at least a little while I walk," I thought, wandering through the night city.

The group of taxi drivers, who had been standing by their cars, lost interest in me as soon as they heard about the lack of money. I nodded understandingly and walked along the line of cars. The line ended. In front of a few empty cars stood a white "fifth" or "seventh" Zhiguli car, it was hard to tell from the back – instead of the standard tail lights it had two red circles. Cigarette smoke drifted from the driver's side window, and I decided to try my luck again.

Twenty minutes later I got home, ran to the floor, took the right amount and came back. The taxi driver was standing outside, smoking.

"Thanks for helping me out!" I gave him the money and shook his hand.

"Anytime, happens to the best of us," he said, getting into the car with a look of mild surprise on his face. "My car's always there if anything."

That's how I met Edik, a student who was moonlighting as a private driver.

It was getting unbearable without a computer. But we didn't have another thirty-five or forty thousand. I offered to take out a loan and my father agreed. My passport was immediately rejected, with the explanation that they do not give loans to the unemployed. "Right, I'm officially unemployed, somehow I didn't think about it, I just keep working," I realized, confused, and put my passport in my pocket. My father's application, a retired military man and self-employed businessman, was approved after a one-hour inspection, and in two days I was unpacking the new computer and printer in my room. After figuring out the product accounting program, I installed it, entered the assortment, and the first waybills came out of the printer with a bang. I was pleased. So was my father, and his eyes were puzzled by what I was doing with the computer. After that, every time he approached the computer and watched me work, he would scratch the back of his head, cough in embarrassment, and quietly walk away – the computer was Greek to my father. I, on the other hand, was very excited and enthusiastic about it.

"Wow, you guys are growing up!" exclaimed the manager of "Mongoose" when he saw the printed waybill.

"Yup," I smiled happily.

The manager wrote the usual "accept" in the corner of the bill, signed it, and handed it to me. I went outside and walked into the warehouse to the steady sound of snow – December began. Things were going well at work – sales were increasing, we had already made three deliveries from "Luxchem", each one bigger than the last. Having given up all previous suppliers, we were back with the only one. I learned from the previous experience and decided that as soon as we made enough money, we would immediately increase the number of suppliers.

"There's a fax for you, bismissmen!" my mother said contemptuously as my father and I returned home one evening, and retired to her room.

I took the facsimile from the table and ran my eyes over it.

"Dear partners... blah blah... in order to increase sales, we offer you to undertake to implement in 2003 the sales volume of the products of 'Luxchem' in the amount of 1 million 600 thousand rubles. In case you fulfill and exceed the above mentioned obligations, we guarantee payment of remuneration in cash in the amount of 5% of the actual amount of sales at the end of 2003. Yours sincerely, the Director of blah blah Llc."

"Here, read it!" I handed the paper to my father. "What an offer they sent us!"

He reached for his glasses. My hunger led me to the kitchen. I looked in the fridge – empty; I looked at the stove – empty. There was a rye crust in the bread box.

"Dad, we have no food!" I shouted angrily.

My mother came into the kitchen.

"Mom, why is there no food!? Why didn't you cook anything?" I stared at her.

"What is there to cook with? There is nothing!" she replied sharply and defiantly.

"Why don't you go to the store and get some, Mom? What's the problem!?"

"You go yourself! Take your daddy and go! What do I have to do with it!?" my mother gave me a challenging look and turned away.

"Here we go again, not even a week after the last scolding, same old stew," I realized:

"And you can't, can you!? You've been here all day! We just got home from work!"

"It's none of your business where I've been or what I've been doing, got it!?" my mother turned sharply and walked out of the kitchen, slurring over her shoulder, "Out, get your rear in gear! To the store!"

"I don't get it, are you going to cook or what!?" hunger made me unable to get angry.

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't!" came the voice from the hallway. "I'll think about it!"

"I see," I said, but more to myself than to her.

My father came into the kitchen, wearing glasses and carrying the piece of paper.

"Yes, it's an interesting offer!" he looked at me over his glasses, scratching under his nose. "Yeah! What do you think?"

"I don't think anything!" I snapped back, feeling a little worked up. "I'm hungry! There's no food! There's nothing in the fridge! Mom doesn't care about anything! I have to go to the store, that's what I think!"

My father stared at me in surprise.

"Do you want to go to the store together and we can discuss this offer on the way?" I softened. "I can go by myself, of course! As you wish!"

"No, we have to go to the store," my father took off his glasses. "Well, let's go. Let's go together."

On the way to the store and back, we decided that we wouldn't risk anything by making a commitment: if we met it, we'd get a bonus; if we didn't – okay, fine. It was worth a try. We brought two bags of food and stocked the fridge. My father had barely started to cook dinner when my mother appeared in the kitchen and said, with an angry look on her face, that she was going to cook it herself. I thought, "Well, let her do it herself then," and went out.

My father spent the whole evening calculating, writing on paper, putting his fingers into a calculator, and in the morning he woke me up saying, "Look, I've done the math. Are you awake?"

"I am now," I said.

My father smacked his lips and grunted as he prepared to speak.

"Look, I counted all the items we take from 'Luxchem' and the approximate sales volume. I calculated it for the coming year, taking into account the seasons for the blue and everything else, and taking into account the fact that Aslanbek promised to start producing new products in the spring..."

"What new products?" I was surprised, half awake, and remembered. "Oh yeah! That rings a bell."

"I suggest we sign such an agreement," my father said as if formally.

"Who's against it?" I said. "I'm for it. All right, let's sign up for these volumes, we're not risking anything anyway, and if we make it, eighty thousand won't hurt us."

The same day we sent another order to "Luxchem". In a telephone conversation my father gave Eduard Dmitrievich his consent on the volume of sales for the next year, and he in turn promised to come personally and bring copies of the agreement.

We were lucky with the weather in December, for the whole first half of the month the temperature was kept at five degrees below zero, the sky was clear, no wind. We cleared the day off work when the decrepit "MAZ" from Krasnodar was supposed to arrive, were home by noon, and waited for the truck. But it broke down a few hours from the city, and it wasn't until seven that my father and I drove to the warehouse. And the weather began to change dramatically. Clouds covered the sky and snow began to fall like small grains of foamed plastic. I looked through the windshield at the beauty falling from the inky sky and thought about New Year's Eve. We had barely pulled into the warehouse when the snow began to fall heavily and a wind began to blow. It swirled the snow and caused it to drift close to the ground. I felt a slight chill on my face. "It's about ten degrees below zero, that's fine as long as it doesn't get any colder," I thought to myself as I ducked into the warehouse to get warm. I talked to my father for about twenty minutes and then went back outside. It was snowing harder! It was up to my ankles. "It seems to be getting colder," I thought, feeling the frost on my cheeks, and went back into the warehouse. After half an hour I heard the hum and clang of machines working. I went outside. The snow was coming down so hard! My face immediately froze. The sound came from the main road of the depot. I ducked into the narrow passage between the warehouses and, knee-deep in snow, stepped into the sound and froze – a solid white cloud was pouring from the sky. Here and there cars were

sliding or stuck in the snow. A tractor drove between them, shoveling snow into the piles near the warehouse walls.

"It's snowing like crazy out there!" I almost shouted as I ran into the warehouse, covered in flakes and clutching my frozen earlobe. "It's knee deep outside the warehouse! We have to shovel it away, otherwise we won't be able to open the gate! And it's getting cold fast."

"We'll do it then!" my father said irritably.

"Call them, will you?" I suggested. "Find out where they are!"

My father called. The "MAZ" was already dragging along the left bank of the city.

For the next half hour, we vigorously shoveled the snow away from the warehouse and cleared the area for the car. There was a creaking sound under our feet and steam came out of our mouths. "It must be fifteen degrees by now," I thought to myself, getting more active with the shovel. The phone in my father's pocket rang – the car pulled up and was parked in front of the depot gate. We left the shovels and went there. The familiar "MAZ" was parked by the side of the road. "Good thing it doesn't have a trailer," I thought. The passenger door opened and the commercial director of "Luxchem", dressed in a light brown sheepskin coat, a gray suit and light shoes, fell out of the cabin. His feet were knee-deep in a snowdrift.

"Oh, wow! Holy moly!!!" Eduard Dmitrievich widened his eyes and became just "Edik" to me at that moment. "What weather you have, Roma!"

"It's winter, Edik!" I said, laughing. "What did you expect!?"

"It's winter there, too!" He shook hands with me and my father. "It's seven degrees above zero in Krasnodar!"

Edik climbed out of the snowdrift and began to kick his feet, shaking the snow out of his shoes.

Five minutes later the "MAZ" pulled into the depot, its central road already free of snow. While my father and I were panting and shoveling the snow away from the warehouse, a tractor appeared, panting with effort, raced down the neighboring road, cleared it immediately, and sped away. Happy with the help, we quickly cleared the road to the warehouse gate. My father's face turned red with frost, as if covered with a motionless crust. "I must be like that now," I thought, and overcoming the frozen crust on my face, I said with difficulty:

"What time is it?"

"It's ten to ten," my father said.

"How many degrees is it!? Twenty, no less!?"

"Yeah, it seems so," my father looked at me with a face as red as a boiled crayfish.

"No clouds at all. The sky is clear. It's going to get colder."

I looked up. The sky was dotted with huge stars. "That definitely means frost," I realized, pushing away the thought of a warm bath and bed. It had almost stopped snowing.

Half an hour later the "MAZ" was already at our warehouse and opened the back doors of the "barn". We started unloading. I had known Edik for a little more than three months, but I already knew his main personality traits: stubbornness, trickery, cunning, and laziness. Frost has one good quality – in the cold, even the most hardened lazybones begin to work. As soon as I climbed into the body and started to move the boxes to the edge, Edik

immediately grabbed one of them and put it on the pallet. The work was in full swing, warming us up. The depot was silent and empty. The driver, who had spent twenty minutes in the cold cabin, joined us.

Dancing with a squeak in his thin shoes, Edik asked me where he could buy cigarettes and disappeared into the passage between the warehouses. I froze and sniffed the air – the temperature was clearly dropping.

"How many degrees is it now?" I looked at my father and the driver.

"More than twenty, for sure," my father replied with a puff of steam and a snuffle.

"What time is it!?" I shouted from inside the "barn" without stopping my work.

"Half past eleven," my father looked at the display of the phone and took out his cigarettes.

"Smoke break?" I said.

My father nodded. I reached for mine. I pulled one out and offered it to the driver.

"Nah, I don't smoke!" he shook his head.

"Lucky you!" I took a drag and exhaled the smoke and steam. "I'll quit one day, too."

"You!?" my father froze in disbelief in his gaze. "You won't!"

"Why not!?" I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "I don't smoke much, just five or ten cigarettes a day. You're the one who won't quit! Because you smoke a pack a day!"

"You'll see!" my father declared resolutely. "I'll quit in about five years!"

"In five?" I narrowed my eyes, working it out in my head. "So at the end of two thousand and seven, well, rounded up to January 1st, two thousand and eight, you'll quit smoking, right?"

"You'll see!" my father looked contemptuously at the cigarette. "Hands down!"

"Sure!" I grinned. "We'll see who does and who doesn't!"

Edik creaked out of the black passage, shivering and smoking on the way – we continued working. We unloaded the goods quickly, almost in complete silence, just wanting to finish as soon as possible.

Twenty minutes later, Edik ran back to the market stalls. The frost didn't spare us, so we worked non-stop. My father was left alone and could no longer keep up with the goods, so I jumped over to him. Edik came strolling down the passage, smiling foolishly, his eyes shining.

"Did you hit the sauce or what!?" I said inwardly amused.

"No, no, no!" he shook his hands. "Roma, the very idea! What are you saying!?"

"Come on, get in the back, you can help me there!" I broke into a smile.

Grunting and scrambling, Edik struggled to crawl into the "barn," took the box, pressed it to his stomach, and cried out as he walked with his legs spread on the slippery metal floor of the body: "My goodness! Two hundred dollars! My siuut! The giift! It was just given to me a week ago..." Hiccuping, he almost dropped the box, carried it and placed it on the edge of the body, caught his breath, adjusted the hat that had slipped down over his eyes, and dissolved his pink face into a happy smile. The others watched in silence, smiling as well.

"I'm helping you, Anatoly Vasilievich! Have you noticed?" Edik raised his index finger dramatically, hiccupped, turned and staggered into the back of the truck. "Two hundred dollars! My suuit! The giift!"

The emotions of the situation lasted about ten minutes, and then everyone fell silent, tired and working mechanically. Edik continued to mumble unintelligibly, but he wasn't having any fun either. I was almost dead with cold. The work warmed my muscles, but my bones had been frozen for a long time.

We finished at one in the morning.

There was a resounding silence at the depot. Edik and the driver hastily said goodbye to us and immediately climbed into the cab of the "MAZ". I closed the warehouse and staggered tiredly to the "GAZelle". In a minute the starter of the truck came to life, the diesel engine picked up and started bouncing. It was our turn. My father turned on the ignition, pulled the choke, and we sat in the cab for a minute. Dad turned the key, the starter cranked briskly. Ten seconds. No luck. Not a single cylinder engaged. My father turned the key back on and pumped gasoline. Trying to keep warm, I sat motionless, staring apathetically, exhausted. I wasn't sleepy. Every cell in me was thinking about warmth: "Warm up first, and then... and then everything else, but warm up first."

My father repeated. The starter started almost as fast, but slowed down faster this time.

"That's all we need right now," my father said, expressing our shared concern.

"It's about to start. Let's wait a little longer," I encouraged him, and began to picture in my mind how we would leave the "GAZelle" at the depot, walk to the roundabout where not many people drive at night, and try to catch a car at half past one in the morning.

Third try. The starter cranked the shaft three times, almost died on the fourth, and – oh my God! – one cylinder fired once and the engine froze.

"Yes! It's about to start!" I perked up, and so did my father.

The fourth attempt. The engine started immediately and roared with all its might in the silence of the night, enveloping the "GAZelle" in thick clouds of exhaust fumes. My father touched the choke, the engine grabbed the icy air and stalled. But it didn't matter anymore. "If it picks up, it'll start again for sure," I encouraged myself with a thought.

Forty minutes later we were home – while we started and warmed up the car, while we drove on snow-covered roads, while we parked the "GAZelle", it was already two in the morning. We walked from the parking lot, almost hopping. I waved my hands, trying to get warm, but my body did not respond, only signaled a desire for warmth. At home, I quickly filled a tub with hot water and climbed in up to my neck. I sat there for a few minutes, but the internal cold would not stop pounding me. The water had cooled and I was not warm. I opened the tap and the boiling water flowed into the tub. It did not help. The cold felt like it was in my bones. The heat of the water only warmed my muscles, unable to penetrate deeper. I sat for twenty minutes with no effect, got out of the water, put on all my warm clothes – thick socks, military winter underwear, sweatpants, and a light sweater. It was still cold. I was shivering. I sat in the kitchen and pressed my feet and hands against the hot radiator and drank some tea. It worked, the cold came out from inside and I stopped shivering. I felt tired and sleepy at the same time. I went to my room, crawled under the comforter and, shivering from time to time with the remnants of the cold, fell asleep.

The next day we signed the agreement, which Edik brought with him, and sent it to Krasnodar.

The rest of December went by quietly. I spent my evenings playing computer games and my weekends hanging out at "Clear Skies". I even wanted to celebrate New Year's Eve there, but it turned out to be mundane and meaningless. I was invited to the party by a girl who was the only one I knew there. New Year's Eve turned out to be terrible. My stomach was already giving out, and then I ate a lot of salted fish and drank disgusting cheap wine. A few hours before midnight I had a severe attack of heartburn. The pharmacies were closed, of course, and there was not even baking soda in the apartment. My insides burned and the heaviness in my stomach made it hard to breathe. It was as if time had stopped. I almost threw up in the middle of the night. With dawn and the first buses, completely exhausted, I went home and drank soda and the heartburn subsided. I threw up in the toilet. On the first of January, I walked around the apartment and ate semolina, carefully prepared by my mother. I felt better, and on Saturday, January 4, I made my way to the club.

"So how did it go?" Edik stared at me with a cheerful look in his black eyes.

I rolled into his car with the usual smell of vodka, grape juice and a great mood. The evening had been a success. Even the slight pain in my stomach, which I had filled with a lot of alcohol, didn't dampen it. I was breathing heavily from drinking and smoking. I didn't want to go home, I wanted to sober up. Edik didn't have many customers that night, so we made small talk. It turned out that he had been cabbing for two years, ever since he and his girlfriend started dating. They rented an apartment. Edik said he liked "family life," but he and his girlfriend fought a lot.

"Why are you fighting, anyway!?" I stared at him. "Do you even love her?"

"Of course I do," Edik nodded, looking at me in surprise at the question.

"Does she love you?" I went on.

"Well, I guess she does, or she wouldn't be living with me," he grinned.

"And if you love each other, why are you fighting?" I smiled.

"Well, everyone does," Edik thought for a moment. "Sometimes she just pisses me off, so slow on the draw. I tell her, why are you doing that? And she doesn't understand, she does everything her own way. She is such a pain in the ass. She's always whining, 'You're not a man, no money, you don't make any!' Where will I get the money!? I'm a student! Go, she says, drive the car, earn money! So I get in the car and drive around the city..."

"I don't understand anything about your relationship," I said, realizing that the guy's answers didn't make the gender issue any clearer. "But if you live together, everything suits you fine, right?"

Edik had no time to answer.

"Beautiful?" I dug deeper, asking a frankly stupid question, as if any man in the world would say his girlfriend was ugly.

"But of course!" Edik said automatically, realizing the impertinence of the question, and stared at me in surprise, but the next question was right there.

"And the forms, well, the appearance, full-bodied or slender?"

"Well, like me," Edik poked his hands into his chest and laughed.

"You're as skinny as a rake," I laughed, too.

"Well, not that way...she's slim..."

"Oh, well, that's more like it," I made a theatrical pause and said that I liked a different type – curvy, dark-skinned girls with noticeable bends.

"Oh! You know which side your bread is buttered! Everyone likes that kind!" Edik fidgeted in his chair, suddenly thought about it, lit a cigarette, and said that he had such an acquaintance – a smart, particular girl who rents an apartment with her truck driver father somewhere in my neighborhood and is now looking for a normal guy because she is not satisfied with her current relationship.

I was surprised that the girl had a boyfriend since she was looking for a guy. Edik calmed me down by saying that the guy wasn't serious and wasn't her type, and suggested that I meet the girl in a group in the next few days, for example at Christmas. I agreed.

The crowd met on January 8th at "Clear Skies". I was the last to arrive. Edik and his girlfriend and a swarthy brunette with D-size breasts and her boyfriend were already sitting at a table. I walked over and Edik introduced me.

"Inna," the girl said, and I shook the beautiful but firm woman's hand.

"Sanya!" said her boyfriend, a long, thin young brown-haired man of about twenty-two, with curly hair falling to his eyes, a freckled nose, and a happy, childlike, smiling, carefree face.

I shook his long "mitt" as well.

Edik's girlfriend, an ugly, gnarled brunette with blank, flat eyes, thin strands of hair, and a disgruntled, pointed face, introduced herself last. "What an ugly one. If she's beautiful, then Edik has nuts in his head instead of brains," I thought and sat down fifth at the table.

Communication in an unfamiliar group is always the same – formal, forced conversations about general topics and implicit exploration of new faces. With Edik's girlfriend, everything became clear at once. Her manner and character matched her appearance – a shrill, twitchy, hysterical girl. Sanya kept smiling. Communication with him became lively, but eerily primitive. "Consciousness not burdened with intellect," I judged, and Sanya began to pour vodka. I didn't want to drink it straight. Why do people drink vodka? It has no taste at all. But I didn't want to be out of place right away, so I nodded to Sanya's offer. The shot glasses were quickly filled, and Sanya's eyes sparkled. We drank the first one. By this time, Inna was tired of taking stock of me, and I was able to sneak a peek at her. She was over one hundred and seventy centimeters tall, a sturdy, fleshy girl with broad shoulders, well-developed hips, and a thin waist. Her figure was feminine, but not the weak and cheesy femininity that reeked of affectation and uselessness, but energetic, the kind that aroused desire in men and confidence in the vitality of its possessor. Swarthy. Resinous, straight hair in a blunt bob. No jewelry on the long, beautiful, thin fingers with thick, healthy, clean, short nails without nail polish. The slightly thin, tightly pressed lips and the sharp look of her attentive black eyes revealed Inna to be a pragmatic girl who knew about the difficulties of life.

Finally, the music began to play, relieving the crowd of the exhausting conversations. The club came to life and people flocked to the dance floor. Sanya quickly poured a second drink for everyone with a practiced move. His fidgeting and burning eyes showed an irresistible desire for a drink. No sooner had the toast been said and the shot glasses raised than Sanya tipped his head back in a split second and poured vodka into his mouth. Everyone drank after him. The smell of vodka made me shiver and I started to eat the salad. Inna stared at me openly. The girl's eyes made it clear that she was privy to the hidden meaning of the

evening. The awkwardness of Inna's gaze prompted me to speak to her. Edik's girlfriend munched phlegmatically on herbs. Sanya smiled and lustfully touched an opened bottle of vodka. The sluggish conversation continued for another ten minutes, after which Inna got up to her full bosom – a thin, tight black sweater, a black skirt above the knees, black shoes on a ten-centimeter stiletto – and went to dance.

The dance floor was getting crowded. I sluggishly exchanged phrases with Edik and glanced in Inna's direction. She was dancing smoothly, responding to the rhythm with energetic body movements. She waved invitingly in our direction a few times. Sitting with her back to the dance floor, Sanya poured vodka. I didn't feel like drinking. I got up and, encouraged by Edik's dirty gaze, walked over to Inna, caught the rhythm and moved in front of the girl. She smiled with her strong, straight rows of teeth and sparkled with the blackness of her eyes. Inna's movements immediately became more active, her breasts swaying invitingly. I glanced in the direction of the table – Sanya was drinking, Edik was looking at us. My eyes fell on Inna's breasts. She noticed, smiled brighter, took my hand in hers and moved more vigorously. "It's a farce. A girl flirting with another guy in front of her boyfriend," I was confused, finding myself in this situation for the first time.

We danced through two songs. I was carefully balancing on the edge of being friendly. Inna was having fun and openly hitting on me. I got tired of all the awkwardness and went back to the table. The vodka ran out and Sanya got sad. Wanting a break, I went to the bar, ordered a double "screwdriver" and chatted with the barman, feeling Inna's attentive gaze on my back. "Clingy girlfriend, and Sanya is a milk toast, why is she hanging out with him, out of desperation or something? He's definitely no match for her," the thoughts floated in my head.

The rest of the evening was the same. Dancing, a few slow songs, during which Inna deliberately pressed her breasts against me, I supported her a little more than formally at the waist. Dance, like nothing else, conveys the energy of a partner – either a mulchy and spineless body at hand, or a firm and exuberant one. Inna's body melted my hand with the grace and strength of a panther. Nimble, clingy, fluid, strong and intelligent. A dangerous cocktail.

We left the club shortly after midnight. Inna held Sanya's hand, who looked happy, and smiled meaningfully. We said goodbye at the exit. I hitched a ride and was home in half an hour. "No need to get involved with her, today she smiles at me, holding the hand of her boyfriend, tomorrow at someone else," I decided and mentally put the girl in the "unnecessary" section.

After the holidays, work resumed with renewed vigor. No sooner had we loaded the customers with goods than the severe cold during Epiphany set in, and the temperature dropped to twenty-five degrees below zero in two days and stayed there for a week. Every working day became a separate struggle for survival. The "GAZelle", which started the first two days, responded to the efforts of the starter on the third day with silence. We removed the battery and carried it home, forcing ourselves to take a day off. The next morning we could hardly start the car. We couldn't afford to wait until the cold weather was over – orders were coming in regularly and in large quantities. We worked fast: we drove the "GAZelle" to the warehouse, jumped out, loaded the goods in the back and, frozen to the bone, jumped into the

warmth of the cabin. Two trips a day were the norm. Afterwards, we would remove the battery and carry it home. It got chilly in the apartment, too. After work, I would sit in a hot bath for an hour, then put on warm clothes, eat dinner, prepare the waybills for the next day, and go to bed in my clothes.

By the end of January, our patience had run out, I hated frost with every fiber of my being, and then suddenly the sky was covered with clouds, it warmed up to five degrees below zero, and there was a coarse-grained, soft snow.

CHAPTER 8

February was warm, but everyone was tired of winter and waiting for spring; even business slowed down. At the beginning of the month a fax from "Luxchem" arrived in the morning:

"Dear Partners! We would like to inform you that our company has started production of the sanitary drain product 'Brush'."

I was cool with the news, but my father wasn't; he was eating breakfast in the kitchen, and when I brought him the facsimile, his eyes widened in surprise, he almost stopped chewing, crossed his legs, and started kicking one of them. I looked at the foot with the slipper dangling from the toes, jumped up from the chair, and paced the kitchen. My father's emotion was transferred to me.

With the next car we received twenty packages of the new product, and all of them were ordered by "Arbalest" on approval. I spent a few seconds digesting the result of the phone call, suddenly realized it, found my father in his room on the couch, and in a fit of euphoria gave the news. My father was looking at me with a neutral face. I waited for his reaction. It seemed clear, after all, we got another strong item, which bodes well for us in terms of increased sales, and therefore profits, and therefore opportunities, prospects, and therefore... That was the reason for my euphoria. But there was no reaction.

"Did you hear what I said!?" I stared at my father in disbelief.

"Yeah," he said.

"What, yeah!?" I began to get irritated.

"Well, I heard!" my father said with a slight emotion. "And!?"

I felt down. Immediately. All gone.

"Why is he so stolid!? Or is it his way of expressing emotion? Or is he used to keeping them in check? How can he be stone-faced all the time? I don't understand," the thoughts rumbled through me like heavy boulders. I studied my father's face, trying to understand why he was like this, what was wrong with him? "Why is he so stingy with his emotions? Or am I so over-emotional that I rejoice at every success, no matter how small, in our common cause? Doesn't it make him happy? Or it does, but my father is stingy with his emotions simply because of his character? It is incomprehensible." It became clear that my father could take away all the desire to fly, born of positive emotions, with one sentence, one dull look on his face. It was as if he was fighting them, extinguishing them as soon as he saw them in me. My chest felt heavy.

"Never mind," I turned and left the kitchen to get dressed.

The mood was ruined for the rest of the day.

Winter was over. March had gotten off to a nasty start – the sky was covered with clouds full of moisture, the temperature was creeping toward zero, the snow was melting into a mush of ice, and the humid air, rushing in rough gusts of wind, stung my face and blew the heat out of my body.

The "barn" from Krasnodar came crawling back to us with a trailer on Thursday, March 5th, bringing thirteen tons. It took a long time to unload the truck – we started at noon, around one o'clock, and finished when the sun went down at seven in the evening. Two-thirds

of the load was the blue, so the work quickly became monotonous – a steady stream of identical packages turned into identical pallets of them. We rolled them one by one into the warehouse until the last one barely fit.

"That's it? Are you finally done?" the tenant neighbor said encouragingly, peering into our part of the warehouse once again.

"Yeah, that's it, we're done here," my father said tiredly. "Now we're going to sell it."

A gust of wind blew through the locked gate from the inside and shook it. The lights in the warehouse were on. The room, crammed with goods, felt cozy. My father and I sat on the packages with our backs to the posts of the same packages, slowly coming to our senses from the hard unloading. My muscles burned with exhaustion. I buttoned my down jacket tightly. The heat from my muscles quickly warmed my clothes on the inside.

"We're about to start the season, too," said the neighbor.

"What made you decide to get into the motorcycle parts business in the first place?" I said, sinking into a light doze. My body was recovering from the exertion and needed rest, preferably sleep.

And the neighbor shared his story.

He had an "Izh" motorcycle, it broke down, and it turned out that there was nowhere to buy spare parts in the city. It was 1995, hard times. So he decided to go directly to the factory in Izhevsk. His friends heard about it and ordered spare parts for themselves. The guy brought a backpack full of them by train, sold them in one day and even made some money. His friends said, "Bring more!" And a week later he took the train back to the factory and came back with two sacks. He went to the market and sold them in two days.

"And again you...?" I tried to guess what would happen.

"Again indeed!" the neighbor nodded, pleased with the story and its effect. "Anyway, I spent the whole summer like this! I would go there, stock up, bring it back here, stand at the market for two or three days, sell it, and go again."

The markups were good, ten times or more.

"How long have you been cruising around with that sack?" my father's voice came from my right.

I shuddered and glanced over my shoulder in that direction. My father took a cigarette out of the pack, put it in his mouth, clenched it dashingly between his teeth and smiled.

"Dad, you're not supposed to smoke in the warehouse, are you!?" I said. It just came out. And it came out rather harshly, in a peremptory way, and unexpectedly to me. There was a time when we had just moved into the warehouse, and I smoked in it once. My father told me not to smoke inside. I put the cigarette out and, without knowing it, I learned my lesson. After all, our life is a constant learning and development. And the father is the first teacher and authority for his son. As we develop, we digest the lessons of our parents. I absorbed my father's moral arguments. To me, he was always the unquestionable standard for the right set of human qualities. There were so many of them in my father that at one point there was even a sense of overabundance. My father's perfection seemed astonishing. I never saw him drunk; my father hardly ever drank, except for token grams on holidays. He did not swear. Which surprised me because I could hear foul language all around me and from every other person. My father was pedantic in his work, reliable, honest, and very diligent. If I had wanted to pick on him and find a fault in him, I would not have found one. Of course, I did not look for

any negative qualities in my father, nor did I try to challenge his authority. What could be more comfortable and important for a son's developing consciousness than the real authority of his father? Nothing. But the laws of life are firm and guide us in the implicit ways of wisdom. What does not kill you makes you stronger. This is true. Paradoxically, the opposite is also true – what makes you stronger is what destroys you. It was what made my father an authority over me that began to work against him. His punctuality, accuracy, pedantry, which were worthy traits of his character, over time crossed the line and began to degenerate into overscrupulousness, meticulousness, hair-splitting attitude toward those around him and especially toward those close to him – me and my mother. My father meticulously noted all my faults, pointed them out to me, and boringly lectured me on how I should have acted instead. As my father's son, I worked hard and sincerely tried to reach the standard set by my father and correct all the mistakes and shortcomings in my actions according to his remarks and admonitions. I was okay with my father's criticism and strictness because I knew that, however painful it was, I was learning how to live. The more I reached for the bar my father had set, the more unattainable it became. My desire to do everything right by my father's standards degenerated into a virtual race to the horizon, and my innate diligence began to be undermined by the irritation of his reproaches and admonitions. Since my father was stingy with emotion, he didn't feel mine either. My consciousness, having learned the futility of acting obediently, adapting to my father's character, began to develop "antibodies". It's not for nothing that they say: who keeps company with the wolf will learn to howl. In the gusts of another scandal, my mother would fling in my teeth: "You're becoming just like your father!" And it was true, imperceptibly, day by day, I was taking on my father's traits, becoming the same rigid, demanding, pedantic, emotionally dry. The traits of my father that I had absorbed began to work against him – I began unconsciously to notice all his faults and weaknesses. I began to wait for my father's mistakes, as he had always waited for mine. I became inexorably transformed into my father, a dry, ruthless "counter" to his failures, mistakes, shortcomings, awkward movements. Living with him, and especially working with him, gradually turned from a "teacher-father-student-son" bond into a rigid bundle of two "counters" of mutual mistakes. One was wearing out and aging, the other was growing older and stronger. The point of equality of forces was rapidly approaching. Every day I became more demanding and relentless. You reap what you sow. Did I like it? I didn't think about it; I was developing the qualities of survival. Was it the first time I noticed my father's failure and told him? I don't know, but it was definitely the first time I realized it. I questioned my father's unquestioning authority over me. It is undoubtedly better, easier, and more comfortable when the father is the authority from the beginning to the end of your life. This state of affairs removes many painful issues of personal growth. But in order to remain a leader, an authority for his son, the father must continue to develop personally. If such thoughts were born in my mind at that time, they were in their raw infancy. All I realized at that moment was that I had found a gap in my father's "perfection" and pointed it out to him.

He froze with the cigarette between his teeth. My father's satisfied face turned to one of surprise. Confusion flashed in his eyes. He didn't have a leg to stand on.

"Yeah, right..." my father said confused and put his cigarette back in the pack.

All I did was pay back the debt. Demand for demand. If you demand something from someone, make sure you follow that rule yourself.

"Not for long!" our neighbor continued. "The next spring I started renting all kinds of 'GAZelles', 'Ford Transits', you know, small cars of a ton and a half, and a year later I bought my own 'bull-calf', you know, 'ZIL' truck. That was in 1997, I guess, just a year before the default! You remember the financial crisis, right?"

He made good money on the default. The dollar rate began to rise, but the prices of motorcycle parts in the factory remained the same, in rubles.

"I understand that it won't be like this for long, that the price will go up! And I only had a hundred thousand dollars. So I took all the money I had, jumped into my 'bull-calf' and drove to the factory in Izhevsk, bought eight tons of spare parts with all the money I had! How am I going to transport them? According to the registration certificate, my 'bull-calf' can carry three and a half tons, well, five can be loaded, the axles will hold. There's no other choice! So I load the 'bull-calf' with eight tons and go back!" the neighbor was excited about the story.

"And?!" I opened my mouth in surprise. "Did you get home alright?"

"Far from it!" the guy laughed with a satisfied look. "All the bolts on the hubs were cut on the road! What a weight! I had to buy and replace two hubs on the way, but the axles held up, so I made it! And a month later the factory raised the prices five times! So they started buying all my goods as a reserve – just in case the prices suddenly went up even more! In short, I sold all the goods for six months and ended up with half a million rubles! With this money I bought an apartment in Prirechny, do you know where Prirechny is?"

"It's west on the way out of the city," my father said.

"Cool, man!" I sincerely admired the desperation of the move. "Wow! No, I have no idea where this Prirechny is!"

My father went into boring geographical details. I wasn't listening, I was thinking about my neighbor's brave and desperate move – an adventurous journey, three thousand kilometers round, with goods bought with all his money, in a truck overloaded two and a half times. I was impressed.

Soon the conversation faded away on its own. There was nothing more to say. I felt cold and began to freeze. The workday was over and it was time to go home.

A few days after unloading, we received some bad news: several of the depot's warehouses were up for sale, including ours. Whether we liked it or not, we had to find a new warehouse. The smooth work plans were diluted by anxious thoughts about the future. The issue of renting a warehouse did not look easy, rental prices in the city were rising, we had to find a cheap warehouse again. In addition, my gastritis had worsened – my stomach ached throughout March, protesting the fast food I ate wherever and however I could. I responded by pouring painkiller syrup into it.

The blue season had begun, but the increase in sales was not as strong as last year – the weather spoiled everything. The month turned out to be disgustingly gray, damp and dreary, without a single clear day. The real spring and warmth was unbearably longed for. I was fed up with winter. In the last days of March, our neighbor, who knew that the warehouse was going to be sold, moved out. Immediately it became somehow empty, boring and uncomfortable.

April began with the same snow and water slush under our feet and wheels. On Wednesday, on the second day, an acquaintance from the depot administration introduced us to two of his "friends," as he called everyone he had seen or even glimpsed at least once in his life.

At the meeting it turned out that they own a cannery in the village of Prirechny, that there are many different warehouses at the factory, that there is a two-story office building with empty space on the factory premises, and that there is their own boiler house.

The next day, at half past nine in the morning, we were already jolting in the "GAZelle" through the huge potholes of the ring road towards Prirechny. At the T-junction after the roundabout, we turned right onto a bridge and headed west out of town. After about a kilometer and a few turns we entered the village, cut it in two along the main road, turned left behind the church and drove downhill through the residential neighborhood. After five hundred meters, we had to leave the paved road and turn onto the adjacent gravel road. The gravel ended before it even began. We barely crawled the next thirty meters to the railroad crossing. The car was bouncing around like a rodeo. A small, dull yellow house stuck out of the ground at the crossing. Behind it was a pile of old oiled and dirty ties. A shabby, dirty white mutt was snooping around at the door.

As we approached, the crossing bells rang loudly, the semaphores flashed red, the barriers came down and the dog bellowed. A woman in a yellow vest came tiredly out of the house holding up a twisted yellow flag. While the bells were hysterical, the mutt yapped. But as soon as the trill stopped, the dog shut up, circled the side of the house, and peed on some driftwood. The woman was holding the flag, staring at us, shifting from foot to foot. We stood there, the engine running.

"That looks like a long time," I said, turning my head. "Where's that stupid steam train!?"

My father turned off the engine, opened the window and lit a cigarette. It was warm and humid outside. I looked up, the low, wet clouds hanging like a blanket. I longed for sunshine, at least one ray for five minutes. I opened the door, dangled my feet outside, sat sideways and smoked. "A kennel, no less," I thought, looking at the small house. The woman, as if she had read my thoughts, turned away. A whistle sounded to the left, from the town side. A shunting locomotive crawled lazily across the crossing and pulled away, whistling twice. The woman went to the house, the barriers went up. After the crossing the road turned out to be exactly the same, leading to the left along the tracks. Another hundred meters and the iron gates of the cannery appeared on the right. They hung between a one-story pale red gatehouse on the right and a two-story administration building on the left. The building looked shabby – the doors of the main entrance from the street were boarded up, the paint, both on them and on the concrete canopy above, faded and peeling. The brick walls of the building, which had never been painted, had turned a dirty color with brown and green stains from time and spring moisture.

"This way, I guess," I said cheerlessly.

"Well, yeah," my father sighed loudly, and we drove onto the property.

A woman immediately jumped out of the gatehouse waving her hands. We stopped.

The owners of the factory were waiting for us in an office on the second floor of the building. We left the "GAZelle" and went there. I pulled the handle of the front door, ducked

into the low opening, and was the first to enter. I smelled a faint whiff of warmth and the dampness of an abandoned building. On the wall to the right hung a thick battery pipe. I touched it – slightly warm. Three steps and we were on the platform of the first floor, with the wings of the building to the left and right. We went up to the second floor and to the left wing. There was a deathly silence in the building. The sand crunched under our feet, the sound instantly spread through the wing, and in the doorway of the far room appeared the stodgy figure of one of the factory owners.

A few minutes later, the four of us stepped outside and walked through the slushy snow. "What a wreck, not a factory," I thought as I looked around. There were six main buildings: an administration building, a boiler house, two production shops, and two storage buildings. A brick fence outlined the rectangle of the factory grounds. Between the buildings, remnants of asphalt were visible under a layer of sand and earth. The two shops and one of the warehouse buildings stood parallel to each other. They were separated from the administration building by a rectangular patch of asphalt about twenty meters wide, with a transformer box sticking out of the ground on the right and a red-brown brick building with a chimney behind it on the left. All four of us walked downhill between the two shops. A rough dirt crossing road marked their end, beyond which a shrub-lined fence ran parallel about ten meters from them. There was a one-meter-wide gap in it, right in front of us. "Like a public thoroughfare," I thought dejectedly.

The warehouse was a hundred meters to the left, and there was almost no room next to it. "There's no way the truck can drive up or turn around," I realized, looking to my right. Invisible from the gatehouse, there was a sixth building – a one-story warehouse, seventy meters long, stretching along the fence to the grassy corner of the factory grounds. Another warehouse building ran down from above, parallel to the two shops. It had three sections. Between the warehouse buildings was a large flat square. I made a rough estimate of the turning radius of the truck – it was just right, the size of the platform provided double the space. We stood in the middle and my father and I looked around. It seemed like a good place. But it had one drawback: the snow melted down to the lower warehouse and dripped from the gatehouse and accumulated near the walls. The upper warehouses, which ran parallel to the shops, were not affected by the melted snow, so the outskirts of the warehouses remained dry. These warehouses were much better than the lower ones. As soon as I asked to rent one of the sections, I was told no, referring to the fact that these premises were no longer available. Our choice was down to the two warehouses in the lower building.

"It's going to be wet all the time, and there's probably a lot of water in there, too," I thought, looking at my father and agreeing to check out the lower warehouses. The whole group sloshed downhill through the slush.

The one-story red brick building with a slate roof had three sections. The left and middle sections were identical, ten by ten meters square. The far right section took up the rest of the floor space. The one hundred meter sections were a pathetic sight: an earthen floor, a leaking roof, cracked walls, and a crooked gate that did not fit tightly. The floor in the left section was flatter, but the warehouse was ankle-deep in water. In the middle one, an uncomfortable mound of earth in front of the entrance proved to be a lifesaver – it blocked the path of the water, forming a puddle in front of the gate, and the floor of the section remained dry. "We can't roll a trolley with pallets in here, we'll have to carry everything by

hand... Two sheds, not warehouses, one worse than the other, end of story," I began to get angry that we had actually gone to such a place. I wanted to go home, I was freezing from the damp weather.

"Well!" I turned to my father. "We'll think about it for a day or two and then we'll call you, right?"

My father took a drag on his cigarette and nodded with restraint.

We made a deal the next day. The rent for the warehouse was half the average price in the city, it couldn't be cheaper or worse. We transported the goods gradually, one full "GAZelle" a day, and we were done in a week. Life had finished writing another page, turned it in one fell swoop, along with the weather. On Monday and Tuesday, I squashed my shoes in a puddle near the warehouse, next to which lay muddy piles of water-soaked snow; on Wednesday night, the heavy clouds disappeared, revealing a gentle blue sky in the morning. The sun burned so hard that it melted all the snow and dried the ground in two days. On Saturday, when we had finished moving, we put a lock on the gate of the new warehouse and drove home. After dinner, I sat on the balcony watching the setting sun and smoking. The mood was in keeping with the weather. Everything was fine. Saturday. Evening. "Clear Skies" was waiting for me.

Just before the May holidays, we received a fax from "Luxchem" informing us that they were discontinuing two product lines. It wasn't good news.

By May 2003, the business situation began to change. The market was showing signs of compression. And it manifested itself in the loss of profits on barter goods. If before it was possible to earn at least a little, now it has become more difficult. The most popular goods received in barter were sold at zero or with a slight deficit. We tried to squeeze the maximum out of every operation. While my father turned the steering wheel, I sat next to him and thought of possible combinations of bartering and selling goods. The biggest losses on returns we made were in "Mercury". Senya had a lot of pressure on prices. But we had to put up with it. First, there was no choice. Second, Senya was constantly pumping good volumes through his depot. In "Peresvet", anarchy continued to reign in household chemicals – a paradise for all small suppliers. They all worked primitively: they brought in low liquid goods and sold them to the city's wholesale depots at a high markup. As a result, the warehouses of the depots were clogged with commercial trash, which only hindered sales. The solution was not long in coming – the large wholesalers of household chemicals stopped accepting the goods for sale and set the suppliers the barter condition. It was the same as we had done before. Part of the suppliers disappeared, others had to switch to barter. The load on depots such as "Mercury" and "Peresvet" increased sharply – the suppliers had to "dump" the barter goods. Price pressure began. Wholesalers of household chemicals went further – they also cut the list of goods. Small suppliers had no choice but to fight among themselves for goods from this list. And then many people's moral compass cracked. I didn't want to take anything away from anyone, to cross people's bows. I understood that all the suppliers were hard workers like us, trying to make a living. I didn't want to leave people angry. Two pathways were left. The first was semi-fictional – to find a new manufacturer from the list of wholesale depots. It had to be as close as possible to our city so that logistics would not kill the profit, the goods

had to be cheap and of high quality, and the manufacturer had to work only with us. Such a set of conditions was like a miracle – I understood that. The second one was real and annoying: setting up our own retail outlets. I didn't like it very much, but if we succeeded, it would be very reliable. The risks were in the choice of location: we could make a bad guess and lose money.

During the May holidays, smoking on the balcony under the warm rays of the sun, my father and I began to talk about business development. My father listened to my chatter, was not against implementing one or both directions at once, but showed no enthusiasm – talk remained talk. I wanted action! I settled down to the wholesale magazines again. Working only with "Luxchem" was a big risk – we could have lost the whole business at once. We needed at least one other manufacturer.

Once again Chance decided everything.

On one of the holiday days, I found myself on a nearby street between rows of commercial kiosks and pavilions. The rows of grocery stores were joined at the edge by two rows of housewares kiosks. The farthest one consisted of six containers. I took a closer look. Inside, the containers were divided into two kiosks. If the kiosks belonged to the same owner, there was no partition between them, so the result was one container kiosk. The first two were like this – united and glazed. They were used for selling kitchenware and shoes. The third and fourth containers had separate kiosks, and moreover, they were open. The first kiosk sold household chemicals, the second sold audio cassettes. The fourth kiosk sold household chemicals. The fifth glass container kiosk – household chemicals, the sixth – all kinds of household goods. A tent stretched over a single iron frame served as a roof for the containers. The next row looked more solid – all large kiosks stood on a cement base. Only one of them sold household chemicals.

I wouldn't have noticed all the details if it weren't for the ad. On the sliding shutters of the third container was a white sheet with a single word printed on it: "For Sale." I walked slowly past it, came back a few minutes later, chatted with the kiosk saleswoman, learned that the owner came by every day at six to collect the proceeds, and walked home.

My father was half-lying on the sun-heated windowsill of the balcony, smoking and watching the life in the courtyard. When I flew up to the balcony, I started babbling, talking about the kiosk.

"Hm! Interesting place, I see what kiosks you're talking about," my father was interested, took a drag, put out his cigarette, and turned to me. "A lot of people pass by there."

"Yeah, it's very crowded!" The idea of buying a kiosk was stirring my brain. "I had only been there five minutes, and customers kept coming. And come to think of it, it's just a regular retail outlet, and the prices there are darn well. If we buy it, we can lower the prices. It's just that we have to move our volume of goods as efficiently as possible. If we continue to barter everything, the discounts will eat up all our profits!"

"I got it! Why are you hustling into deciding again?" my father was indignant.

"I think we should go and talk to the owner tonight!" I was a fountain of emotion, demanding action without question.

"Well, I said we would! Cut it out! Here, sit down!" my father pointed to the edge of the couch.

"Forget it!" I waved and flew off the balcony into the kitchen. I put the kettle on.

A minute later, my father's footsteps could be heard in the hallway.

"Why did you run away!?" he stared at me in surprise.

"Never mind."

"Come on!" my father added conciliatorily. "Such issues are not resolved just like that, you saw it, ran and bought it! I said we would go! We'll go tonight."

"Yeah, we will," I began to calm down.

A few days later we bought the kiosk. It cost us thirty thousand, and we got it with the saleswoman – Nadezhda Petrovna – a skinny, but strong and quick old woman with innate intelligence and an agile, clear mind. The owner decided not to sell her second kiosk for now – half in the fourth container next door. Another saleswoman watched us with interest, leaning against the window with her shaggy head sticking out.

The purchase gave me a strong emotional uplift. The feeling of accomplishing something significant and important in our business stirred in me again. Our precarious position had finally found its first foothold.

Inside, the kiosk looked miserable – a square room measuring two by two meters, vertically divided by a wooden counter window. Behind it, like a screen, were shelves for the kiosk's stock. Half of the front of the kiosk was taken up by a waist-high horizontal glass counter. In between was a chair. If the saleswoman did not sit on it, but stood next to it, then the free space in the kiosk ended there.

We were lucky with the saleswoman. She brought the kiosk back to normal sales mode in two days, and from the third day it began to make a profit. The rhythm of work and life became harder – goods had to be brought to the kiosk every other day to maintain the assortment, otherwise the income immediately dropped by half. At the end of the first week, we found a second saleswoman – an overweight, short of breath, silly and shrill woman with glasses. She squinted constantly, waved her hands emotionally while talking, flashed a pair of iron crowns on her upper teeth, and spat small amounts of saliva.

We spent all of our free time the next week repairing the warehouse. The first rain of May flooded it, reminding my father and me of the holes in the roof. We fixed the leaks by putting new slate on the roof. A local electrician repaired the wiring, and instead of one light bulb in the warehouse, all four were working. Because of the kiosk, the goods in the warehouse had grown in assortment, lying chaotically on pallets, and they were no longer enough. In three days, we sawed and hammered together three levels of shelving from what we could quickly get on the factory grounds. As soon as we put the goods on them, the warehouse became cozy and practical.

CHAPTER 9

"I'm getting a fucking divorce after all, Ramses!" Vovka began to rub his hand roughly over his eye and angrily shook the open door of our "GAZelle".

"Vova, damn it, you're gonna rip the fucking door off! That's enough!" I yelled out, my father wasn't around.

"We'll weld it back on, for fuck's sake! It'll be as good as new! We have our own welders here at 'Pelican', they spend all day here welding things: doors, racks, all kinds of shit!" Vovka stopped, but didn't calm down, continuing to boil inside.

"Why the hell are you getting a divorce!?" I got out of the "GAZelle" to stretch, I was tired of sitting, the sun was burning through the glass. "Your wife is so hot. I like her!"

"It's fucking complicated, Ramses!" Vovka rubbed his eye until it was red and ruffled the hair on his head until it stuck out in all directions. "Fuck if I know! My relationship with my father-in-law is fucking great, but my mother-in-law... Well, she pisses in that fool's ears!"

I looked down at my feet in leather sandals. "So dirty, ankle deep in dust, should I wash them?" I thought, looking at the faucet in the wall five meters away. Our "GAZelle" was parked as usual in front of the household chemical warehouse. It was the end of the working day. The customers had left. Only the tired and sweaty loaders hung around the depot.

"Fuck it, I'm getting a divorce!" Vovka jabbed his hand through the air, his face frozen in confusion, his eyebrows furrowed and yet stubbornly raised in a curve.

"Well, is it really that unbearable, don't you love each other?" I slurred back over my shoulder, walking to the faucet.

"Yeah, we seem to be doing all right! Fuck, my mother-in-law is making a big deal out of it! She's always nagging me: 'Blah blah, you live with us, you don't have your own apartment, why did you leave the army, you could have a corporate apartment by now, and then they'd give you your own!' She would fucking love it if my wife and I would continue to live in fucking Chita and only come on vacation – 'Mommy, mommy, eensy weensy!' Vovka imitated his mother-in-law's languid, fake family kisses. "So I live at her place, I eat her food, I eat out of house and home, for fuck's sake! Let her go fuck herself!"

During his emotional speech, I washed my feet and staggered back to the car.

"It's okay, Vova, it's all to the good!" I tried to cheer him up. "Of course, it's a pity, because your relationship with your father-in-law is good, and with your wife, too."

"Well, not as such!" Vovka flared up again. "We've been lying and sleeping on the same couch for two years now, and we don't shag!"

Vovka, fully stretched, depicted two people lying close together, as if on a single bed.

"What do you mean, you don't shag!?" I even forgot where I was going. "All of two years?!"

"Well, yeah! Twooo fucking years!!! Twooo!" Vovka parted his fingers to make a V shape and shoved them under my nose.

"Holy shit! Gross!" I expressed my surprise and turned around at the sound of footsteps.

It was my father coming from the side of the office.

"Well, did you get the rest?" I said.

He waved his hand with a piece of paper. I nodded. My father walked over to the "GAZelle", took his cigarettes from under the steering wheel and lit up. My stomach hurt. I hadn't eaten anything since this morning, just two cups of tea from the kiosks and a bar of chocolate. I went back to my seat in the cabin, wincing. I noticed a long time ago that when I sat down, my stomach would squeeze and stop hurting. So I settled in, choosing a comfortable sitting position. I swung my legs out and turned around. My father stepped away from the cabin, smoking and studying the piece of paper.

"Well, what else is new with you?" I said quietly to Vovka.

He started yanking the door again, but not too hard. Then stopped.

"That jackass Petrovich pissed me the fuck off..." came the grim reply.

"Looks like everyone pissed you the fuck off, doesn't it?" I laughed silently.

"Son of a bitch, he acts like an asshole..." Vovka stomped nervously on the spot.

"Fuck!"

I was silent. I looked around again. My father was far away and couldn't hear us.

"When I get what's mine from suppliers or wherever, I always share it with Petrovich. And he always shares with me. He shared. He gets more, of course, he's the director. But this time he kept it quiet! He got the money from a crook like you..." Vovka grinned at me, protruding his lower jaw and laughing mischievously. "He didn't tell me, but I found out!"

Vovka sighed heavily, shook his head as if to shake off a delusion, and fell silent.

"Well, he didn't do a very good job, after all, you're working together," I cobbled together a weak phrase in an attempt to support him.

Vovka was silent, standing with his hands at his sides and rolling his eyes angrily.

"Fuck this!" he jabbed his hand through the air again. "I think I should give him up to Daddy so he can kick him the fuck out! And put me in his place! I'll be the director, Ramses!"

Vovka grabbed my wrist sharply with his rough claw, squeezed it, and shook it emotionally. Then he grabbed it with his other hand and shook it even harder.

"Ramsees!! I'll be a direeector!!" he howled long, his small, tenacious eyes boring a hole through my pupils with glee.

"What's that got to do with me!?" I smiled and started to pull Vovka's fingers away from me. "Give me my hand back, you'll tear it off!"

He unhooked himself, moved away, and sort of calmed down.

"Fucking awesome!" Vovka answered his thoughts, rubbing his hands greedily.

"Sounds like a plan!"

I turned around. My father was no longer smoking, he was just standing there, obviously waiting for me.

"So, what's up?" I nodded at him.

"Off we go?" my father suggested.

I nodded and looked at Vovka. He got the hint.

"All right, move it, you crooks!" Vovka waved good-naturedly, grinning and giggling.

"I bet you've made some money for a week! Yes, you did, you did! I saw your sales this morning! Hm, I didn't expect that, all this shit sells well."

I held out my hand to Vovka, who shook it and then shook my father's.

"All right, see ya," I nodded, and Vovka turned and walked toward the office building, past the faucet that let out a thin stream of water onto the hot asphalt.

The "GAZelle" roared and overtook Vovka. As usual, I looked in the side mirror and Vovka waved at me. We left the depot and slowed down at a T-junction.

"Vovka keeps an eye on our sales," I said.

"He watches everything there. He's supposed to..." my father said, turning to the right.

"Clear Skies' continued to draw me in. I didn't realize at first that the changed work schedule had contributed to it – it had become monotonous: in the morning to the warehouse, loading, first in the back of the car for wholesale customers and for the kiosk, unloading the goods to the kiosk, the rest to the wholesalers and then home. In a whole day there were maybe two or three quick bites to eat. Often I would settle for a glass of tea and a chocolate bar. Later, my stomach would hurt. Whenever my father saw my distorted face, he would either turn away reluctantly or scold me for disregarding my health. I understood, but the lectures were enough for a few days, and then I would go back to eating chocolate bars. The pain would immediately return and get worse. I already had a lot of practical knowledge about stomach pain – a cigarette would dull it, a bottle of beer on a hot summer day would bring it back. I began to carry painkiller syrup with me and take it on the go. It dulled the pain, but there was a feeling of vomiting, a feeling of obstruction, and a heaviness in my stomach. After two or three days, the pain subsided, I stopped taking the disgusting medicine, and the pain returned. I knew I was being stupid, but I persisted in my idiocy. My mother persisted in hers – her fights with my father had become the norm and had increased to the point of exasperation. I also took a beating every other time.

"Mom, is there anything to eat?" I said from the threshold of the apartment in the evening, the work day was over, my stomach was empty and aching and all I could think about was food.

"Look in the fridge! You're not a little boy anymore!" my mother barked as she walked out of the kitchen and down the hall past me and my father.

"In a bad mood," I realized, took off my shoes and went to wash my hands. What was stressful about the job was the clothes. Because we had to do everything – communicate with managers and carry goods – it was difficult to dress appropriately. Dressing for work meant looking like a loader all day. Not much to look at. Dressing in anticipation of communicating with the "white collars" meant ruining my clothes the first time I loaded goods. Changing clothes in the middle of the day? In the car? Utopia. We tried to maneuver by separating work days and meeting days. It didn't work out very well; the days were almost always mixed. We had to dress in an average way. The snow helped in the winter, but the rest of the time our clothes got dirty very quickly. My mother would grumble about "endless laundry". If a fight came to a screeching halt and my mother refused to do the laundry, my father or I would tell her that we would do it ourselves. The statement always had the opposite effect – my mother would shut up and start throwing our clothes into the drum of the washing machine. Until the next fight.

I opened the fridge. Cutlets and spaghetti. Two pots. I took them out.

"Give me that!" my mother shoved me roughly, snatching the pots out of my hands.

I shrugged and went to the shower, taking off my dusty t-shirt. When I came back, my father was eating dinner. My mother wasn't in the kitchen. My share was on the table. Everything was as usual – yesterday's clustered spaghetti, hastily piled on a plate, and two cutlets on top. The sight of the food did not make my mouth water.

"What are you looking at!? Eat!" came my mother's irritated voice from behind me.

I didn't want to argue with her. I just wanted to go somewhere. I knew where. Friday night was my salvation. I poured some tea. My mother poked around the kitchen and, getting no answer, went out. After shoving dinner in myself, I put on my jeans and was at the center in an hour. After hanging out there for a few hours, I went down to the club after sunset. There were already a lot of people inside. I pushed my way to the small bar. It was crowded and there was a line for alcohol. After getting a double "screwdriver," I chatted with a couple of girls I knew for half an hour. People kept coming. The music was thundering. I was wiggling my knees to the beat. I wanted to drink properly. I smoked. The cigarettes helped the alcohol. The cocktail was dissolving in me, making me euphoric, and I headed for the bar.

"The same!?" the bartender looked at me questioningly.

I nodded and leaned against the counter. A couple of tipsy girls jostled behind me. A minute later, cocktail in hand, I was in the stream of bodies that carried me into the darkness of the dance floor. There I sat down in an empty chair and drank the cocktail. I had almost finished it when Anya entered the dance floor. I got excited and immediately lit up. Anya was gorgeous. My interest in her was pure in its pristine nature as a tear – a strong physical attraction. We knew each other visually and only crossed paths at the club. I remember when she came to the club wearing a thin navy blue sweater and black jeans. The sweater was killer to a man's eye – it hugged the perfection of the girl's figure. A bush of finely curled reddish-blond hair fell in long, bouncy, thick springs just below her shoulders. Anya was about one hundred and seventy centimeters tall, inclined to embonpoint, but her figure was in the shape that made the girl most attractive. The tight sweater showed her strongest trump card in all its glory: her breasts. Ripe, high, firm C-size breasts. They looked like an exuberant hymn to life and pleasure. It took me an incredible effort to look into her eyes every time I spoke to her. My gaze was stubbornly downward. I could stare at her breasts forever. And not just stare. I wanted this girl. It was as if she was made for pleasure. The sight of Anya paralyzed my brain, and the only unwavering thought of physical desire remained pulsing in it. Her full, sensual lips, her wide, open smile revealing even, flawless teeth, ended my pathetic attempts to resist the primal call of the flesh. Her face was beautiful. Fine wrinkles spread from the corners of her green eyes across her cheekbones as she smiled, the sweetest dimples appeared on her slightly plump cheeks, and the tip of her tongue showed playfully between her rows of teeth. I slowly died at such moments, hypnotized by it. Anya saw it, knew it and felt it. She glanced playfully at the guys around her and, just for fun, repeated the winning combination of dimples and tongue. When she spoke, she lisped so sweetly and subtly that I could no longer perceive a woman's speech without such a flaw. Anya was a wonderful mixture of the innocent look of a child, the awkward coquetry of a young girl, and the sex appeal of a physically mature woman. Feeling the vibe of male interest, she reveled in her game. The guys next to Anya were either shivering or rooted to the ground. I began to shiver.

But as if obeying some powerful law of the Universe that tends to balance everything, Anya turned out to be half-witted. Not stupid, but half-witted. As long as Anya stayed silent

and smiled, enraptured by the guys' attention, everything was fine. But as soon as she opened her mouth, the charm of physical beauty faded. For me, that's for sure. In those moments, I envied those who perceived girls only from the physical side. I wanted to see more in them than just the promise of physical pleasure. "What a silly girl!" I thought for the first time when I heard her incoherent, flirtatious chirping. I was so upset at that moment that for some reason I immediately stopped having any plans for Anya. Once and for all, she was relegated to the category of beautiful but useless fools. But I still wanted her. It was an unbearable split – physiologically Anya beckoned, intellectually she disgusted me. Alcohol! It saved me and suggested a way out. Vodka and juice liquefied my inner conflict, and every time I met Anya in "Clear Skies" and was seriously drunk, I forgot everything and continued to stare happily at her breasts. And this time everything went according to the usual scenario: I was drunk and Anya was beautiful. We greeted each other – she greeted me, I greeted her breasts. Anya smiled coquettishly, playfully running the tip of her tongue over the edges of her upper teeth, while I grinned bluntly and stared where I wanted to stare. I was nervous; I needed a drink immediately. Very quickly, a few more double "screwdrivers" found their way into me. Alcohol played its cruel trick and a miracle happened – a memory lapse. At about one o'clock in the morning my consciousness cleared from the alcoholic intoxication at the most interesting moment – I was standing in the street a few steps away from the entrance of the club and... kissing Anya! Deeply! Greedily! Anya returned the kiss. I sobered up almost immediately. I'd never felt such pleasure from a kiss before. The world around me ceased to exist, I closed my eyes and fell into the sensation.

Some are good kissers, some are bad. Some would like to kiss well, but they can't. The kiss of thin lips is not pleasant, not even a skillful one. Such lips are stiff, and there is no pleasure in them. Medium and full female lips promise a good kiss. But not everyone is skilled. Kissing skill comes from innate sensuality.

Anya was skilled. Her sensuality through the kiss penetrated me and made my head spin. Big, soft, plump, delicious lips, I felt like I was being sated from a bottomless well. And the more I drank, the more thirsty I became. I sank my lips into hers, all my senses merging into one: my lips. At that moment, my brain flashed and our minds merged – I understood her thoughts and felt her sensations. We became one. We weren't kissing, we were living the kiss. I suddenly realized that we both had the perfect kiss, and it was only possible between us. It had never been better and it would never be better. Whatever movement I made with my lips and tongue, Anya immediately responded the way I wanted her to respond. With every movement of her lips and tongue I felt more pleasure. And it wasn't an animal pleasure of the flesh. The pleasure exploded in my brain with every movement of her lips. I became one sensual consciousness. Every cell in my body was enjoying Anya. The girl smelled amazing. The soft scent of freshness enveloped my mind and put me in a state of trance. My arms wrapped around Anya's waist, my fingers dipping lightly into the inviting softness of her body. After a while, my desire drove my hands higher. I put my palm over Anya's breast and squeezed it a little. Her breast didn't fit in my palm, it yielded softly and firmly to my caresses. I completely lost track of time.

It was only when my lips were already swollen and burning beyond belief that we broke away from each other. I was physically unable to kiss again. I was not thinking clearly, so I walked back to the club with Anya. As I walked down the steps of the club, staggering

and smiling stupidly, I asked the first guy I saw what time it was. It was two in the morning. We kissed for an hour! I was completely sober, the adrenaline had taken over and killed the alcohol. I was so devastated physically and emotionally that I immediately walked out onto the street and staggered away. Nothing better could have happened to me that night. I waddled down the street at a deliberately slow pace, still conscious of the kiss. My lips were swollen and sore. The warm summer breeze had dried them out in an instant and they were slightly crusty. "It was worth it," I thought, smiling. "Maybe she's not such a fool after all."

I came out of the corner and immediately saw the red circles of the tail lights of Edik's car.

"Well, how was the 'Skies'?" he asked as I plopped down in the seat next to him.

"Awesome!!" I yelled, not holding back in my emotions. "Beautiful girls out there with C-size breasts and gorgeous figures!"

"Oooh...!" Edik stared at me, and his eyes immediately got greasy.

"Got a cigarette?" I said, searching my pockets.

Edik handed me the pack, and I pulled out a cigarette and lit it, blowing the smoke dreamily upward past the open door. Edik began to pry the details of my trip to the club out of me. The only thing he was interested in was whether or not I had picked someone up there. My mood could not be spoiled by such boring vulgarity, and Edik's lecherous behavior was amusing as well, so I decided to play along with his male ego. It turned out that Edik's attitude towards "broads" was simple: there had to be a result, a broad had to be fucked, and he had a girlfriend for love. I could still taste Anya on my lips. I touched them with the back of my hand, my lips burning and stinging. Besides, women would flirt with him, ask him for a ride and then say they didn't have the money to pay him back. And that happens three days out of five, that's for sure. I kept the conversation going almost automatically and called Edik Casanova. He bragged that he had been with almost two hundred girls and started asking me about my number. My mind was still swimming in an unbearably magical and long kiss. I enjoyed the contrast between my feelings and Edik's fussy perception of women. I said that I didn't count women, and that I preferred to deal with girls in relationships, and if casual affairs came out, I just took it as a fact. The answer caused confusion and Edik was awkwardly silent with a surprised look in his eyes.

"Look, don't you like Inna at all?" he changed the subject.

"Why not? I mean, I do..." I was a little confused, I almost forgot to think about that one, and then the question came. "I like her, a beautiful girl. It's just that she has a boyfriend..."

I knew that if something strong had flared up between me and Inna, the guy would have disappeared on his own, but that wasn't the case, and I found salvation in her unavailable status. Edik wasn't confused, he said that the girl liked me and that she and the guy had recently split up, so Inna was single.

"Oh, so that's it!" I said, but it didn't change the fact that I didn't really like Inna, even though she was a striking and showy girl. I was intuitively tensed by her inner rigidity, self-interest, and almost cold, masculine, analytical mind. I remember thinking, "You can't relax with a girl like that," and then added, "That's more like it."

"You want to see her!?" Edik rejoiced.

"Something like that," I nodded, and Edik suggested that the four of us go to the river – me, Inna, him, and his girlfriend. And for some reason I agreed.

I found it! Incredibly, I found a small two-line ad in a wholesale magazine – a manufacturer of cheap laundry detergent from Lipetsk was inviting regional distributors to cooperate. The ad had the lowest price I had ever seen in such offers. And Lipetsk was just over a hundred kilometers away. Perfect!

I immediately got the commercial itch, so I shoved the ad under my father's nose.

"Oh!" he said after a minute and started scratching under his nose. "That's interesting!"

"Call them!" I said.

The next day, July 3, we drove to Lipetsk, bought a ton and a half of the laundry detergent, unloaded it at the warehouse, and returned home. I hurriedly ate dinner and ran off to "Clear Skies" for the whole weekend. On Monday, we started offering the new product to customers. Among the big companies, only "WholeSale" was willing to barter the detergent. This company worked with semi-impoverished district and village cooperative stores, which, due to the eternal lack of money, agreed to take the product at almost any price. We charged the maximum amount for the detergent, and business was brisk: we went to Lipetsk once every two weeks, and by the end of the summer it was once a week. We got into the habit of unloading the whole car at once at "WholeSale", and managed to be back by five o'clock in the evening. The depot warehouses were open until eight, and they took the goods until six. Once we were late and pulled up to the "WholeSale" warehouse at six o'clock sharp. The storekeeper, a stout, big woman in her fifties with a hard but fair temper, scolded us for the look of the thing and barked into the back of the huge warehouse hangar, "Where are the movers!?" The weather was calm and warm, and I was hanging around the car waiting. My father was smoking nearby.

"So, how much of that detergent do you have there?" the storekeeper came out of the warehouse.

Realizing that this was the best moment to break the ice, I said:

"It's all yours!"

And I laughed. The woman warmed immediately.

"Oh, clever fellow, as I can see!" she smiled. "What's your name?"

"Roma!" I kept smiling.

"And your father?" the storekeeper pointed her pen behind my back.

I turned around. My father realized we were talking about him, looked at our faces and smiled.

"Anatoly Vasilievich is his name," I said, looking over my shoulder at my father, and turning to him, added, "Right, Anatoly Vasilievich!?"

He threw down his cigarette and waddled over to the woman and me.

"What?" my father said, pleased that the conversation was about him.

"Never mind," I said.

"Tolya, is this your son!?" the storekeeper said.

"Doesn't he look like me?" my father asked his favorite question.

The woman looked closely, thought for a while, hesitated, and said frankly, "No, he doesn't."

"This is how we live!" I sighed theatrically and pretended to be sad.

"Oh, you artist!" the storekeeper shook her head, turned and shouted again into the warehouse:

"All right, come on, move it, the supplier's waiting here! What are you sitting there for!?"

Two grubby loaders crawled out at the sound, took a box each from the back of the "GAZelle" and carried them into the warehouse. Soon the boxes on the edge were over, and I jumped into the back of the truck and started handing over the goods from the back.

"Hookers!!!" A voice came from outside the cabin and I heard the sound of familiar footsteps approaching. Knowing what this was all about, I laughed softly. First an extinguished cigarette butt hovered over the edge of the canvas cover, then a wisp of hair, curled upward punningly, with a cloth cap at the very back of a head, and then a hand dived into the back of the cover. I shook it.

"Howdy!" Alexey Semyonovich muttered, deliberately serious, winking at me mischievously, blurring into a wrinkled, rubbery smile, and poking his head into the warehouse: "Hookers, eh!"

"Oh! What did you drag your butt here for!?" the storekeeper attacked him right away.

"I'm here on business!" Alexey Semyonovich didn't flinch.

"What business can you possibly have here, huh?" the woman laughed. "We know your business!"

Alexey Semyonovich, satisfied with what he had heard, turned to me and winked.

"Ey know, you see!" he said, spoiling the word "they" by the cigarette butt in his mouth.

"Get out of here, move it!" the woman said with playful seriousness, pushing her guest out of the warehouse and going out herself. Alexey Semyonovich picked up his cap by the visor, took it off, put it on, took it off again, and so on, until he put it back on the very top of his head. He winked at me.

"What's up?" he stared at the goods in the back of the truck. "You brought something new."

"Not much. Yeah, see for yourself," I nodded at the nearest box.

"Some kind of detergent," Alexey Semyonovich looked closely. "Oh, holy shit!"

"Let them sell!" I jokingly supported his complaint.

"Yeah, whatever! What do I care!" He raised both hands, shook my father's hand, said the usual "Howdy!" and immediately switched to the storekeeper:

"I need the waybill, I mean, we have to redo it!"

Alexey Semyonovich angrily pointed a finger behind his back in the direction of the depot office.

"What's there to redo!?" the storekeeper stared at him.

"Oh, give me a break, bring it here!" Alexey Semyonovich spat his cigarette butt into the trash can as a sign of the weight of his words. He winked at me again.

"Who are you so angry with, Alexey Semyonovich?" I nodded in the direction of the office building.

"Never mind!" he waved angrily in the same direction. "Hookers! First they write waybills they know nothing about, and then they rewrite them!"

"Here!" the storekeeper floated out of the warehouse door, and shoved the bill into Alexey Semyonovich's hand wrapped in a cloth. "Go, get out of my sight!"

"Oh! That's more like it!" he lifted his cap. "Much obliged!"

"Just go," she muttered, putting her glasses on her nose and looking at our waybill.

Alexey Semyonovich waved goodbye to me, and I to him; he said goodbye to my father, and with the waybill in his left hand, wrapped in a cloth, he fled in the direction from which he had come. "Hookers," came a muffled whisper from the other side a little later. I, sitting on a box of detergent, burst out laughing again.

Alexey Semyonovich was a particularly interesting character. I met him for the first time about a year ago. He was an oddish man, defiantly jaunty, full of jokes, often close to the wind, especially with the female employees of "WholeSale", and sometimes beyond the limits. Alexey Semyonovich was a short man, about one hundred and sixty-five centimeters tall, thin and wiry, with a shriveled face and strong, hard hands. He always wore a cloth cap, as if it were the same one, under which his curly hair, as wild as his actions and character, stuck out in all directions. It was as if Alexey Semyonovich had only one pair of pants. Only his jackets changed according to the seasons. He wore a dirty old sheepskin coat full of holes in winter, a light windbreaker in fall and spring, and shirts in summer. Alexey Semyonovich had two shirts. The thick, dark checkered one was worn on cool summer days and under jackets in the other seasons. The light colored one was worn on the hottest summer days, with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows and the collar wide open on the chest. Alexey Semyonovich would probably take a cigarette butt out of his mouth only when he slept, ate or talked. In the latter case, not always. Alexey Semyonovich cursed loudly and vividly, and strangely enough, it did not cause disgust. Even those he cursed. Alexey Semyonovich would curse storekeepers in public, girls in the office behind their backs. But he never got personal, he made impersonal generalizations. The storekeepers would blush and be speechless, which made Alexey Semyonovich even freer. He liked kicking up a row, and he always got away with his monkey business. No one ever complained about Alexey Semyonovich. He was never fined or reprimanded. Firing him from his job was out of the question. Alexey Semyonovich was untouchable and gave the impression of being a holy fool in the company. Why was he allowed to do everything? Perhaps because he did his work very well and honestly? Alexey Semyonovich was a hard worker. He did not slack off, did not look for easy ways. Everything he was asked to do, he did precisely and without delay. And this work was the most tedious and hardest of all, so there was no one willing to take his place. Alexey Semyonovich was an expeditor driver. The car in which he drove the goods to the customers was just like him – an old, stinking and rattling "GAZ-53" with a home-made box, painted with a company advertisement with a large diagonal inscription "WholeSale". The car was in its death throes. It seemed to me that in order to navigate in space with it, one had to know a certain magical secret – Alexey Semyonovich knew it. The "Gazon" had a hard time starting, convulsing in its revolutions, snorting, spitting black clouds of gasoline from the leaky exhaust pipe, and only after a wild grinding in the box would it shift gears. "Jalopy," I immediately called this self-propelled piece of iron.

As we drove around the city in the "GAZelle," we saw this car almost every day. When the "Jalopy" saw us, it would start honking, and the driver's hand would stick out of the window and greet us fiercely. We responded in kind. Alexey Semyonovich worked alone and managed everything. He loaded the goods himself. The loaders at the "WholeSale" warehouses would only bring the boxes to the edge of the car, and then Alexey Semyonovich would stack them himself. He also unloaded the goods himself. Every day. Four tons, back

and forth. I wondered where this dry man got his strength. He could do everything – work, joke, swear.

On Saturday morning, July 19, I found myself in Edik's car, the four of us driving out of town to go swimming at the lake. After leaving the car in the nearest village, we followed the path to the beach. Inna was beaming, smiling incessantly and looking in my direction. Edik's girlfriend was even uglier in the daylight. And her brain was also a problem, the girl would not shut her mouth and laughed inappropriately. Me and Inna kept quiet while Edik blushed guiltily. It was as if Inna was trying to size me up, holding my hand and trying to catch my gaze in the clinging nets of her black eyes. Her inner strength frightened me. I looked at Inna and she smiled and squeezed my elbow with her fingers. I responded with a forced smile.

We found a quiet spot on the shore of the lake, spread out our blankets, and began to lollygag in the sunlight. Edik's girlfriend was still broadcasting in "radio" mode. I pretended to listen to her, Edik too, Inna didn't even care. After lounging to our hearts' content, Inna and I went for a swim. I entered the water up to my chest and turned around. Inna was standing in the water up to her thighs, the top of her bikini absolutely unable to contain her form, from which I carefully averted my eyes. The squinting black eyes watched me carefully, and as soon as my gaze fell on her breasts, Inna smiled. I was confused. A few minutes later we were swimming together – Inna's arms around my neck and I could hear her breathing from behind. Then we were facing each other again, waist-deep in water, and I asked a simple question.

"We broke up," Inna answered, not the least bit embarrassed.

"How long ago?"

"About a month ago."

"On whose initiative?"

"Mine," Inna said, looking at me defiantly. I was indifferent, so I was not embarrassed, I just smiled. Inna said that Sashka drank a lot, and in general the guy was not reliable, and she wanted a normal relationship, a family, children... The dialog came to a logical end and I suggested that we go back to the shore.

The rest of the day was spent barbecuing and eating skewered meat. Inna's attention to me was implicit but total. It caused mixed feelings: my male ego was satisfied and licked sensually at the sight of the girl's forms; my brain signaled that I had no feelings for Inna and reminded me of her firm and resolute character. I was stuck at this crossroads, tired of thinking and decided to let things slide.

August reminded me of one thing: since we started our own business, neither my father nor I have had a vacation in the usual format. At first we had days off, but that's different. Individual days off do not provide psychological relief, they are like sleep in pieces, the sum of which does not replace the whole. Mentally, we were always at work, around the clock. It didn't bother me, I was burning with work, and whatever I did, I did it with eagerness and joy. Intense work quietly stole another August, and with it the whole summer. Trade turnover increased. There was a new employee in the "Arbalest" office. Ilya, the same inconspicuous, balding, light brown-haired guy in his late twenties, joined the phlegmatic

manager as a partner. He was modest, but the newcomer's constantly shifting eyes confused me.

Inna continued her offensive: the next week Edik called me and suggested that we go to a cafe in the center with the same group. Out of curiosity I agreed, and on Saturday night we met in front of the movie theater. Inna looked gorgeous. She used the most spectacular combination of herself and clothes – dark skin and an all-white short tight dress. Sleeveless, with as low as possible and still a decent neckline on her chest, the dress hugged Inna's waist and flat stomach, went down the arc of her wide and full thighs, converging and ending in the middle of them. The bottom of the dress was trimmed with a wavy ribbon, which gave the dress a certain airiness. The resemblance of Inna's figure to that of Sophia Loren in her better years was striking. Inna looked at me with the same attentive squint and smiled broadly. She was raven-haired, with a blunt bob and bangs framing her face. We walked along an avenue full of strolling people, and Inna confidently hooked her arm through mine. Edik's girlfriend continued to talk shit that only he listened to. I nodded occasionally, while Inna walked prudently on the opposite side. Half an hour later we were sitting in a cozy outdoor cafe and I ordered a beer like everyone else. The heat. It came out automatically. I knew beer would make my stomach hurt almost immediately. Why did I order it? Herd behavior. I had it coming. Edik and I lit up a cigarette. The conversation turned to alcohol. In the first sentence Inna said that no alcohol affected her at all. I was surprised, but Edik, who had hastily chewed a handful of salted peanuts, eagerly confirmed Inna's words.

"I can drink champagne, but I just don't like it. Vodka is no problem. Wine has no effect on me at all. I once drank seven bottles of wine with a friend on a dare, and I had to carry him. He was totally zonked, and I was sober," she explained, as she continued to dart glances at me and smile more and more.

"Cool!" I said. "You can drink on a bet with whoever you want!"

"That's what I do," Inna playfully kicked me under the table with her foot and smiled.

"You do that for a living?" I laughed. "Just kidding."

"No one believes me, sometimes they insist on drinking on a dare. I don't refuse. In the end, someone always carries them off and I stay sober. How about another beer?" Inna twirled the empty glass in her hand.

Edik perked up and supported the proposal. As soon as I agreed, my stomach began to hurt.

We left the cafe at eleven. The avenue was crowded with people. Inna took my arm and calculatedly accelerated, leaving a gap between us and the second couple. Edik's dirty remark came from behind me, but Inna cleverly laughed it off. She held my hand so confidently and expertly that I felt like a rabbit next to a boa constrictor. A conversation started between us. I kept looking down the neckline of Inna's dress, and she noticed and smiled approvingly. A swarthy, tall brunette in a tight white dress on a hot summer Saturday night on a downtown street – she swayed her hips as she walked, her stilettos clinking on the sidewalk, and she happily held the arm of a guy with a dull pain in his lower sternum. I mentally cursed myself for the beer and salted peanuts, but all the while I looked carefree and at ease. It was getting harder and harder with every step I took. I smoked a cigarette. Something stuck in my stomach, rumbling, and wouldn't go down. The aching pain made me

sweat. I looked at Inna. She was radiant with charm. I smiled as naturally as I could, almost laughed. And then time slowed down. It seemed to me that we were not walking, but barely moving. The evening seemed endless. The rest was as in a fog. We reached the hotel, said goodbye to Edik and his chicken, and got into a taxi together. "Good thing we live in the same neighborhood," I thought as soon as Inna gave me the address. "I'll take her home, let the taxi go, and walk away." I felt nauseated. Holding my hand, Inna snuggled her thigh against me and said something. The pain in my stomach clouded my consciousness more and more. I answered abruptly with a painful smile. Here we are at last. I got out of the taxi, the nausea rolling back from my throat and the pain in my stomach becoming unbearable. It was as if someone had stabbed my stomach with an awl and was twisting it in a murderous, monotonous way.

"Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?" Inna's voice sounded.

"I'll try to pour some tea in, maybe it will feel better," I thought and agreed.

While the elevator counted the six floors with measured taps, Inna looked at me like a cat at sour cream. We entered the apartment. Inna deftly escorted me into the living room, which had a large double bed in the middle. The heartburn unbearably ate away at my stomach.

"Inna, do you have any soda?" I said.

She didn't immediately understand what I was talking about and jumped into the kitchen. Trying to relax a bit, I automatically lay down on the bed. The nausea came back with a vengeance, my breath was choked and my mouth was full of saliva. I broke out in a sweat again, felt a slight panic, closed my eyes and tried to regain my breath. Heartburn was rampant. Saliva filled my mouth and I swallowed it, but it reappeared immediately. I had to leave as soon as possible.

"No, no soda," Inna returned.

I opened my eyes. She was standing over me – a swarthy, tall brunette in a tight white dress with a low neckline and breathable, full breasts. "I shouldn't have gotten on that bed," I realized, but it was too late. Inna crouched down beside me, leaned forward, hovered over me and took my hand. I felt terribly queasy, the pressure building from inside. "Oh, please, no!" Inna leaned forward and kissed me on the lips. I didn't pull away, but I didn't lean forward either. Sweat broke through me again. My stomach twitched, my throat constricted. I swallowed. I swallowed again. The nausea receded a few millimeters from my throat. I was on edge.

"Inna, look, I don't feel well, my stomach hurts, I feel terrible," I said as I sat up on the bed, trying not to look into her eyes. "I should probably go home..."

"Well, okay, if it hurts, then go, of course. You don't have to suffer here..."

The goodbye came out confused. I muttered an apology. Inna nodded tactfully. I struggled to get my shoes on, mumbled goodbye, and went to the stairwell to call the elevator. It rattled at the bottom and crawled up. I turned around. Inna was standing in the doorway, looking at me with a look I'd rather not describe. I smiled awkwardly. "Move faster, you piece of shit!" The doors finally opened, I smiled hastily, nodded at Inna, and hid from her piercing gaze in the elevator. My throat twitched again. I could barely resist retching and breathed harder. Finally, the first floor. I went outside, wiped the sweat from my forehead, and looked at my watch – it was past one in the morning. It was dark, no one was around. I

relaxed, the pain subsided, the heaviness went away. I walked home. One courtyard, another. A bus stop. Kiosks. As I crossed the street, I walked down the dirt path, saw a lone bush, realized I couldn't hold back any longer, took two steps to reach it, and bent over. I was turned inside out, as if from the very groin. My legs immediately felt like jelly, sweat broke through me, and I became weak. It was over at once – the unbearable fire of heartburn and the exhausting pain of my stomach. I got up slowly, wiped the sweat from my forehead, and walked at a leisurely, blissful pace. I slept like a log.

CHAPTER 10

Hardheadedness is a terrible thing, but life treats it persistently. For a week after the exacerbation, I gave up alcohol and fast food and honestly tried to eat normally. All the while, my mother, putting aside family quarrels, eagerly prepared diet soups and porridge for me. The result was immediate, I recovered and the discomfort in my stomach disappeared. From then on, everything went back to normal – I stopped dieting and used syrups and pills to drive out the pain.

As soon as I was back in Edik's car, his eyes got greasy.

"Well, what about you and Inna, how did you walk her home?" the student asked impatiently.

I shook it off with a general remark. Edik tried to beat it, but ran into another one, and then he got bored, changed the subject, and told me he was getting married in a week. I didn't care. I couldn't understand the choice, but I recognized everyone's right to choose. The choice is made, live with it, don't cry.

"Where will you live? In the same rented apartment?"

"No. I have my own one room apartment, I got it from my aunt, we'll live in it. All we have to do is fix it up and we can move in."

"Cool! Your own apartment, great! Congratulations!" I was excited as soon as the conversation turned to a sensitive moment for me. "When will I get my own place? It's not clear. No money. I think I've started earning with my father, but it's still pocket change. I'm twenty-six years old, there's no rush yet, I wish I could buy my own place before I'm thirty! If I do, I'll be the happiest person in the world! Wow, my own apartment!" I thought, falling into a dream.

"Thank you," Edik brought me back to reality.

We pulled into my yard. Silence. There was light in the sparse windows of the concrete blocks.

"How much do I owe you?" I said.

"As usual!" Edik laughed. "What your soul tells you."

We both knew the approximate amount. I never gave less, often a little more. I paid and we said goodbye. The "seventh" crawled away, bouncing on the potholed asphalt.

"I'll have my own place by the time I'm thirty," I decided, ducking into the entrance hall.

Summer is over. As a bonus, the first Saturday in September was City Day. The public festivities on the main streets of the city lasted all day, and in the evening had descended into an alcoholic frenzy. The holiday was crowned with fireworks. After that, the festive avalanche rushed to the nightclubs, creating an absolute mess at the entrance of each one. Knowing this, I made my way down to "Clear Skies" at exactly 10 p.m., as the thunder rumbled and the crowd raised their heads and roared. The club was still empty. As soon as I ordered a double "screwdriver", everything went quiet outside and the crowd rushed into the club. Ten minutes later, the solid, buzzing mass filled every corner of the club, lighting cigarettes and demanding alcohol. The dance floor rumbled. Off we go!

What a crazy night! After an hour on the dance floor, the wall mirrors were fogging up. That night, as expected, I met all the regulars of the club. I wiggled out of the maelstrom of bodies and suddenly Anya appeared beside me. I nodded at her. The girl began to talk a little affectedly to the girlfriends who surrounded her. I sipped alcohol, smoked and forced myself to listen.

"Yeah, girls, guess what, I'm getting married in a month!" I heard her voice.

I looked at Anya – I liked the girl.

"He's all FSB type!" she said with a big smile on her face.

After a second, the human mass shook and separated me and Anya, and the girl's happy monologue was drowned out by the music. The mood immediately soured and I felt wistful. And as if in protest, I ordered another double.

An hour later, Sanya emerged from the crowd, tipsy, sweaty, and disheveled. His face lit up with an almost childlike gaze and an equally open smile. "A happy fool, no less," I thought, looking at the lanky, swaying figure in the unbuttoned, half-soaked shirt. Sanya shook my hand happily, and I felt uncomfortable. I hadn't crossed the guy's path, I hadn't taken the girl away from him, the couple had parted on their own, but I still felt awkward in front of him, as if I had really done that. A stupid situation. Sanya continued to smile sincerely. "How did I manage to run into him?"

"Are you here alone, without Inna?" I asked him bluntly.

"Yes, I am. We broke up!" Sanya continued to smile without the slightest embarrassment.

His smile was starting to piss me off. I couldn't figure out if he was happy that they broke up, or if he didn't care, or if he was really stupid and that's why he was smiling all the time.

"I know, I saw Inna, she told me," I didn't want to beat around the bush.

"Aah!" he smiled harder, staring into my eyes with a clear gaze.

We were both silent, so there was a ridiculous pause. A big fellow, almost two hundred centimeters tall, hovered over me, smiling. I didn't know how to get away from him. As if sensing my condition, Sanya said goodbye, happily declared that he would continue drinking, and disappeared into the crowd. As soon as he disappeared, I realized that the guy was very drunk. It was clear that he was one of those people who, when they were very drunk, did not show any signs of intoxication, but when they drank even a little bit too much, they would fall down. There was a dangerous sign of a potential alcoholic in Sanya.

The whirlwind of the club kept me going until closing time. At three in the morning, the downtown streets were a horrible sight. There was an almost even layer of garbage: broken and whole glass bottles, plastic beer cans, cocktail tin cans, torn bags, paper food wrappers, crumpled empty cigarette packs, and so on. The contents of all this had been drunk, eaten, and smoked. But after a few minutes, the brushes of the tractors began to whirl and rake the garbage to the side of the road. Edik was nowhere to be found near the hotel, so I took a random car home. I couldn't sleep for a long time, my head was spinning from the drinks. And when it became easier, I fell asleep and kissed a girl until I was exhausted, noticing that her lips tasted like Anya's.

The next day I had a terrible headache and thirst. "Cigarettes were too much," I decided, remembering the pack I had emptied during the evening and taking a pill.

At the very end of September, we bought a second kiosk in the market from the same woman. The woman had pleaded for the saleswoman, and we kept her. One look at Polina made it clear why – an unkempt, unattractive, slouchy woman of small stature and uncertain age, with a lot of hobbling on one leg and, judging by her face, sometimes drinking. She looked so pitifully at us from behind the kiosk counter that firing her would have been like leaving a kitten outside in the winter. We paid more for the kiosk this time – forty thousand. It sold less than the first one, but it was necessary for bartering goods.

The increased workload was felt immediately: instead of one request, I was now handling two; the stock for the kiosks grew; it took twice as long to assemble the goods for them in the morning. The pace of work had to increase, and here the characteristics of my father and me became more apparent. He, sensible and calm, needed a lot of time to make a decision. He thought carefully about every action. Not a bad quality, but not for quick work. With the second kiosk, there was no more time to prepare the waybills; we still had to fit in an hour and a half and leave the warehouse. Otherwise, if we were late, we would be late everywhere. My natural agility worked for both of us. To speed things up, I made almost every decision myself – I would make a well thought-out proposal, my father would simply agree, and that was it. Placing and moving the goods in the warehouse was my job. The two of us would move the goods, but I would say where and what to put. My father would just carry the boxes around and put them where I told him. He couldn't remember what was where, so I had to prepare the batches as well. My father couldn't remember or didn't want to, I don't know. But he was often confused about the goods. When I asked him to bring something, he would be silent for a while, and then he would ask me where the goods were in the warehouse. I began to tell him exactly what goods, in what quantity, and where to get them. My father would go and carry them. While he was working on one item, I managed to do three or four. After that, everything was repeated. Because of the speed at which the goods were typed, I sometimes made a mistake in quantity or missed an item or two on the waybills. The shortage was usually discovered in the evening when the kiosks were closed. My father would make a disgruntled face and blame me for packing badly, for being in a hurry again, with the result that the kiosks were left without goods and we were short some hundred rubles. I resented his complaints and we argued. Our petty quarrels became more frequent as the volume of work increased and tension grew. At first I tolerated my father's accusatory remarks, but later I began to snap back. My father's endless complaints about everything would try my patience.

October had begun. The warmth of summer had left irrevocably with September, and with it the carefree mood was replaced by a slight moping. It was a period of intense monotony in our work. There were no new events. The whole trade was established, and all that remained was to tirelessly move boxes of goods and earn money. The kiosks significantly increased the total profit. But the most important thing was that by the fall of 2003, I could clearly feel that people were used to us, that they reckoned with us, talked to us, and did business with us more or less on an equal footing. We had passed an important stage of establishment and recognition among our kind, and we had survived.

I had barely stepped out of the "Pelican" office building when Vovka jumped on me from behind at a run, hung on to me, pushed me off with his hands, bounced to the side and walked beside me.

"What a blockhead you are!" I said.

"Hee-hee-hee!" he grinned, pleased with his prank, and immediately yelled in my ear. "What's up, bigwigs!?"

"All good! We have to unload, you see!" I waved the waybill in front of him.

"What did you bring, anyway!?" Vovka snatched the piece of paper out of my hands, studied it carefully for a split second, and immediately shoved it back at me. "All kinds of shit, as usual!"

I remained silent and smiled, understanding and accepting Vovka's goofy jokes.

"All right, come on, I'll stay with you while you unload your shit at the warehouse!" he pulled up his sagging jeans. "I'm bored at the office, nothing better to do, I busted my ass! Let's go!"

We unloaded in half an hour. The working day was over. My father smoked his cigarette, and Vovka and I hung around the "GAZelle" as usual.

"Look, where do you always go!? What's the name of that shithole?" he said.

"What do you mean, shithole!? It's the best place in town! 'Clear Skies'!"

"It's a stupid fucking name, 'Clear Skies', 'Skies' you say! So that's where you go!? I see what you do there, young man! You pick up girls there and fuck them, huh!?" Vovka raised his eyebrows and imitated moral severity.

"Ew, Vladimir. You talk like an animal. Where is your morality?" I fooled around, too.

"Hee-hee-hee..." he hissed with laughter. "Anyway... I'm going to visit, what the fuck do you call it, 'Clear Skies', and see for myself what's what!"

"Are you going to party!?" I was surprised.

"Ramses, you are an exceptionally clever young man!" Vovka exclaimed.

"All right, all right, I'll take you there, give you a tour!" I was ready to go as soon as my father finished smoking. "Clean your shoes and don't forget to put on clean underwear!"

"Wow, they don't let you in there in dirty underwear, do they!?" Vovka rolled his eyes.

"Face control! Have you heard of it? It's very strict!" I opened the door of the "GAZelle" and entered the cabin. "They check people like you seriously."

"So when are we going to your fucking joint?" Vovka grabbed the door and began to swing it back and forth.

"Leave the door alone!" I slapped his hand. "When you get home, you open the front door, stand on the landing, and wiggle it to your heart's content!"

"Hee-hee-hee..." Vovka liked the joke, but he didn't let up and grabbed me like a door. "Don't throw me off! I asked you, when are we going?"

"Whenever, Vova! Friday and Saturday are the most crowded days there! We can do it Friday, we can do it Saturday, take your pick!" I said.

The car started.

"But when's the best time? I don't get it, which one of us is a professional party animal, me or you?" Vovka spread his hands and raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I just got divorced, I'm a family man, you might say!"

"You were," I clarified, raising my index finger.

"I was," he corrected himself.

"Well, let's go on Saturday. I'll call you at noon and we'll arrange for the night."

Vovka thought about it.

"All right! Go! Get to work!" I shoved him off in a friendly way and slammed the door.

"No, Friday would be better," Vovka said.

"Okay, I'll call you on Friday, at six o'clock," I summarized. "See ya."

"Shall we go?" my father's voice came from the left.

I nodded. The car moved. I raised my hand and waved goodbye to Vovka. He did the same. We drove a few meters and I looked in the side mirror as usual.

"Friday!!!" Vovka shouted after us.

At nine o'clock in the evening on October 3, Vovka was already strolling clumsily at the bus stop in front of the hotel when I got off the bus. He was wearing the same clothes he wore to work – a khaki sweatshirt, dark blue frayed jeans, and worn, dusty shoes.

"Well, show me where your brothel is!" Vovka said demandingly.

"Over there," I waved across the street, and we wandered to the crosswalk. "I wonder if Edik is working today?"

"Who's Edik? Some kind of pimp!?" Vovka rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

"No, he's a taxi driver," I peered into the row of cars, looking for a familiar car, but it wasn't there. "He's a student, moonlighting as a taxi driver, standing over there in his banger all the time."

"What wheels does he drive?" Vovka walked next to me in the crosswalk, unable to keep up, looking at the line of parked cars.

"A white 'seventh'," I said as I crossed to the sidewalk.

"What do you need him for?"

"He drives me home after the club all the time."

"Wow, what a bigwig you are!! You already have your own driver!" Vovka almost shouted, his eyes bulging. "Look at him! Bigwig! Selling bullshit and raking in the money."

"Oh, come on! What driver?" I felt the embarrassment of shouting. "I met him by chance, and now I always go home with him, it's convenient."

"Look at him!" Vovka continued. "He met a boy, some Edik! Normal men meet girls, but this one is with a taxi driver."

"Stop it already, Vova! I just didn't have any money, and he helped me out," I replied, irritated by the discomfort. "Crying bloody murder... People are turning around."

Vovka was at once embarrassed, blinked stupidly several times, blushed, buried his head into his shoulders, put his hand over his mouth guiltily, and finally shut up.

"What a jerk," I said quietly, looking at my friend sarcastically.

"Hee-hee-hee..." he laughed.

"Oh! Cle-ar Ski-es!" Vovka spelled it out deliberately, looking mentally retarded as he stood in front of the club's sign. "Is this your 'Skies'!? Let's go inside and have a look! Come on, lead the way! You're already one of them through and through!"

"Hi," I shook the hand of the security guard who was smoking outside the entrance.

"Well, look who decided to show up! Hiya!" he smiled and shook hands with me and Vovka. "It's okay there today, there are beautiful girls."

"Then we are coming!" I parodied the famous commercial and pulled the front door toward me, ducking inside, Vovka behind me.

"This door is so fucking heavy!" I heard his constrained voice behind me.

We went downstairs and headed to the bar, on the way the receptionist girl greeted me, and two security guards shook my hand. But as soon as the older woman said, "Good evening," Vovka couldn't help himself, he burst out laughing and said, stunned:

"Even the fucking cleaning lady knows you!"

We passed the big counter. I shook hands with the bartender and nodded to a couple of waitresses. We stopped at the small counter, the bartender shook hands with me and Vovka, and I ordered two double "screwdrivers" and took out a cigarette.

"One for me," Vovka reached for the pack.

We both smoked. Alcohol was also ready. We each took a glass.

"I didn't know you smoked," I wondered.

"I just smoke off and on," Vovka took a drag, grimacing as if he'd tasted a lemon. "I quit once, and then I started smoking again with this divorce. What's in there?"

"The dance floor," I replied. "It's not crowded right now, but it'll be packed in a few hours. Let's go check if I see anyone I know..."

"Fuck, Ramses, every man and his dog here knows you!" Vovka almost choked. "All I do for the first half hour is say hello! My hand is fucking falling off and my head is tired of nodding."

"Vova, fuck off, would you?!"

"Hee-hee-hee."

We went into the darkness of the dance floor, I didn't see anyone I knew there, after a while I ran out of alcohol, and Vovka and I found ourselves back at the bar.

"Another one?" the bartender said.

I nodded and looked at Vovka's glass, which was still half full.

"Why are you drinking so slowly!?"

"Well, I can't drink faster! I have no experience with it," he said indignantly. "It's you schicki-micki who gulp down the booze by the bucket, and we peasants drink as best we can."

"Come on, don't cry poor," I said, taking out my cigarettes, and Vovka bummed one again. We smoked. The club was getting crowded. I looked at the clock, it was 11:10.

"Oh, look, there are more and more people! How many girls!" Vovka was confused, not knowing what to do: drink, smoke, or turn his head.

"It's about to start!" I nodded.

"Listen," Vovka turned to me. "I officially declare to you that I like this place! What's it called? 'Clear Skies', right!? Anyway, I'll be a regular here from now on!"

"I told you," I broke into a smile. "I'll never steer you wrong."

I turned around. Anya and her girlfriends appeared in the flow of people. Her face expressed a universal sadness and detachment. The girl pretended to be cheerful, forcing a smile, but her eyes didn't sparkle. For some reason, I immediately thought of the wedding that didn't happen.

"Oh! Anya's here!" I said, nodding at her, the girl nodded back.

"Now those are boobs!!!" Vovka almost shouted in my ear, grabbed my arm and started pulling it nervously. "Look!!! Look!!! Look!!!"

I felt horribly uncomfortable at my friend's screams, and I could feel the blush spreading from my neck to my ears. Anya approached, unable to hear Vovka's emotions over the noise of the club.

"I've seen her a hundred times, why are you yelling?" I pulled my hand away. "Haven't you ever seen boobs?"

"Ramses, just look at hers!" Vovka's eyes popped out of their sockets.

"Vova, stop it!" I couldn't contain my irritation. The phrase had an effect, Vovka shut up and continued to tug at my sleeve, suffering. We stared at Anya like two cats at a bundle of sausages, only we didn't lick our lips. She stopped two steps away from us. As if on cue, the "maids of honor" surrounded Anya and began to chatter over each other. I sipped my cocktail through a straw and watched from under my eyebrows. Anya was careful not to look in my direction. I stared at her openly. Vovka grunted nervously beside me.

"Let's go to the dance floor," I said.

Vovka nodded, and we began to make our way through the crowd, approaching Anya.

"Hey, Anya!" I said as we passed her.

"Oh, hello!" she imitated a strained smile and joy of meeting.

"How was the wedding?" it suddenly came out of my mouth.

"There was no wedding," she said nervously.

The magic of her charms disappeared from my sight and my interest in Anya faded.

"I see," I slurred. The flow of people picked me up and carried me within seconds into the dark and stuffy space of the dance floor. Vovka kept up.

It was after midnight. The club was shaking. Vovka and I destroyed "screwdrivers" one by one. His eyes were spinning, stunned by what was happening. At two in the morning, the heat began to subside and the customers began to head for the exits. After half an hour, only the most resistant remained.

"They close at three, let's leave a quarter of three, otherwise there will be a crowd on the way out, I don't like crowds," I said to Vovka, who nodded.

Ten minutes later, tipsy and happy, we went outside.

"It's already chilly," I said, shivering.

"Yeah, no fucking summer!" Vovka barked.

"Summer's over, I didn't even notice it while I was carrying those shitty boxes," I said sadly. "Did you go swimming or sunbathing this year?"

"I did once," Vovka brushed it off.

"I only bathed once too, I didn't even get a tan," I said sourly. "Life will go by and we won't even notice it, just like this summer..."

We crossed the street to the movie theater.

"Well, let's get a cab, shall we?" Vovka suggested.

"No, let's go to the hotel, in case Edik is standing there," I waved my hand in the direction. "Then he'll give us a ride."

The student was there. We piled into the back seats of the "seventh" and after meeting Edik, Vovka began to tell him about our trip to the club. His shouting filled the car and continued for several minutes. Finally Vovka ran out of steam and calmed down.

"Where are we going?" Edik interjected immediately.

"Where are you going, blockhead?" I looked at Vovka and realized that I didn't know where he lived.

He yelled out the address.

Twenty minutes later, we slowed at a T-junction, the adjacent road leading into the darkness of the yards.

"Is this your street?" I said, looking deep into the outline of the houses.

"Maybe I should bring him closer to the house?" Edik added.

"No, that's okay. I live nearby, it's a hundred meters down the alley and there's my house," Vovka grunted and got out.

"I should probably come visit you sometime," I said.

"Ramses!" Vovka threw up his hands. "What's the problem!? Stop by!"

"You talked me into it, I will. All right, go to bed, I'll see you at work," I nodded.

Vovka said goodbye to us, slammed the door, and staggered off into the darkness of the old courtyards of the brick "Khrushchyovka" houses. Fifteen minutes later, I was home.

Late fall is always equally depressing. 2003 was no exception. The kiosks were doing well. The stock of goods allowed us to launch another outlet. There was no problem with money, we even saved fifty thousand that was no longer needed for sales. I suggested to my father that we open a third outlet, and he supported it. I wanted something more substantial than the primitive kiosks in the market – a store in a shopping mall, for example. All the existing malls were occupied, so I looked for one that was under construction, and I found one: the mall was scheduled to open at the end of the year, and tenants were being invited.

The next day we visited the developer's office. There it turned out that only two of the smallest departments of seventeen square meters were left. We promised to think about it and went out. On the way to the "GAZelle" I felt cold and gladly climbed into the cabin. My father started the engine and turned on the heater. As soon as the cabin got warm, we both opened the windows and smoked. From the cabin, we could clearly see the entire mall under construction. A one-story rectangle of one hundred by thirty meters – a brick box without any frills – it made a mixed, even rather negative impression.

"What a stupid construction!" I said as I looked at the construction site, which was surrounded by a concrete fence. "Two inconvenient entrances, between them a wall without a single window, and the windows are just on the sides of the entrances, what are they for? And why only one floor? It's stupid not to build at least a few more floors. And that glass top, idiocy. There's no asphalt yet. When are they going to lay it? It's going to snow any day now!"

"If they don't lay asphalt before the snow, they won't lay it in the winter either," my father said.

"How are they going to open on time for New Year's Eve?" I was surprised.

"It doesn't look like they're going to make it to New Year's Eve," my father said.

After we finished our cigarettes, we drove home. There, sitting in an armchair with a cup of hot tea, I went over the pros and cons of what I had seen. On the one hand, the rent in the new mall was lower than in the existing ones. On the other hand, the opening date seemed unrealistic. "And it's kind of stupidly located, behind the road, the residential houses are on this side and the mall is on the other side of the road, will people really go there?" The pros and cons froze in my head, balanced on an imaginary scale. The desire to have my first store in a decent mall prevailed. My father and I conferred and decided to make the move.

At the end of the last week of November, we stopped by the developer's office and agreed to sign a lease for a seventeen-meter department. My father signed it, encouraged by assurances that the mall would be open by New Year's Eve. When we asked about the asphalt, we were told flatly that the work would start on Monday of the following week and would be done in ten days.

According to the calendar, that Monday was the beginning of winter and the first snow fell.

CHAPTER 11

Dear Partners!

We would like to inform you that in connection with the Supplementary Agreement dated 01.12.2002 to the Sales Agreement dated 01.09.2002 for the realization of the sales volume, which you have undertaken in the amount of 1600000 rubles (one million six hundred thousand rubles 00 kopecks), you have until 31.12.2003 to pay to Luxchem LLC money in the amount of 256037 rubles 48 kopecks (two hundred fifty six thousand thirty seven rubles 48 kopecks).

Sincerely, Director of Luxchem LLC

I read the fax several times. "This is ridiculous! It can't be true! No, they can't do that!" the thoughts swirled around in my head, chased away by common sense. I understood it all at once. But I didn't want to believe it.

"This is just stupid!" I stared at my father, who was sitting next to me on the couch. "Are they idiots!? Why would they send us something like that!?"

"Yeah," my father said, staring through his glasses at the sheet of paper handed to him.

"I understand that they don't want to pay us the five percent of the turnover!" I threw up my hands. "But I don't understand this!"

My father tucked one leg under the other and began to scratch the tip of his nose with his hand.

The notice was clear – they didn't want to pay us the bonus we deserved, so they sent us this. Of course, we couldn't find the amount of money we were owed – we just didn't have it. I got fired up, called the two owners of "Luxchem" sons of bitches and assholes, and went to the kitchen to get some tea. We had struggled all year to sell the right amount of product, had lost several items that had been taken out of production, and yet we were almost able to meet our obligations. And we got this.

In a few minutes I came back with a cup of tea and was almost calm. After holding the "Fili Conference" with my father, we decided that we needed to prepare a response document.

A day later it was ready. In the letter, we explained that we considered the withdrawal of several items from production after the signing of the Supplementary Agreement as a force majeure that prevented us from fulfilling our obligations, and we considered the payment of the bonus to be fair.

After faxing the paper, we went to work. As I dragged the boxes around the warehouse, I suddenly realized that both of us, my father and I, were determined to settle the matter in our favor. Even if it meant refusing to work with "Luxchem". At that moment, my father surprised me by telling me that he intended to get the bonus any way he could – we had the "Luxchem" goods in the warehouse, and we could take them for the amount owed to us. My father said he intended to do so if necessary. And I felt firmness in his words.

We worked as usual until the end of the week. On Monday morning, December 8, the expected call came to the home number. My father answered the phone. I leaned against the wall a meter away from him and became all ears. The dialog with Aslanbek was to the point:

my father said that we had not fulfilled our obligations for reasons beyond our control, and in response he heard that we would not get our bonus anyway. The voice on the phone – I could not make out the words – said something else at great length. I stared at the pattern of the carpet on the floor. As soon as the phone went silent, my father told him that since we weren't going to see the bonus, it was probably best to stop cooperating. And he looked at me. I held up my thumb. I did not care that we could lose our most important supplier. We put a lot of time and effort into their product, but there's a limit to everything. You can't let someone walk all over you. I was ready to break up. "Screw them, we'll find a new supplier, there are tons of them, we'll make it, we'll get what's ours and find another product quickly," I made up my mind.

And the mood on the other end of the phone changed – the owner of "Luxchem" asked how much we could transfer by the end of the year, heard the figure of one hundred and fifty thousand from my father, asked him to try to transfer as much as possible, and said goodbye. He didn't directly promise to pay what was owed to us, but that's what we understood.

By mid-December, it became clear that the mall would not open before the New Year. The conversation in the developer's office was almost in a raised voice, and we were assured that the mall would definitely be open by April. We did not believe it. Although the delay was not a loss to us, I was not happy that we were involved in such a shady deal.

By the end of the third week of December, we had transferred one hundred and fifty thousand to "Luxchem".

Dear Partners!

We would like to inform you that in connection with the Supplementary Agreement dated 01.12.2002 to the Sales Agreement dated 01.09.2002, in order to fulfill your sales obligations in the amount of 1600000 rubles (one million six hundred thousand rubles 00 kopecks), you have until 31.12.2003 to pay an additional amount of 106037 rubles 48 kopecks (one hundred six thousand thirty-seven rubles 48 kopecks) to Luxchem LLC.

Sincerely, Director of Luxchem LLC

"Are they out of their fucking minds!?" I stared at my father on Monday when I realized the contents of the fax. The document had been sent, as expected, by the secretary, who said that both directors were not present. I came over shivery. This attitude was out of line.

At 9:00 the next morning, I stood with the bells on near my father and the phone. The conversation was diplomatic, but tough. My father quickly reminded Aslanbek of his words that we would get our bonus after our maximum payment. He replied that he had not promised us anything and that we should fulfill the agreement in full. My father said that it is not good to change what he said, he must keep his word. In response, he was accused of being plain rude. I was surprised; my father had handled the conversation as delicately as I wouldn't have been able to, and would have moved on to emotion long ago. Afterwards, my father parried the phrase about age, saying that he was at least as old as he was, and that respect had to be mutual. After listening to a new tirade, he finally said that obviously there

would be no agreement, and therefore he had a business proposal – we take what we deserve in goods and end the cooperation, that they should look for other fools. The director of "Luxchem" replied that he would have to consult with his partner.

Two days later we got a fax:

Dear Partners!

According to the Supplementary Agreement dated 01.12.2002 to the Sales Agreement dated 01.09.2002 for the implementation of the volume of sales for 2003 of products of Luxchem LLC in selling prices in the amount of 1493962 rubles 52 kopecks (one million four hundred ninety-three thousand nine hundred sixty-two rubles fifty-two kopecks), Luxchem LLC undertakes to pay you an amount equal to 5% (five) percent of the above-mentioned amount, i.e. 74698 rubles 13 kopecks (seventy-four thousand six hundred ninety-eight rubles thirteen kopecks).

Sincerely, Director of Luxchem LLC

It was a victory! A small victory, but a very important one! It wasn't about the money. We had defended the most important thing – ourselves! I almost jumped for joy. The New Year was three days away, and my emotions were mixed with the general holiday spirit. Our clients had postponed orders for next year, there was a break from work, and the days were suddenly free. I wanted to capture the holiday with a purchase, so I started shopping. Coincidentally, in our family, the tradition of giving gifts on New Year's Eve has faded over time. Each year my parents became more and more estranged from each other, moving toward a formal separation. I was forced to witness the painful effects of my parents' estrangement. Seeking support, each tried to win me over to their side. Sometimes my father would indirectly accuse me of indulging my mother. My mother, in her usual rude way, regularly threw hurtful remarks in my face, saying that "I took after my boring and all so goody-goody father" and that "I fawned and groveled before him because I was good for nothing and could not earn money myself. To put it simply, I was being spat at from both sides. I felt terrible, and as I tried to figure out where and what I was doing wrong, I tore myself apart more and more. My parents, estranged from each other, tore me in two. Half of me loved them. The other half hated them. Part of me loved my mother just for being there, and the other half hated her for saying and doing mean things. Part of me loved my father for continuing to be in the family despite the difficulties, and the other half hated him for his excessive self-love, his intolerance of the weaknesses of others, and his absolute desolate dryness of feeling. When these thoughts came, it was hard to breathe. I wanted a breath of fresh air, like the bonus we got by New Year's Eve. A small but much-needed breath of fresh air in the stale, cramped space of small business. And our business itself seemed to have gained stability. It felt as if we had been walking up to our chests in a swamp for years, moving our legs with great difficulty in the thick mud, without feeling any solid substance underneath. And suddenly we felt a narrow solid strip under our feet. We stepped on it, took a deep breath and realized that we had to go on carefully, not to slip, not to miss the chance that life had given us as a reward for many years of ordeals.

I was standing in the center of the city looking up at the snowflakes slowly forming in the night sky. The weather was beautiful – quiet, five degrees below zero, soft snow falling – a perfect winter evening. People rushed past me in the festive bustle. I wandered over and joined the stream of people. Half an hour later, I noticed a cell phone in the window of the mall. I liked it immediately. I picked it up. It was heavy and compact, a flip phone. I opened and closed it, the screen flipped and stuck to the keypad. Silver color. Antenna. I pulled it out and pushed it in. The rotating eye of the camera sat on the deliberately thick central axis of the flip phone. A beautiful men's phone, I looked at it with admiration. "Ten thousand, it's a little pricey, but I really want it, I'll ask my father for the money, I think he'll give it to me," festive thoughts went through my head. I returned home and my father gave me the money that same evening without further ado. The next day, December 30, I gave myself a present and celebrated my purchase at "Clear Skies". The evening was a success. I spent the day before New Year's Eve at home with a splitting headache and thirst. My mother cooked a holiday meal, and my father and I bought desserts and fruit. I stuffed myself with all this and fell asleep half an hour before New Year's Eve 2004.

Vovka and I visited "Clear Skies" so actively over the holidays that he ran out of money by Christmas and I was embarrassed to take it out of our general cash register. I spent the remaining two weekends at home playing computer games and thinking about an interesting idea. It had been kicking around in my head since the summer, but only came to fruition in January. The barter system only involved goods from local wholesalers. There were also direct sellers from large international companies operating in the market. The policy of direct sales was the only criterion they professed. There was no barter for such goods. And they were also the most in demand on the market of household chemicals. They accounted for the majority of sales. But because of the pricing policies of the international companies, the wholesalers' margins on their goods were minimal. Even if a smart wholesaler had decided to barter such goods, he would have made nothing – the discounts on the returned goods would have eaten up all the profit. That's why no one would barter for direct-distribution goods. It seemed impossible to barter such highly liquid goods.

And then it hit me!

"Peresvet!" "Why didn't I think of that before, what an idiot, it's a good idea!" went around and around in my head. "Peresvet", being essentially a grocery store, placed little emphasis on by-products. And the exclusivity of direct sales was missing. I decided to take advantage of this peculiarity. I mentioned the idea to my father. After thinking about it, he said, "Yeah, that's an interesting idea," and agreed.

We stopped at "Peresvet" just after the holidays. My father parked the "GAZelle" and reached for a cigarette.

"Are you staying here or coming with me?" I said, grabbing the doorknob.

"I'll sit here, what am I supposed to do there?" the cigarette in my father's hand stopped halfway to his mouth. "You can talk to your friend yourself..."

"Yeah," I sighed and shook my head. "The director here is a bit... you know..."

My father laughed silently. I left him in the cozy, heated cabin and went to the office. There were two main buildings on the depot grounds: a one-story warehouse complex with a salesroom inside, and a three-story office with an adjoining two-story warehouse. The second

floor of the warehouse was for household chemicals, and the first floor was for beer. The director of "Peresvet", a slender brunette of medium height, with a neat parting on the left side of his head, tenacious, angry eyes, predatory shoulders, combined with a slightly sunken chest and a walk with outstretched arms, had a character that matched his appearance. Seeing only profit, he did not respond to other contrivances and arguments, let alone sentiments. Therefore, it was almost impossible to communicate and negotiate with him.

I entered the corridor and stood in front of the open door of the director's office. "Just don't shit yourself, there is only one good moment," I mentally prepared myself and knocked on the doorjamb. The director of "Peresvet", like any natural predator, felt who was in front of him – the victim or the predator. He would morally devour the former. He respected the latter, but quickly determined the "caliber of the blood brother". If it was bigger, he would tread carefully; if it was weaker, he could "bite" for the sake of it, but if he got a reaction, he would stay "in his territory". I saw him as a jackal. I could feel his cowardice masked by reflexive insolence and aggression.

"Yuuup..." a voice came from the office.

I said hello as cheerfully and confidently as I could. The director sat at his desk, staring at the monitor, stopped moving his hand over the mouse, and reluctantly slurred a "hello" back.

"I have a business proposal for you!" I continued in the same tone.

"Proposal?" the director took his eyes off the screen, looked in my direction, and immediately stared back. "What kind of proposal? Spell it!"

"We supply you with goods for sale... We get money for it..."

"Yuuup..." the director replied without taking his eyes off the screen.

"I propose to take your goods instead of money for the sold ones!" I said.

When the director realized the significance of what he had heard, he forgot about the computer, sat up straight in his chair, and stared at me. I could literally see the brain's algorithm examining the proposal for merit. One moment – and the director's eyes lit up with interest.

"What kind of goods do you want to take?" he uttered.

I replied. The product that the wholesalers of household chemicals had dreamed of and tried to bypass the official distributors, I was now trying to get my hands on. The director's brain was working again, looking for a catch and my profit. "He didn't find one," I realized and smiled at the director's attentive look.

"No problem, take it," he said.

"Yes!" I happily jumped into the cabin of the "GAZelle". "He agreed to barter!"

"Oh, wow!" my father paused with his cigarette, looked at me, took another deep drag, exhaled a puff of gray smoke out the window, and threw his cigarette butt out there, too. "Yeah, that's good!"

"Good!?" I was surprised, almost jumping up and down on the seat with joy. "What do you mean? This is freaking awesome! We'll get it for free at a great price. We're buying it for more money! And now we can shove even more stuff in 'Peresvet' and take back a great product! And most importantly, no reference to volume, take as much as you need and the price will always be the lowest! Super!"

"Did you get the leftovers?" my father said.

"Yes, here!" I handed him two sheets of paper and lit a cigarette.

My father put on his glasses and immersed himself in studying the papers. The euphoria I had been feeling burst out again, and I rambled on about how lucky we were that everything had worked out and that the calculations had been right. My father took his eyes off the papers for a second and looked at me with a puzzled expression. I went on – I was happy that they had given us a bigger discount than we had expected and that we had gotten a great product for no money at all!

When I was done talking and silent, I looked at my father, who had his full attention on the papers. My euphoria was gone. I felt down and mechanically finished my cigarette, absent-mindedly wandering through the winter landscape behind the glass.

"Shall we go?" my father's voice sounded a few minutes later.

"Yes," I said, throwing out the cigarette and closing the window. "Let's go."

"Where are we going now?" my father looked at me as he sat upright, holding the steering wheel with one hand and the shift lever with the other. There was a military bearing to his posture. In a split second, the image of a tin soldier, ready to go anywhere at any time, appeared in my mind.

"To 'Arbalest'," I said mechanically, turning to the window and adding. "We'll pick up the soap there and take it to Senya to 'Mercury'."

"That's all?"

I nodded without turning around.

"Say something! Why are you silent?" my father added irritably.

"That's all!" I turned and looked at him. "I nodded, didn't I?"

"I don't know if you did!" my father looked at me, clenching his jaw. "Is it too much trouble to say yes? I don't know what you have planned for today, do I?"

"What do you mean, I planned?" I also began to get angry. "Don't you participate in the planning?! You don't know where we're going and why we're going!?"

Pause. My father was silent, staring at me, his teeth clenched.

"Don't get smart with me!" he grumbled, slamming his hands on the wheel. "I'm turning the wheel! And all this route planning, that's your responsibility, I'm not going to memorize it now!"

"You've got yourself a good job spinning the steering wheel and that's it!" I retorted, realizing that I smelled another quarrel. They had become more frequent lately. But I didn't care. I wanted to fight. Everything was boiling inside me, and I added: "I'm the one who calls everybody and makes orders and prepares orders and tracks the goods and writes the waybills and gathers the goods in the warehouse, while you just turn the wheel!?"

"If necessary, I negotiate in the most important moments!" my father also raised the heat. "Or have you forgotten who made the arrangements with the breweries, who called all the companies in Krasnodar!"

"Who else would call them? Who among the directors would talk to me with a twenty-five year old kid! Nobody!" I threw up my hands. "There was no other way but for you to call, because you're a grown man, they would have communicated with you and not with me! That's all! If I was older, I would have called all those places myself! Who found them? Who found the ads!?"

My father was silent. There was a mutual dislike in the air. I could feel it in everything: in his look, in his tone, in the anger that had suddenly erupted.

"Did you find them!? No!" I wouldn't let up. "How many suppliers did you find? Tell me! You don't tell me!? That's right! You didn't find any, so you don't say anything! You didn't even try to look! I found them all!"

"Now what!?" my father said through clenched teeth. "You'll find more if you have to! I am your father! I feed you! And as long as I do..."

"Who!? You feed me!?" I was surprised by what I heard. "You don't feed me! I make my own money! I carry these boxes myself, and more than you do!"

"Shut up!" my father barked.

I fell silent. I thought I was dreaming and hearing this in my sleep. I stared at my father, my eyes blinking and my lips moving silently like a stranded fish, and I couldn't understand why he was saying these things. My father's words were at odds with the image I had seen in him since childhood of an honest, pedantic, and decent parent who was a source of unquestioned authority and respect. I listened and could not believe my ears. My father was blatantly distorting reality to suit himself. This had never happened before. Yes, we fought. Sometimes, rarely. Even then, it was only over small things. Now something else had happened. We marked our difference in our vision of working together. Moreover, my father was clearly distorting reality. An oddity and a precedent happened at the same time. I had not yet realized it, but something important in my mind had changed irrevocably, and a bitterness of resentment arose. A bitterness of resentment over an untruth. All the time before, I had worked selflessly, as hard as I could. I didn't divide who had done more and who had done less. I just knew exactly what was done by me and what was done by my father. And when, in the heat of the moment, I expressed the extent of my involvement, my father cheekily turned it into nothing. I was vaguely aware that this was his way of increasing his involvement and thus his own importance. Not a fair move. My father had never allowed anything like this before. I wondered. Either my knowledge of my father was incomplete, or I had discovered something new in his character. "Competition? With whom? With me, with his own son!? That's silly." I pushed the unpleasant thought away. I tried it on myself. Had I ever thought that about my father? No. After all, we are a family and we do the same thing. We have to respect and appreciate each other's work. That's what my father taught me. "But why doesn't he follow his own concepts?" I was confused. I had a nasty feeling.

"Look at him, smart guy!" my father continued. "Why don't you sit down and turn the wheel? Sitting behind his father's back! His father, like a fool, turns the wheel, drives him all day long, and he just sits next to him and criticizes! When you start earning your own money, you'll open your mouth! Until then, keep your mouth shut and sit quietly while your parents feed you!"

There was dead silence in the cabin.

"We can swap places," I said quietly.

My father glared at me.

"We can swap places," I repeated in a calm tone. "I'll drive and carry the boxes with you. And you would call everyone, collect the orders, run with the waybills, keep the records on the computer, receive and issue the waybills, arrange and assemble the goods in the warehouse. I'm in. We can swap places."

For a few seconds I was scrutinized with a savage look.

"Don't get smart! Sit and work! You'll do what you've always done!" my father took the gear lever again. "Where are we going!?"

"You know exactly where we're going," I said calmly, watching my father with conscious interest, studying his reactions.

"I ask again, where are we going!? I'm not going to guess!" he gritted his teeth.

"To 'Arbalest'," I smiled slightly, wanting to laugh out loud but holding myself back.

"That's more like it!" my father put in the first speed and the "GAZelle" started.

"Playing smart here! You'll be smart with your girlfriends."

I didn't answer and turned to the window. I had a lot to think about.

The rest of the day passed with tension and little communication. I mechanically did what I always do. At "Arbalest" I went to the office and dictated the order to the manager, who made out a waybill. I took it to the warehouse to the storekeeper, waved to my father – pull up. The "GAZelle" backed up to the warehouse ramp and stopped. I removed the cover and jumped into the back. The storekeeper brought up a pallet full of goods. My father started to feed the boxes, I took them to the back and stacked them. Then we drove to "Mercury" and in half an hour we were there. It took another half hour to write the waybill in the cabin. A tedious task. My father sat with his elbows on the steering wheel and smoked. I wrote the waybill by hand, put a folder under it on my lap, and counted all the prices on a calculator. When I was done with the waybill, I went to the office, upstairs to Senya, who gave me permission to unload the goods. With this paper I bypassed all the services of the depot and returned to the "GAZelle". My father sat in the cabin and took a nap. After I woke him up, I went to the warehouse and got in line to unload. Half an hour later, the previous car unloaded and made way. My father brought the "GAZelle" to the conveyor belt and I removed the cover. The conveyor came to life, the belt crawled down into the basement storeroom for household chemicals. I started putting boxes on it, everything. In half an hour the goods were in the basement. Another ten minutes of checking the goods with the storekeeper, and the day's work was done. I jumped into the warm cabin of the "GAZelle" and it took me home. We were silent the whole way. I don't know what my father was thinking, or if he was thinking at all, maybe he never thought about anything while driving. I was thinking.

We had to wait out February before the spring revival of sales. The month was sunny and frosty, and the days dragged on monotonously. Eventually, the sun's bright rays drove the cold out of the crystal blue sky, saturated the color with moisture, and barely began to warm. On the morning of February 24, I waddled fifty meters behind my father to the parking lot, remembering that the thermometer outside the window read fifteen degrees below zero and that we had another cold day of work ahead of us. That's how it came out. I creaked toward the "GAZelle" as my father swept the snow off the cabin with his brush and smoked at the same time.

"Let me!" I shouted, taking the brush from my father. "Get in, start it!"

He looked at his cigarette, took a puff or two, put it away and went into the cabin. The "GAZelle" started on the second try, roaring loudly, grabbing cold air, but holding the revs and rumbling more quietly. There was a lot of work to do – three wholesale orders and two waybills for the kiosks. Forty minutes later we arrived at the warehouse. The oil in the

padlock was frozen, and I had a hard time turning the key, opened the gate with a creak, and stepped inside. Frozen through at the end of winter, the warehouse still gave the elusive illusion of warmth and comfort. Driven by the cold, we set to work immediately, and without a moment's pause, we packed and loaded the goods in an hour, filling the back of the truck to the brim. My father drove the car away, I closed the gate and ducked into the almost cold cabin. The heater was humming again, trying to melt the frost that had already taken hold of all the windows. I grabbed a squeegee and started to help it.

Forty minutes later, we were at the kiosks.

"Tell Nadezhda Petrovna and Polina that we are here, tell them to get ready there," I slurred to my father, jumped out, removed the cover, opened the back side, grabbed the nearest box and carried it to the kiosks. It was fifteen meters to them; I caught up with my father at the nearest Nadezhda Petrovna kiosk, threw the box on an iron case that stood in front of the kiosk for just such a purpose, greeted the saleswoman, and said to my father: "I'll carry the boxes, and you help them sort out the goods!" and went back.

The frost did not leave me standing for a second – I ran with the boxes from the "GAZelle" to the kiosks, my father took the goods out of the boxes and gave them to the saleswomen, who piled them up in the corners and on the shelves. We were done in half an hour, and then we went to the wholesale outlets.

At "WholeSale", a ruddy, stout storekeeper I knew laughed when she saw us.

"Oh! It's freezing and they're working! Tolya!" she turned to my father. "It's all right for us, bound servants! But you!? You should have stayed at home! A good owner wouldn't let his dog out in this weather, and you came!"

"It's okay!" I said. "We have to work, no need to keep our asses warm at home!"

"You'll be a millionaire in no time!" she laughed.

"I don't mind!" I said and opened the back of the car. "I'll be a millionaire, I'll leave everything and go to a warm country!"

"What are you going to do there?" the storekeeper waved her hands.

"I'm not going to do anything!" I smiled and jumped into the back of the car. "I'm going to spend the whole day in shorts and flip-flops, sitting on a chair on the porch of my house, looking at the ocean!"

"Come on!" she waved her hand. "Give it to me, dreamer!"

We unloaded. The storekeeper signed the waybills, I ran to the office with them and made the necessary markings. It took another forty minutes. We moved on. "Mongoose". Same thing. I ran to the office, got an unloading permit on the waybill in the office, and went back to the "GAZelle". We wandered between warehouses and outhouses to the far corner of the depot, stopped, I ran to look and found a storekeeper I knew.

"No loaders!" he said, waving to a nearby truck. "See? Soap, twenty tons! And there's bleach over there, too!"

"And what do we do?" I asked a question to which I already knew the answer.

"If you want, you can unload it yourself," the storekeeper shrugged.

So we did, and we were done in half an hour. As soon as we had closed the side, we took a breath, my father lit a cigarette, and I started to cover the back of the car. The canvas became quite stiff in the cold, hardened at once. In ten minutes the storekeeper came running

in, handed me the signed waybill, and ran to the truck that was being unloaded. My father finished his cigarette. It was cold. I dived into the warm cabin.

"Where to now, 'Arbalest'?" my father said.

"Yes, we'll unload and load soap for Senya and then go home," I nodded, shivering. The frost was starting to get under my clothes and take away my body heat.

Twenty minutes, three traffic lights, and we're at "Arbalest". My father pulled up in front of the office, and I jumped out of the car and ran up to the second floor, where I found myself almost in a winter botanical garden. In the spacious room, about a dozen managers sat at tables full of plants in pots and tubs. The atmosphere was that of a resort. Everyone was leisurely going about their business – one was talking on the phone, another was copying papers, and most of them were staring at their computer monitors. The phlegmatic manager I knew was playing, clicking his mouse with a rubbery expression on his face. Ilya sat next to him, watching the monitor with a glassy eye. My visit brought them both out of their stupor. Ilya signed the permit for unloading, and I ran out. The "GAZelle" was already parked in front of the right warehouse. I found the storekeeper, who was tipsy – it was possible to stay warm all day in the cold, occasionally going into the unheated warehouse only with the help of vodka.

"What did you bring?" the storekeeper looked at me with bleary eyes, heard the answer, nodded and left, returning with a pallet, throwing it flat on the ground and waving at me. "Come on, give it to me!"

I ducked under the cover and began throwing package after package outside, happy to feel the healing warmth building in my shoulders and flowing down my body. We were done in half an hour.

"Go to the other side, we'll load the soap," I told my father, jumping off the ramp and walking back to the office. The "GAZelle" crossed the yard to the warehouse across the street. After picking up the waybill from the bored manager next to the monitor, I went back outside, found the storekeeper of the right warehouse, and slipped him the document. "I'll get it for you," he muttered and left.

Ten minutes passed, and I was beginning to freeze, when the storekeeper finally rolled out a pallet of goods. "At least I can throw some boxes and get warm," I was happy and jumped into the back of the truck.

It took about fifteen minutes. My father handed me the boxes outside and I stacked them. When we were done, I returned to the ramp and straightened up, my back aching.

"To 'Mercury'?" my father clarified as I followed him into the cabin.

"To 'Mercury'," I nodded.

The windows on the inside had time to freeze. The squeegee thing started again. My father drove the car, and I cleaned the glass. Half an hour later we were there. The yard of the depot was full of cars, a line was forming to unload at the conveyor belt. My father found a free place and cautiously crawled into the "GAZelle". I jumped out of the cabin.

"What's up?" my father said when I came back.

"Three cars in front of us," I said, pulling out the blank forms; the most tedious part of the job was writing the waybill by hand. Two forms, a copy sheet between them, a calculator, a pen – I placed the "Mongoose" waybill in front of me and began to write my own. My father saw me fidgeting and offered to help, calculating the prices on the calculator and

telling me. He pressed the buttons a few times, the calculator screen showed a number, and my father froze.

"Damn," he cursed softly, moving the calculator away from his eyes. My father had always had perfect eyesight. I, on the other hand, had been slightly nearsighted since school. It didn't bother me, but sometimes I thought twenty-twenty vision was great. I read in some smart magazine that after forty-five, the eyeball starts to shrink and your vision changes. Normal vision becomes hyperopia and nearsightedness becomes normal. My father laughed at me when he heard the article, but a year later he felt the changes, and by the time he was fifty-two he could not read up close without his glasses.

I looked at my father. He pushed the calculator almost an arm's length away from him.

"I don't see anything," he muttered, putting his glasses on his nose. "What's the price again?"

I repeated it patiently. My father began to poke at the calculator again, very slowly and carefully. I waited. Finally, my father said the number, which I wrote down and immediately gave him the next one. Everything was repeated just as carefully and slowly. My father announced the total of the calculation. I wrote it down and looked at the waybill to be written – thirty-two items. We spent about four minutes on two of them. "Another hour to write the prices on the waybill and then count the amounts line by line and the total at the bottom? No, I don't think so! We're sure to miss our turn." I took the calculator and started to do everything myself. My father rested his chin on his hand and gazed into space.

When I was done with the waybill in twenty minutes, I went to Senya. In the noisy salesroom, people were scurrying back and forth. The director, the accounting department, the certification service – I walked around them all, crossed the salesroom, and stomped up the stairs. The door to Senya's office stood wide open. His deep voice echoed from there, telling the person on the other end of the phone, with a lot of expletives, that the price offered for sugar was high.

In about ten minutes I came back to the car with Senya's permission to take the money, handed the paper to my father and said:

"Here! Would you go and get it? It's obviously not our turn yet."

I sat alone for twenty minutes. The first car left the warehouse and the next one was unloading. I looked at my watch: 5:20 p.m. "We won't make it to six, but we should be unloaded by seven," I thought, almost dozing off. Just then my father returned.

"Did you get it?" I muttered.

"Yes," my father said, reaching for a cigarette, opening the window and smoking again. I looked in the direction of the warehouse. There were a suspicious number of people hanging around the conveyor belt.

"What happened there? I'll go see," I said, and soon I was back.

"What's wrong?" my father said as soon as I got inside.

"The bolt sheared off," I said angrily, annoyed that the repairman said it would take another half hour to fix the conveyor.

"What kind of bolt?" my father stared at me in surprise.

I told him.

My father listened and began to tell and prove in detail how the conveyor belt design was wrong and how it should have been done. It was long, detailed, and boring. At that moment I felt a terrible urge to get out of the cabin. But it was freezing outside.

"I'll go and see how it's going," I couldn't stand it after a minute.

"I'm just finishing up, it'll work in about five minutes!" the same worker replied, diligently pounding on the problem spot with a sledgehammer. I didn't want to go back to my father, so I staggered into the salesroom. I spent some time there, in the warmth and the crowd, and returned to the conveyor. It was already rattling, dragging boxes down to the basement. Feeling a bit cold, I went back to the "GAZelle". My father was napping. I approached the conveyor belt twice more, hoping it would be our turn, but it wasn't until 7 p.m. The sun had set and night was falling on the city. "I can't wait to unload and go home! I'm freezing like a dog," I thought to myself as the "GAZelle" pulled up to the conveyor belt. It moved, I opened the side and began to throw ten kilogram boxes of soap onto the crawling belt of the warehouse. It took half an hour to unload. It took me another ten minutes to check the goods, then I went to the accounting department and marked the waybill. As I left the depot office, I felt relieved that the long, cold day's work was over and walked to the car.

"That's it!" I yelled as I got into the cabin. "Home!"

My father started the engine before it had cooled down, and we drove out of the "Mercury" at 7:55 p.m., headlights on, into the darkness of night that had already fallen on the city. Forty minutes to the parking lot, ten more to walk home. We walked tired, almost silent, but happy. All the work was done, another winter and very frosty day was over. Fighting the cold that was getting under my skin, I walked down the path through the snowy field, imagining a bathtub full of hot water. Even with the glow of the city lights, the sky sparkled generously with bright stars. In the distance, the chimney of the boiler house spewed white smoke vertically upward. "Tomorrow it will be even colder, it's good that everything was taken today and the retail goods were brought in, tomorrow we'll be sitting at home and in a day it might get warmer," I thought encouragingly and suddenly realized that I hadn't eaten anything all day. Immediately my stomach hurt.

"I'm hungry," I said to my father, who was walking in front of me.

"I'm hungry too," he replied. "We ate all the food in the morning, but your mother must have gone to the store to buy food and cook something by now. I left her the money."

"I'll be home soon. It's warm there." We walked into the entranceway and it was already warm. We're at the elevator. It didn't seem like we walked very far from the parking lot, but my father's face was red again. "My face probably looks the same." The elevator came. We took it to the floor. My father pushed the bell button. There were footsteps behind the door. The door opened. We tiredly entered the apartment. My mother silently turned and walked down the corridor. I began to undress, trying to get out of my cold outer clothes as quickly as possible. I could feel my whole body shaking and I felt cold inside of my warm pants and sweater. My toes could barely bend. I was completely frozen. "I can't wait to get in the tub." I rubbed my shoulders through my sweater and the warmth slowly ran down my arms. My father took off his down jacket and went into the kitchen, and I followed. All I could think about was food.

"What have we got to eat?" I said cheerfully.

My father looked at the empty stove and then at the table. I did the same. The money for food was untouched. My father opened the fridge, closed it, and went into the back room. I followed him. My father opened the door of the room, froze and said in surprise:

"You didn't go grocery shopping, did you?"

"No!" came the harsh reply.

I looked over my father's shoulder into the room and my mother was sitting on the couch watching TV.

"Why!?" my father said, confused.

"I didn't want to!!" my mother almost screamed.

I looked at her face, which immediately became angry.

"Mom, why didn't you make something to eat?" I added.

"All you want me to do is cook, do the laundry, and clean up after you!!!" my mother snapped, jumping up and storming out of the room, pushing my father into the chest in the doorway, hissing, "Let me go," and walking down the hall to the kitchen.

I froze in confusion. My father's face fell as well. Something new had happened. We'd gotten used to my mother's regular outbursts against us. After that, she would calm down and normal life would resume. But it never happened that my mother didn't have dinner ready when we came home from work.

My father and I looked at each other. I walked into the kitchen with my father behind me.

"Mom, what are you saying?" I said. "We're hungry, we worked all day. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong!!!" she shouted, rushing around the cramped kitchen. She grabbed a chair, lifted it off the floor, and set it down with a bang. "You're happy with everything!!! The only thing you know how to do is eat!!! You've got yourself a cook!!! Go and do your own cooking, laundry, and cleaning!!! I'm not going to slave away for you anymore!!!"

I didn't understand anything. I stood there and watched my mother have a fit of hysterics.

"What happened?" my father's voice came from behind me.

"You shut the fuck up!!!" my mother was pissed. "Fucking bismissman!!! The others have bought themselves Mercedes and apartments, and he's still trying to earn some money, but he can't make any! He gives me pocket change just so your mother can buy food!!! And then she has to stand at the stove all day!!! And wash your dirty underwear! We haven't been able to renovate our apartment for a year now! There's still no money!!!"

"Mom, what are you doing?" I said, confused by the surrealism of what was happening.

"And you shut up!!!" she yelled at me. "Just as sly-arsed as your father!!! You're sitting pretty next to your daddy!!! You've got yourself a warm place! You don't want to go to work, you just run after him, you don't give a shit!!!"

It all boiled over inside me. Anger, resentment. It was all mixed up. I didn't understand what was happening.

"That's enough! Stop it now!" my father could not stand it and walked around me into the kitchen.

"Don't you stop me here!" my mother yelled frantically. "Got it?! You!!! Asshole!!!"

My father tried to grab her elbow. My mother lashed out with a sharp movement, punched him in the chest with her fist, pushed him away, and yelled again, "Don't touch me!!! Or else!!!"

My mother's eyes flickered desperately around the kitchen, looking for something to grab. My father moved toward her.

"Get away from me!!!" my mother screamed.

"Has she gone crazy...?" it flashed through my mind. My mother threw a punch at my father, who recoiled. She rushed to the exit, pushed me out the door and ran to her room.

"What's the matter with her?" I stared at my father.

"Heh," he brushed me off, clenching his jaw.

There was an awkwardness in the air.

"Well, we'll have to make our own dinner," I said.

My father exhaled loudly, scratched the back of his head, and grunted confusedly.

"Yeah," he said. "We'll have to, for sure."

The pause was oppressively quiet again.

"All right," I said. "I'll go to the store and you go to the bathroom and get warm. I'll come back and get in the tub while you cook."

My father agreed. I took the money, reluctantly put on my still cold down jacket and went out. Cold again. My thoughts froze. I walked into the darkness, my face pressed into my collar. My mind was torn between food and a hot bath. I was so hungry that my stomach hurt. I tried to analyze what had happened, but I could not. I immediately felt depressed. I tried to distract myself. I automatically did some shopping and went home. My father had already come out of the bathroom, steaming and satisfied. I sneaked into the bathroom. I undressed. My arms and legs were covered with goosebumps. My toes were blue-green and almost ice-cold. I used the bath plug, turned on the hot water, and jumped in without waiting for the tub to fill. Superior bliss! My back touched the bottom of the tub and was embraced by a thin layer of hot water. I tried to squeeze in as hard as I could. I couldn't fit in the tub and my legs were sticking up with my bluish knees. The goosebumps grew. I closed my eyes and threw my head back. The stream of water thundered against the bottom of the tub, vibrating and spreading its power around me. The water rose and covered my ears and there was silence. The steady hum and the warmth of the water enveloping me lulled me to sleep. I dozed off. I saw summer. "Just a few days and it's spring, just a few days and it's spring, just a few..."

CHAPTER 12

"Fuck this!" I blurted out as my father and I left the developer's office after learning that the mall would not open in February and might not open until April. My insides were boiling. As soon as we got in the "GAZelle," my father immediately smoked, and so did I. After a few minutes, I calmed down a bit and started breathing normally. We began to discuss the situation over dinner at home.

"We can stay in this mall, or we can take the advance and look for another place," I said, sitting at the kitchen table, picking at fried eggs and biting into rye bread.

After my mother's protest, food became scarce. If we came home early from work, my father would cook something. It was delicious, I must say. Meanwhile, I did the waybills. Sometimes we'd get grilled chicken and a beer on the way home. If we got home late, were too tired and forgot to buy chicken, we'd fry some eggs and go to bed so we could have eggs in the morning.

My father ate in silence. As always, he chewed his food in the same measured, thorough manner. I swallowed everything in big chunks, chewed hastily, and drank my tea quickly. My father always took longer to eat. I would sit at the table later than he did, and I would still finish first.

"It's always like this with you," my father said after chewing. "First you're all fired up – go, go, go! Then, when something happens, you go, go, go again, but back. You're always rushing back and forth! You'd better think about it properly."

"What's there to think about!?" I stared at him, perplexed. "I didn't force you, did I? We decided together to rent a department at the mall! And now it turns out that I'm rushing!?" Interesting thing to say!"

I shook my head and popped a piece of fried egg into my mouth.

"You have to think first!" my father continued. "Nine thousand this way, ten thousand that way, we'll never have enough money for you!"

"What money!?" I was stunned. "What are you talking about!? I make my own money, I don't ask you for it, we work fifty-fifty! What nine this way, ten that way!? If we don't want to rent the department, well, we'll go and get our money back and that's it!"

"That money!" my father stared at me with the look of a mentor. "The money you blow on your clubs left and right!"

"Oh, that's what you mean!" I almost choked on my food.

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean!" my father added harshly.

"I see," I nodded and then stared at my plate, the conversation making me sick. "I don't have to go anywhere, I'll just sit at home."

"Then sit."

"No way, sit!" my mother's voice sounded behind me.

I shuddered. It was as if my mother was standing guard around the corner and quickly entered the kitchen.

"Should he sit at home like you?" she glared at my father, hovering over him with her small stature. "So he can become a cheapskate like you! What money does he take from you!? He earns it himself! Maybe he should ask your permission!? He's an adult! Let him go

where he wants! He shouldn't stay at home! Otherwise he'll end up like you! You sit here counting every penny like a miser!"

My mother's pressure confused my father – he even stopped chewing.

"Don't listen to him, son!" my mother waved at my father and looked at me.

"Otherwise, you'll end up with a sour face and forget how to smile! Go wherever you want!"

My mother spoke the truth; my father was remarkably unsmiling and unemotional. I rarely saw him laugh heartily. A broad but restrained smile was his maximum emotion. If it appeared for a second, it was quickly hidden. My father's restraint was also manifested in his willful control of negativity. But when the willpower ran out, there was a release. Several times I saw his anger literally tear him in half, his face contorted in wild rage, and then I didn't envy anyone who got in my father's way. I had been the cause of his anger three times during my school years when my father beat me violently, but each time my mother saved me by shielding me and pulling my father away. He hit me hard, really hard, like I was an adult. I would huddle in the corner and wait for my mother. About the same number of times, my mother and father had a big fight in front of me. Once when my mother was being particularly intemperate with words, my father used his fists. He kicked her kidneys and damaged something regarding women's health. Then my mother said that if he laid a finger on her again, she would stab my father to death in his sleep. I saw his eyes as she said this, filled with real fear and horror. He never touched my mother again.

The suppressed emotions accumulated in my father. But only the negative was angrily released, while the positive was at most capable of a rare smile.

"Go, make friends, have fun!" my mother kept waving her hands in the air and shooting crushing looks at my father. "Your youth will end and you may turn into him!"

"Look here, you!" my father exclaimed.

"Don't you dare!" my mother was furious. "Got it!? You are nobody to me!!! Shut up!!!"

My father became quiet and clenched his jaw.

"You can clench your teeth," my mother said, watching my father's reaction with undisguised glee. "Grit them all you want! I don't give a shit about you, you fucking miser!"

She turned abruptly to the fridge, opened it, rummaged through it, slammed the door loudly, and slurred as she walked out of the kitchen:

"You stuff your face with eggs, and that's good! Serves you right, you cheapskate!"

I drank my tea and felt the hairs on my head move. The family crisis was threatening to escalate into something more. My father chewed thoughtfully, slower than usual.

"All right," I said when the oppressive silence became unbearable. "Let's decide what to do about the mall anyway..."

"What's there to decide," my father said, crossing his legs and twitching one leg nervously. "We have to stay, that's all. We won't find another place like this, and it's not a good idea to rush from place to place."

"I agree," I slammed my hand down on the table. "It would be silly to wait so long and leave it half done. Maybe there will be good sales. Anyway, we're staying!"

"We're staying," my father said nervously, clearly thinking about my mother's antics.

I finished my tea and walked out of the kitchen, my computer and the waybills waiting for me.

Another spring selling season came and exposed the shortcomings of our warehouse – the roof was leaking in places, and meltwater was collecting outside the gate. Every night it froze, and in the morning we'd chisel the lower edges of the gate out of the ice. At least half an hour. Take a crowbar and get on with it. And so on until the end of March.

Sales went up sharply. "Mercury" and "Peresvet" began to gobble up barter goods so much that we were short of them. Again, there were two ways out. Either we add new wholesalers to the barter system. But there were almost none left in the city. Only "Homeland" came to mind. The company continued to amaze us with its growth rate, as if it had been pumped full of money. Or we find a new producer of liquid goods. I did not see any, and I was not eager to boost another unknown product. Thoughts swirled in my head, but there was no solution. Senya, who had the taste of money, went hyphy.

"Go ahead, propose!" he exclaimed excitedly when I visited him again. "What else do you have there to bring?"

I was standing in the middle of the office. Senya was sitting at his desk, his tongue sticking out in lust as he hurriedly filled out my waybill. I listed several groups of goods that could have been delivered by anyone. Senya grimaced, and so did I when I saw his reaction.

"All right! You know what we'll do?" Senya pursed his lips, drumming on the table with his fingers, thinking. "You unload now and come to me, and I'll write you the prices and the assortment of these groups in the meantime. You'll take it all at once, okay?"

I agreed and went outside. Our "GAZelle" was already parked in front of the warehouse. I approached just as my father was about to put the first box on the conveyor belt.

"Let me," I pushed him aside and got to work.

The loader came in, looked in the back of the "GAZelle", and called another one from the smoke room.

"Here," I shoved a box into his hands, and stepped aside. "Pass it on."

As soon as the unloading was finished, I checked the goods in the warehouse and went back to the office.

"Senya gave me the papers for the other goods!" I said as I got back to the car. "We'll see what's what at home, and tomorrow we'll call everyone. Check the prices, calculate everything. We don't have any extra barter, but we shouldn't refuse. We'll have to work it out."

"How exactly are we going to work this out?" my father stared at me in surprise. "Don't promise him pie in the sky if it doesn't work out."

"It will!" I objected excitedly. "It's the season, we'll have the goods for a few months, and then, maybe, we'll find something else! Maybe 'Luxchem' will finally wake up. Assholes, they've been promising us for a year. All right. We'll make it, right, Daddy?"

"Yes," my father nodded cheerfully with a smile. "Where to now?"

"To the market!" I threw up my hands. "We'll take the proceeds and then we'll go home."

After half an hour of trembling, we were there. At 5:45 p.m. my father went to the kiosks. As I stayed in the car, I realized I was very tired, so I curled up in the corner of the cabin and dozed off. I didn't expect the idle chatterer to return anytime soon.

"Asleep?" my father said in a cheerful voice as he climbed into the cabin twenty minutes later.

"Uh-huh," I murmured without opening my eyes.

"I chatted with Nadezhda Petrovna," my father said with a satisfied look on his face.

The cabin vibrated with the revived engine, rousing me from my slumber, and I sat upright.

"Well, home!?" my father added cheerfully.

"Yeah," I said weakly.

"You don't look very happy, do you?" my father continued to smile. "Didn't you sleep well?"

"I'm hungry, my stomach hurts," I said, still listless.

"Stomach – that's bad," my father grew darker. "You'll have some soup at home."

We moved.

"Of course I will," I mumbled, pressing my fingers against my aching stomach.

Before, I didn't understand why people with gastritis or peptic ulcers weren't drafted into the army. But when I got these problems, I understood everything. The constant and unbearable pain was so unpleasant that I couldn't think of anything else. Overwhelming everything, it took away my strength, first moral and then physical. The pain created irritation with the inability to stop it immediately, except with medication.

We drove to the parking lot and walked halfway home in complete silence.

"How much does it hurt?" my father said.

"It's... okay," I let out through irritation, feeling queasy.

As soon as my mother opened the door after the bell rang, she defiantly went into the back room. My father and I undressed, washed our hands, and went to eat. My father had made an excellent soup the day before. He was a good cook; I was cack-handed at it. Something as simple as scrambled eggs was the ceiling of my cooking skills. There had been a change in the family since the last quarrel – my father and mother had gone to separate rooms. My father stayed in the sunny room with the balcony. My mother moved into the former nursery across the hall. A wardrobe, a bed and a dressing table were the only furnishings in that half-empty room. The only television, an old one with a worn out kinescope, remained in my father's room. In our absence, my mother would sit there for days, staring at the dim screen. As soon as we returned in the evening, she would go to her room and toss and turn on the creaking bed until midnight, when she would fall asleep.

I stayed in the living room. The dividing line even went through the refrigerator. My mother began to store food and eat separately from us. We now cleaned the apartment, did the laundry, and cooked for ourselves. My mother did not communicate with us defiantly, only speaking to us when she had to. I was willing to tolerate her behavior just so the family would finally stop fighting and arguing.

I felt nauseous. The soup was stuck in the middle of my chest and wouldn't go down. The heartburn began. I endured it for a while, sitting at the computer and dealing with flowing papers. After an hour, the heaviness in my chest eased, I drank the syrup, and I got sicker. My father was asleep. Not a sound came from my mother's room either. Heartburn and a lump in my throat kept me awake. I went to the bathroom and was immediately turned

inside out. The pain and heaviness subsided and I felt better. I made my way to the bed, lay down exhausted and fell asleep.

In April, I was thinking about "Homeland" again and wanted to finally see its elusive director. After another unloading at the "Mongoose", we paid him a visit.

"Oh, what a little one!" I thought to myself as the girl in the sales room complied with my request and led the director to us. He was about one hundred and sixty centimeters tall, with a down-to-nothing haircut and a sour face, dressed in a cream-colored three-piece suit and a white shirt without a tie. The man's chubby little hands were clutching a frayed black belt bag, a symbol that was beginning to go out of fashion. He came up to us with sad, shy, thieving slanting eyes and mumbled something. I couldn't hear, so I held out my hand first and said: "Hello!" The man mumbled again and lazily extended his small hand to me. I shook it gently. My father shook it after me. The director sighed and said: "What have you got there?"

I took out the price list, handed it to him, put a box of product samples on the table, and talked vigorously about it for five minutes. The director looked lazily at the price list, turned the bottles in his hands, and his face became more and more sour before our very eyes.

"All right, you can leave it here," the director said, giving in to my insistence and showing me that our visit was pointless.

We said goodbye and walked out.

"Yeah, that's tough," I uttered. "He's hard to deal with. Well, okay. We'll keep pushing, coming back every week, until he agrees to take the goods."

My father said nothing. We walked over to the "GAZelle", got in, opened the windows, and smoked. I looked around the yard. There was more bustle outside the warehouses. The volume of goods in the warehouses had increased. A couple of new trucks were parked beside us.

"Meanwhile, the 'Homeland' is growing," I voiced my thoughts.

"Yes, it is, there are more people working," my father said and started the "GAZelle".

"Where did he get the money?" I added. "I don't understand."

The new manager of "Arbalest", the inconspicuous Ilya with the shifty eyes, had set up his own retail outlet. He told me the secret in a half-whisper when, on another visit, I entered the manager's office and saw Ilya's glowing face. His phlegmatic colleague's chair was empty; he had gone to lunch.

"No way!?! Really!?" I was surprised.

"Well, yeah," Ilya confirmed with a slight touch of laziness and self-importance.

"Oh! Wow! Congratulations! And what kind of retail? A store? A department? Where is it?" I overwhelmed the manager with questions, which obviously pleased him.

Together with his partner, a manager of the same company, Ilya rented a store in the center of the city. The little information I had was enough to understand in a second how his business worked. Ilya followed the simplest scheme – to buy goods with maximum deferred payment and at wholesale prices in the company where he worked and sell them at retail. The idea was as uncomplicated and straightforward as a crowbar, and therefore unviable. Such a store could make a profit only if the traffic was high, even the maximum discounts did not

allow to make a profit from a retail store with average customer activity. From my experience with our kiosks, I knew this for sure. Barter was the invisible stream that fed our business. Ilya did not have it; the guy had clearly stepped on a flimsy path. Still, I sincerely wished him success.

"Uh-huh!" Ilya accepted the wishes, nodded, straightened up in his chair, winked at me, and added, with a slightly raised chin, "You're not the only ones setting up retail!"

We both laughed, said goodbye, and I went to the warehouse. The "GAZelle" was already unloading, boxes were flying out one by one, and a loader caught them and put them on the pallet.

"All right, let me!" I replaced my father in the back and handed him the waybills. "Here."

After unloading, we drove to the next customer. I told my father the news.

"No kidding!?" he was surprised. "Nice one, Ilyukha! I didn't expect it from him! Who would have thought it! He sits quietly in his little chair, and suddenly here we are, his own store!"

"So we're not the only ones setting up stores, got it?" I added.

"That's for sure! See how our kiosks have sunk into Ilyukha's mind!" my father said.

"We'll open a third outlet in the mall, and he'll die of envy!" I said contentedly, thought about it and then added. "Although, no! We won't tell him... Otherwise he won't be able to sleep anymore!"

"Well, fair enough, true," my father nodded.

Work on the new mall was in full swing, the asphalt was already laid and everything was in place for the opening at the end of April. It was time to think about the retail equipment.

"We'll order it from 'WholeSale' in barter," I suggested to my father. "They have their own carpentry shop, they make everything out of wood. They'll make us shelves, too."

"How are they going to make us barter shelves if we work with them on household chemicals?" my father stared at me as he sipped his coffee in the kitchen that morning.

"What difference does it make to them what to give in barter?" I stared at him too. "It's their department, they can do it in accounting."

"What makes you think they can?" my father looked at me in surprise.

I was starting to get annoyed. It wasn't the first time my father had been skeptical of one of my out-of-the-box suggestions. It was as if there was a pattern of tried and true actions in his mind, and there was no room for anything new. Each time I had to implant something new in my father's head, and then, after careful consideration, he would agree. My father was not open to new ideas; he accepted them with difficulty. Whether his lack of natural flexibility of thought led to excessive caution or, on the contrary, caution killed creativity, I did not know. But the peculiarity of his character was that on the road of life, my father used only the proven ways. Our business, on the other hand, required nothing but flexibility and originality to stay afloat and grow. We had to take advantage of every opportunity to increase revenue or reduce expenses. When I saw an opportunity to cut costs, I shared it with my father. And once again, his brain creaked strenuously. By ordering in barter, we saved a third of the amount. My father had to be led to such simple solutions; he didn't see them. When my

father heard an understandable explanation, he would object, hesitate, and finally agree. At first I did not notice his slow-wittedness, but later I became unconsciously irritated by similar arguments, and when I understood the reason for my irritation and the peculiarity of my father's character, I began to grow weary of debates. They wore me out every time I expended my energies to move my father forward like a stone. My mental fatigue grew, and in the spring of 2004, a critical point in my perception of my father arose – I questioned his leadership of our business. The cracks in my father's image appeared unnoticed, and the conclusions did not make me happy. I began to realize that my father was sluggish, conservative, inflexible in his thinking, and passive in generating solutions. And the main conclusion I came to was that my father was not the leader in character that I had imagined him to be. He didn't lead me, he just waddled along, occasionally yelling and reprimanding me when I went on a life sprint.

"I haven't decided anything yet!" I snapped. "I just need to talk to them, that's all!"

"Well, talk to them first and then decide!" my father looked at me sternly.

"Well, obviously I will!" I suppressed my anger. "Tomorrow we'll go there and I'll talk to them."

Everything worked out. We ordered the production of the retail equipment from "WholeSale" and saved ten thousand rubles.

In the middle of the month we stopped by "Homeland" again, the director was there, and we went straight to his office. The rectangular office, about thirty meters square, was occupied by a long, massive desk, at the head of which sat a chubby little man in a large, solid leather chair. There were chairs on either side of the desk.

"Hello," I yelled from the doorway, flinging myself onto the nearest chair.

The little man mumbled something and blinked confusedly, as if trapped, looking at me and my father, who sat on the other side of the table.

"We came to you to talk about something!" I took the bull by the horns, as they say, intuitively choosing the only appropriate tactic. "A week ago..."

I briefly explained the reason for our visit. In the course of the monologue, the little man seemed to come to his senses – he relaxed and began to absent-mindedly twirl a paper clip in his hands.

I finished.

"All right," the director said weakly. "We will consider your proposal..."

"When should we come by?" I interrupted him cheekily.

"In about a week or so," he added in the same tone.

"Good! We'll be here in a week!" I summarized and stood up. "See you then!"

My father also stood up. The little man mumbled something.

"Goodbye," my father said and cleared his throat.

We walked out.

"We'll come back in a week for sure!" I said as we left the office. "We've got to put the squeeze on this ghoul..."

The growing sales of barter goods forced us to include everyone in the barter system. I wondered about the second-rate wholesalers. The most interesting among them was "Sasha".

This company was a dealer for several large manufacturers, including "Aerosib", one of the three largest aerosol manufacturers in the country. The leader was "Arbalest", whose products were sold exclusively by the company of the same name. "Sasha" was the exclusive distributor for "Aerosib". The products of the third factory were sold by both companies on equal terms. When I learned all these nuances, it became clear that the fattest piece of "Sasha's" business was "Aerosib". Of all "Aerosib's" products, only air fresheners and, in the summer, dichlorvos sold well all year round.

"Yes, hello!" I answered my cell phone in the morning.

"Hello, Roma," came the pleasant, slightly ingratiating voice of "Sasha's" manager. It sounded remarkably soft. Its owner seemed embarrassed by the fact of the call and the inconvenience it caused. He did not demand anything, but shyly asked if I could bring another batch of goods, since the previous one had run out. I was surprised to hear such a tone from the manager of a larger company. I was used to cold, sometimes dismissive, business communication. Although over time I developed a fairly warm and trusting business relationship with most of the managers. But Sergey was courteous from the first minute, and in this way he immediately won my favor. My attitude affected our work – our trips to "Sasha" were internally pleasant. I wanted to work with the company.

"Hey, Seryoga!" I said cheerfully, expecting the order.

"I'm out of blueish here, do you have any more?" the voice continued quietly.

"Yes, Seryoga, I do, plenty! How much do you need?" I clarified.

"I think I could use fifteen packlings..."

"All right, we'll bring it to you!" I said contentedly.

Sergey kindly informed me that the company "Sasha" had moved to a new location and gave me the address, which was completely unknown to me.

"I know where it is," said my father. "I have a rough idea."

In the afternoon of the next day we drove to "Sascha" with our last order. "It's a ghetto, no less," I thought as we drove over the bridge and into the residential yards of one of the left-bank districts. Old, shabby "Khrushchyovka" houses stretched all around the window. The active rhythm of life, boiling on the right bank, was not felt here at all. It was as if time had stood still here, as if we had gone back ten years. It was a complete ruin and a depressing sight. The houses on both sides of the street stared at us with their peeling windows and dirty glass, overhanging the street with ragged walls of old paint. Five meters in front of our car, slowly, as if we were in a zombie movie, a poorly dressed, dirty man with a glassy stare walked by. My father slowed down. The man wandered into the alley we were about to turn into. Three others dragged along on different sides of the street.

"Wow! What a drunk dude!" I exclaimed. "There must be a boozer nearby!"

There was another alchy sitting under the wall of the house, two lying by the bench, and one sleeping in the bushes.

"Yeah, I think so," my father said thoughtfully, slowing down.

"Oh, there's the boozer!" I shouted as the "GAZelle" rolled off the road to the right.

On the back wall of the house was an iron door leading to a room with dirty windows, a liquor store. We drove slowly past it, looking at the people who had lost all traces of personality. The asphalt ended with the house.

"There, it looks like a former kindergarten!" I exclaimed as I saw the new metal fence and the slate roof of the building behind it. "This way, Dad!"

The gate in the fence was open. We shook on the ground for another thirty meters and entered the property. The two-story building, with two attics on each side, looked like an old manor house. The right attic had been converted into a solid brick addition. The left attic was in a state of disrepair. In some places, the building showed signs of renovation: new windows; a new front door, one of two; and a roof covered with new slate. The whole area around it showed the beginnings of order and tidiness. There were two cars parked in front of the building – a new "Audi A6" and a used "Toyota Corolla". We pulled up beside them and I went into the building and up to the second floor. It smelled like paint inside. Passing a room with desks of computers and three girls sitting behind them, I entered the spacious sales room. "Not bad," I thought, started to look around, and my eyes fell on Sergey, who suddenly approached me. We greeted each other. I handed the waybill to the manager, he began to study it, and I studied him.

"It's strange how disproportionately large his shoulders are," I thought, noticing how much the heavy fabric jacket made them look larger. "And his head..." I thought afterwards. "And his lips are awfully thick and big." I was surprised at my new perception of Sergey, remembering the previous image from two years ago of a nice, slim, swarthy, even handsome guy. Suddenly the image fell apart into separate fragments. The jacket, which made Sergey look like a square drawer for his medium height. A large head jutted down with a swollen double chin. Lips – big, wide, fleshy, bulging out so much on his face that it seemed they were all there and the rest was separate. A medium, neat nose. Slightly slanted eyes, large in relation to the nose, but inferior in proportion to the lips. A dull, as if extinguished gaze, framed by a rainbow of gray sheaths. A low sloping forehead, three fingers high. Strongly developed eyebrows protruding excessively from the rudimentary forehead. Machine-cut, dark, straight hair with a touch of gray at the temples. "Either he's always looked like that, or he's changed so much," I thought, confused.

"Are you going to take anything?" Sergey said, taking his eyes off the waybill.

"Yes, here," I handed over a piece of paper with a pre-written order.

"Okay, I'll register the order, and you can go unload, and the storekeepers will have prepared it by then," Sergey said, sitting down at the unoccupied computer in the sales room. I came closer. Sergey fidgeted in his chair and began to stare at the screen, as if cautiously touching the mouse with his hand.

"Katya, where's the trading program?" he shouted after a minute into the next room, the one I had passed earlier. "Did you get out of it?"

A girl came up. She picked up the mouse, clicked and started the right program.

"Here," she said and went back out.

"Oh, yeah," Sergey stared intently at the screen, "Yeah, I got it, thanks, Katya."

His hand hovered over the mouse, trembling, moved it slightly to the side, clicked the button. "Why is he doing everything so slowly?" I wondered.

"Okay, now I'll enter the discount," Sergey said, and his trembling fingers began to slowly poke at the keys as if they were doing it for the first time.

Tired of standing, I began to wander along the windows of the sales room.

"Okay, you got it, here, I'll register what you ordered," I heard from the computer. "You ordered air fresheners. Why don't you get the other aerosols, the ones for the kitchen, for the stoves?"

"Are they selling well?" I asked, standing with my back to Sergey at the far windows.

"Yes, they are. You can take them for a try, retail them," he said. "You want me to add a box each?"

"No, don't," I said without changing my posture, knowing full well that the product on offer was pointless, that it would hang in circulation and not be sold. "Just what I wrote."

"All right," he said to my back.

I turned and walked slowly towards Sergey. He continued to slowly poke at the keys, moving his lips as he read my order.

"Okay, done," he said after five minutes, wiping his forehead with the palm of his hand and yelling into the room again. "Katya, how do you get from here to the waybill and print it out?"

The girl came over, fluttered her fingers over the keys, the printer whistled, pulled a blank sheet of paper from the tray, and returned it with the waybill on it. The girl left in silence.

"Oh, yes, I remember," Sergey hesitated. "Yes, that's right. Okay, uh-huh, Katya."

"Strange, all those years of work and not being able to type a waybill," I wondered again.

"Come over, you can unload!" Sergey said to me, raking all the documents together at once. "And I'll take the waybills to the storekeeper."

I nodded and walked out. My father drove the "GAZelle" to the pickup window and I unloaded the order. When I finished, I barely had time to put the waybill in my pocket before the first two boxes of air fresheners fell into my hands. I sent them to the back of the car. The boxes came flooding in. Two more boxes of air fresheners. Two more. More. A box of antistatic and two boxes of varnish. Two more boxes. "What kind of boxes are these? They don't look familiar," I thought. I automatically took them and put them in the back.

"That's it!" the storekeeper barked. "Are you going to check it?"

"Yes, wait, let me have a look," I said confusedly and took the waybill out of my pants, ran my eyes over it, checked it against the boxes in the back of the car. I remembered my order perfectly. Everything was correct except for two boxes. "Stove cleaner," I read the name to myself.

"Is everything all right?" the storekeeper said impatiently.

"Just a minute," I hesitated.

"I definitely did not order these two boxes... It's junk... not for sale at all. Why did he give them to me? I didn't ask for them. I said I didn't want anything but the order! Strange," my mind raced. I looked at the unwanted boxes and did not know what to do. This was the first time I had ever been in a situation where a product was being palmed off on me. An incomprehensible move. It didn't make sense. I could have easily refused the item, couldn't I? "Why?" swirled around in my head.

"Is everything all right!?" came the voice in my ear again, the storekeeper impatiently tapping his pen on the metal railing.

"Fine, I'll take these boxes. I'll put them in the kiosks. If they don't sell, I'll give them back, who cares," my brain hastily made an uncomfortable decision.

"Yes, it's all right," I mumbled confusedly and closed the back of the "GAZelle".

"Well, okay, bye!" the storekeeper waved his hand and closed the shutters.

Still a little perplexed, I sat down in the cabin and immediately said:

"Fancy that, Seryoga shoved me two boxes of a stove cleaner for some reason!"

"What for?" my father asked in surprise.

"I have no idea!" I shrugged. "Maybe he does this to everyone as a test run."

"Well, maybe," my father grimaced in disbelief.

"Never mind!" I shrugged off the strange event and threw the waybill on the dash.

"We'll try retail and see if it sells, and if not, we'll give it back."

"Whatever you decide, I don't mind," my father shrugged indifferently.

"All right," I agreed, and we left.

Ten days before the end of April, the commercial director of "Luxchem" appeared unexpectedly. He called early in the morning and asked for a meeting. We met Edik in a cafe for lunch. The conversation was casual, about current events. I mentioned "Homeland" and said that the negotiations were difficult, but we still hoped to get the director of that company.

"I'll have to pay him a visit while I'm here," Edik said.

"Yes, you should, see if you can make a deal!" I perked up. "He might listen to you and agree right away! Then we'll start delivering your goods to 'Homeland'!"

"Okay, Roma, I'll be sure to stop by today!" Edik smiled foxishly.

The last week of April was hectic – we were getting ready for the mall to open. On Monday we made two trips to get the retail equipment – display cases and shelves, brought them in and set them up. On Tuesday, we put up an ad at the entrance of the mall for saleswomen in the department, and on Wednesday, two girls responded. On Wednesday and Thursday, we moved the goods into the department and got it ready to open. The other tenants did the same. At the end, I looked around tiredly; the room that was once empty was now full of sales departments. At 10 a.m. on Friday, April 30, after half an hour of boring official speeches from the balloon-covered podium in front of the main entrance, the grand opening of the mall was complete! The crowd poured in, ensuring a good day's sales for the festively dressed merchants.

"Let's go to 'Homeland'!" I suggested to my father around noon, when the first wave of euphoria had subsided. "It's the last day before the holidays."

My father agreed, and in half an hour we were there.

"Hello, how can I help you?" the sales manager smiled at me.

"Hello! I wanted to ask you about the situation with our commercial proposal, you know, the one we made to you, to your director!" I said cheerfully, in a festive mood. "We opened a third outlet! And not the old kiosks, but a full-fledged department in a new shopping mall!" my thoughts bounced around happily in my head.

"Yes, we will work with your products," said the girl, and everything in me rejoiced with double force: "What news! We didn't stop by for nothing! It felt like it!"

"We have already placed an order with the manufacturer," the manager added.

"What do you mean???" I stared at the girl, dazed.

"The director found your offer interesting," she explained calmly. "A representative of the manufacturer came to see us, we signed a contract, and now we will work directly with him."

I had a sinking feeling. I turned around. My father was standing behind me, scratching his nose.

"Who came?" I forced myself, knowing that I had to say something, even if it was pointless, and that it was even more stupid to remain silent. "Edik?"

"Oh, I don't know his name," said the girl. "He was short and gray-haired."

"Edik," I looked at my father, who nodded, turned away, and walked slowly out the door.

"Okay, I see," I said, trying to gather my thoughts and calm my pounding heart. "Yes, that was him. I need to call him and see what's going on. Because, you see, there was a misunderstanding..."

I threw up my hands and the girl smiled understandingly.

"Okay, so it goes," I exhaled heavily, waving my hand and heading for the exit. The sun was blindingly bright outside, making me squint. The weather was beautiful – clear and blue skies, no wind, warm, just over twenty degrees above zero. It was perfect. And just five minutes ago, the mood had been completely ruined. My father was smoking nervously in the distance. I smoked without thinking.

"That Edik is such a pig!" my father forced himself. "That's all I have to say."

"Well, yes," I nodded.

We smoked for a minute in silence.

"I don't understand!" came out of my mouth. "How could they do that? Why would they do that? They're cutting us from behind! We can't develop this way! How can we sell their product if they're taking our customers?"

My father was silent. Everything inside me was seething. There was a terrible feeling of being stabbed in the back, and I reflexively stood against the wall with it. I remembered a story from a book. There was a bandit in America during the Wild West. They couldn't catch him. He was a good shot and always sat with his back to the wall and his face to the entrance in all the establishments, so that he could see and control everything. Of course, he was killed in the back, the first and only time he sat with his back to the entrance. The bottom line is, don't relax and don't put your head on the block. I finished my cigarette.

"Shall we go?" my father said, angrily tossing away his cigarette butt.

I nodded. The upcoming holidays were no fun anymore. I felt like a dog that had been cheated out of a hard-to-find bone. I had learned my lesson.

I spent the whole May holidays with Vovka in "Clear Skies". My inner state was like a "screwdriver", a cocktail that I used to drink in the evenings at that club: on one side anger at Edik, on the other side euphoria at the opening of the first full-fledged retail department. Joy mixed with bitterness, like vodka and juice. The days were mixed as well. I crawled out of the drunken haze of the club on the last night of the holidays and found myself out in the fresh air at two in the morning, just as the club was closing. Nearby, Vovka was fuming.

"I'm going to quit smoking after all," he suddenly said tiredly.

"You've quit before, right?" I chuckled and took a drag.

"I'm going to quit again," Vovka frowned, and we wandered towards the hotel.

"Yeah, cigarettes are a bad thing!" I sighed. "One day I'll quit smoking too."

"I'm starving!" Vovka said and started to circle his hand over his stomach.

"I'm hungry too," I immediately felt a pang of hunger.

In a few minutes we were greedily eating our food, standing at a 24-hour fast-food kiosk. Vovka chomped horribly. The sauce dripped down the corners of his mouth, breadcrumbs flew in all directions. I finished first, the hamburger clogged my stomach and got stuck, making it hard to breathe. I drank my coffee. It didn't help. The chunk of food was right under my throat.

"Well, let's go!?" Vovka shouted.

I nodded and took a deep breath, no use. We got into Edik's car and drove off. The whole way, without shutting up, Vovka told him something loudly. I started to sweat and felt sick.

"Pull over here, for fuck's sake!" Vovka yelled as we got in front of his alley.

The car squeaked its brakes. Panting, Vovka got out of the front seat, said goodbye to us loudly, and waddled off into the darkness. We drove on. I tried hard to pretend that I was okay, but it was getting worse. A lump in my stomach bounced in time with the wheels on the broken streets of the city. Time melted away in seconds.

"Don't take me to the house," I said casually. "Just stop on the street and I'll walk, get some air."

Edik nodded.

Here we are! I counted the money, said goodbye to Edik and he drove off. I looked around, not a soul in sight. I took a step towards the nearest bush and threw up a fountain.

"Fucking stomach, I'm so fucking sick of you!" I cursed, exhaled in relief, and, wiping the sweat from my face, walked home on jelly legs.

CHAPTER 13

Sales in the new department were poor. For the entire month of May, its daily profit hovered just above break-even. "It's okay, it's a new store, it takes two or three months to get up to speed, we have to be patient," I reassured myself. Two departments away, in an area of forty meters, there was another outlet for household chemicals. I feared in vain that it belonged to one of the big companies – the owner of the department was a small seller. "We'll have to crush him, in a few months he'll run away on his own," I said to myself. It seemed to me that the most difficult stage of our ordeal in business was over, and that from now on it would be easier: to set up departments in shopping malls and individual stores, and that would be it. In the midst of these thoughts, I suggested that my father and I set up another department.

"We can do it, we just have to find a good place, not just open it anywhere," he said. "And it shouldn't be as expensive to rent as this one."

"It's not that expensive, either. The average price is a thousand and a half a meter everywhere, but here it's only a thousand," I objected, thinking and sighing. "Although, even that's expensive, we can barely handle it so far. All right, let's look for other retail space."

"You just have to look right, or you'll start again... I know you!" my father said.

"Start what!?" I stared at him.

"You'll start grabbing everything, indiscriminately, the first department you come across!"

"I don't get it!" I looked at my father in surprise. "What's stopping you from looking for a normal department and not the first one you come across!? Look for it too!"

My father froze, changed his expression, and stared at me with a hard, studying gaze.

"I'll be looking, too!" he raised his tone.

"Then do it!" I added, not about to back down.

"I will!" my father raised his voice more.

"Well, do it!" I laughed, realizing that my father had nothing to say except helpless stubbornness. "If you find it, fine! I'll thank you for it! All the better for us."

My father gave me a long, unfriendly look, turned away, said something obscene in a low voice, and lit a cigarette.

At the end of May, we stopped at "Homeland". I wanted to see for myself that "Luxchem" was shipping its goods directly. I did. I went alone, my father had a cigarette and stayed in the car. I found the entire assortment of "Luxchem" in the windows of the sales room and went out with a renewed sense of betrayal.

I pressed the bell. There was a stomping and sniffing sound behind the door, the lock turned and the door swung open with a jerk.

"Ramses!" Vovka shouted so the whole stairwell could hear. "Come on in!!!"

Catching my hand in a handshake, Vovka dragged me inside and slammed the door.

"Take off your fucking shoes! See my bachelor cave!" he barked as he walked into the depths of the dwelling. Depths was a strong word. The apartment was tiny: four square

meters for the kitchen, fifteen for the living room, a cramped combined bathroom the size of the kitchen, and a miserable hallway. All in all, no more than thirty meters.

"This is my room!" Vovka entered it with his arms stretched out at his sides. "This is where I sleep!"

To the right of the entrance, a double bed occupied one-third of the room. Opposite it, on a glass table, was a television, with a stereo on a shelf underneath, and speakers on the floor on either side of the table. Behind the bed was a balcony, visible through the door, which was wide open because of the heat. To the left of the entrance was a closet leaning against the wall, and next to it was a similarly old sofa, covered in coarse red fabric with holes in several places. When I saw the couch, I shuddered.

"Yeah, that's what you'll be sleeping on if you fucking decide to stay with me after 'Clear Skies!'" Vovka bared his teeth at my gaze. "The fucking couch sucks! The springs stick the fuck out under the fabric and get right up your ass!"

"Thanks, Vova," I said with a reproachful look in my eyes. "You're a true friend!"

"Hee-hee-hee!" he grunted, wearing only jeans, scratching his hairy belly hanging over his waist belt and turning his equally hairy back to me. "Let's go fucking eat in the kitchen and get ready for the 'Skies!'"

I followed Vovka into the kitchen.

"This is the owner's couch! It was already here, along with the closet!" Vovka brushed me off and opened the fridge. "The only things I own are the bed, the TV and the stereo! And a vacuum cleaner too! Would you like some tea with sausage?"

I nodded and sat down on a chair by the table by the kitchen door. "This place is so small," I thought, looking around while Vovka rattled in the fridge. A small table with two chairs, the refrigerator, the ready made kitchen, the corner sink, the washing machine and the gas stove – there was so little space that two adults could hardly fit in it.

"So, what's new with you, anyway?" said Vovka, putting the kettle on and cutting the sausage. "How's business?"

"It's fine," I yawned.

"Well, did you open the department?" Vovka turned to me and froze.

"Yes, we did," I nodded, scratching my ankle. "It's been working since the beginning of May."

"Woow!! Bigwigs!!" roared Vovka, furiously shredding the sausage and bread. "Growing!"

"Growing little by little. I'm thinking of opening another shop," I said, straightening up in a flimsy chair. "I have the goods in stock, and the money will allow me to put another hundred grand to use."

"Oh! You guys are dangerous!" Vovka shoved a piece of sausage into his mouth, chewed it a few times, and laughed with his mouth full. "You'll make everyone else go to hell!"

"Stop it, will you?" I waved him off. "Retail is for us. The more retail we have, the more stable the company is."

"Well, yeah!" Vovka champed, wiped his fingers on his belly, and turned off the kettle.

In a minute we were eating sandwiches of brown bread and cooked sausage.

"How's your old man?" said Vovka.

"I'm sure he's fine," I said sluggishly, chewing. "He gets on my nerves sometimes with his lectures. Do this wrong, put that wrong. Teaching me how to live."

"Well, yeah," Vovka took a sip of tea from a large mug. "Your father is so strict and serious."

"Strict and serious, you say?" I brushed him off. "He just likes to take the moral high ground, that's all. Sometimes he gets so boring, it's terrible. He's difficult, he's hard to work with."

"Well..." Vovka shrugged and tried to chew quickly. "Difficult or not, he's still your father. Family business, that's good. He stops the business, you get everything. That's good too!"

"What's there to get!?" I took the cup from my mouth. "You'd think he created everything and I'd get everything! I've been involved from the very beginning!"

"Well, yeah!" Vovka scratched the back of his head. "But he's still older, more experienced, he's the brains and the leader, so to speak!"

"Damn it! What makes you think he's in charge!?" I stared at Vovka. "You don't know what's going on in there. Do you know that of all the suppliers we've been working with, my father hasn't found a single one? Do you know that!?"

Vovka shrugged.

"That's right! You don't!" I set the cup aside and put the sandwich back on the plate. "I found all the manufacturers and suppliers! Every single one of them! He wasn't even looking for them! I was constantly going through all the magazines and newspapers and bringing him information! And he, yes, he called them and negotiated! I don't deny it – you have to know how to negotiate, all right! But I would have done it myself if it wasn't for my age! Nobody would negotiate with a twenty-five year old kid! That's all! And when we started the beer business, I was twenty-two or twenty-three! Would you negotiate with a kid like that if you were, you know, forty?"

"Well, no, I wouldn't," Vovka said.

"That's what I'm talking about!" I summarized and sipped my tea.

"Well, Anatoly Vasilievich certainly gives the impression of being a serious businessman," Vovka added.

"He does, he does," I said thoughtfully. "I don't mind that he makes such an impression, as long as it corresponds to reality!"

"Come on, Ramses, your father is a good man," Vovka finished his tea and got up from the table. "I just don't know your situation."

"Never mind, let's skip the subject," I brushed it off and took a second sandwich.

Soon we went outside and walked to the bus stop. The evening was just getting started.

The kiosks worked steadily, increasing sales one and a half times over the summer. Sales in the department in the new mall were at zero profit. It was hindered by the competitor who kept the prices low for the goods that crossed our way and high for other goods. Since we were in wholesale all day, we could not be as scrupulous with prices in a separate retail store. I had absolutely no time for it. My father was not interested in such nuances at all. The

competitive battle in the mall was clearly lost on us. "It's okay, when the next department works properly, we'll close this one," I thought, flipping through newspapers and magazines. By mid-June, I had found what we needed – a large, one-story store a five-minute walk from our kiosks.

"Well, the place is not bad, let's take a ride and find out," my father said.

The next day, while the immensely fat shopkeeper was telling us about the joys of the rentable retail space, I was mentally calculating the cost. "Ten thousand in rent, plus the salesmen's salaries. Still, ten is not seventeen, even with the same sales as in the mall, this department will make a profit," I estimated.

"I have some shop equipment in excellent condition in the basement," the shopkeeper added, seeing our hesitation. "If you don't have your own, I can lend it to you free of charge."

We didn't have our own. After a few days of thinking, we agreed. Two girls in their twenties answered the ad for sellers. I didn't like the eyes of one of them – stupid, cold and thieving. I never remembered the other. We spent the rest of the month working in the store, and on Thursday, July 1, we opened our fourth retail outlet.

In the evening of the same day, having collected four hundred rubles, I was sitting on the garden fence in front of the store, in a state of absolute happiness. "Four stores already, we're growing," I thought, taking a slow drag and practicing my cigarette smoke rings. I didn't even feel the accumulated fatigue of my daily physical work, which had almost doubled in the last two months.

July went by working hard. We drove around the city all day, taking goods to retail stores in the morning and wholesale orders to depots in the afternoon. We didn't get home until eight, usually nine. My father would go to the stove and I would sit at the computer and do the accounting. We'd have dinner at ten or eleven, and then I'd go back to the computer and prepare the next day's waybills. I'd go to bed at one and get up at eight. Time flew by at breakneck speed. Days flashed one by one. The relationship with my mother was getting worse and worse; she withdrew into herself and looked at us with hostility. Once or twice a week there were fights and arguments. I got used to it and no longer remembered that there had been a different life in our family.

By mid-July, it was clear that the department in the store was doing even worse than the department in the mall. The daily sales were paltry, less than a thousand. "What a joke," I thought nervously each time I collected the proceeds. It felt like the salesgirls were working half-heartedly. "Maybe they're even stealing money," bad thoughts went through my head. "What are we going to do? Stand around them all day? What about the rest of the work? Not an option. Change sellers?" A normal and natural solution. But my desire to do something urgent was crushed by my father's phlegmatism. At that moment I thought about this trait of his again. No, my father was not against saving the department. He just agreed with my suggestions, but he did not offer his own, did not take the initiative. The opening of the department in the store turned out to be the moment in our business when my physical and mental strength reached its limit and my father's business passivity was clearly exposed. Once I was at my limit, I had no time to think, to decide, to do. I was in desperate need of a business partner who could offer solutions and push them forward. My father was not like that. He worked with high quality, meticulously discussed new initiatives, made sensible corrections and improvements. My father was great at understanding "how to do things

better," but not at all proactive about "what to do better" or "where we should go". Once again, in my mind, his position as a leader was shaken. My perception of my father as a man who knew everything and could do everything was cracked again at the very moment when my irrepressible young activity urgently needed a mature mentor who could see far into the future of our business, who could plan its development and set goals, and he was not there. Suddenly, instead of reliable support, I felt an emptiness. "My father is really not a leader. Yes, he's a good worker, a doer, but he's not a leader in our team. In fact, in all the time we worked, he never suggested a reasonable case. He only thought and discussed what I suggested, and I was always the one who suggested where to go, who to work with, who to call, where to buy what and where and how to sell it," the seditious thoughts returned to my head.

"Dad, we've got to do something about the store department," I said as we came home from another hot day at work. I was in the kitchen eating chicken and spaghetti. My father had just gotten out of the shower and sat down in the chair next to me, huffing happily.

"What is there to do about it?" he looked at me and leaned back.

"It's been half a month of five to eight hundred rubles, what good is that?"

"Well, yeah, it's not enough," my father exhaled loudly and scratched his nose.

"Then what's the point of such a sale?" I stared at him.

"There is no point! What point can there be?" my father said.

"Then what are we going to do?" I looked at him perplexed.

"What is there to do?" my father said.

"What do you mean, what!?" I was confused and shrugged. "We have to solve this problem somehow. I don't know – change sellers, lower prices, decide if we want to continue renting this department or not! Something like that..."

"When the time comes, we'll solve the problem," my father closed his eyes, leaned back in his chair and relaxed.

"And when will that time come?" I said. "How do we solve it? Do we close the department?"

"If we have to, we will," my father said, without changing his posture or his condition.

For a while I sat in a stupor, staring at my father, trying to comprehend the dialog.

"What was it about? What did we decide?" Like a conversation of the mute with the deaf.

"Either he doesn't care, or he's in such a state right now that he doesn't want to think about problems." I was tangled in my father's vague phrases like a viscous swamp.

"Well, okay," I mumbled confusedly, finishing my meal and leaving the table.

I overcame the fatigue of the day and sat down at the computer, sorting out the current waybills and prepared new ones for tomorrow in an hour, then lay down and fell asleep immediately. The phone call at nine in the morning woke me up – Alexey Semyonovich said he would be at our warehouse at eleven. He always called before each of his visits. After waking up, I felt my body humming with the fatigue of the previous day, without having rested.

At half past ten, I removed the lock, opened the warehouse gate, and went inside. I smelled a chill, as if I'd gone from the heat of July to the middle of autumn. I looked around the tightly packed warehouse, shivered, and went back outside. The lingering heat enveloped my body, and I warmed up in no time. My father stood in the shade of the warehouse,

smoking a cigarette with his head cocked dreamily. I took the waybills from the cabin and began to gather the goods for retail. I managed to turn this tedious task into some kind of a game. Knowing where each package, each bottle was, I would prepare the next waybill, trying to mark and remember several items at once from those that were nearby. In this way, I optimized my actions, took the drabness out of my workdays, created excitement in myself, and tried to keep preparation time to a minimum. This tactic paid off. I prepared waybills of forty items in about twenty minutes. Faster was not possible. As soon as I started speeding up, I started skipping lines, didn't get the goods to my father at the packing place, and as a result, the outlets didn't get them. My father would grumble and scold me for my mistakes.

I marked five positions with a pen, walked along the shelves, and began piling up the goods: ten pieces, five, ten, ten more, and twenty. When I had my hands full of goods, I put them all in one place and went back to the shelves. My father came by, looked at the pile of goods I had made, and said: "So, what's to pack here? Shall I stack this?"

"Yes," I nodded. "Pack up what I brought."

My father took an empty box and began filling it, taking his time. I kept scurrying along the shelves, pulling the right things from the racks.

"Don't rush, gather it properly so you don't miss anything," my father said.

"I'm trying not to miss anything, I think I'm marking and collecting everything," I replied as I brought him another armful of goods and heard the familiar clatter of the approaching "Gazon".

Alexey Semyonovich appeared in the doorway, saw us, and raised his hand: "Anatoly Vasilievich, Roma, greetings!" Hearing a greeting in return, the expeditor nodded, glanced at the shelves and pallets, and added in a matter-of-fact tone: "The warehouse is full! That's good! Business is going well?"

"It is, little by little," my father said, going outside and lighting a cigarette.

"How are things at 'WholeSale', Alexey Semenych?" I asked, anticipating the answer.

"Oh! What can there be?" he brushed it off, irritated. "Sitting there, hookers! Just fucking about! We should give them a good scolding, whip them all!"

I laughed.

"Shall I drive up?" the expeditor said, adjusting his cap on the back of his head.

"Yes, drive up!" I waved.

Grinding with the gears, the jalopy jerked and backed into the warehouse. Alexey Semyonovich got out of the cabin, jumped into the back and started to hand over the goods. We were done. I began to check the goods against the waybill. The driver jumped to the ground with the dexterity of a boy and began to walk around the warehouse, now and then fixing the dirty rag with which the fingers of his left hand were wrapped.

"Alexey Semenych, how old are you, anyway?" I could not hide my astonishment at this man's toughness.

He stopped, scratched the back of his head under his cap, counted in his mind, squinted one eye, and said:

"Just like your old man! Fifty-two this year, eh, Vasilyich?"

My father, resting on the packages of goods, nodded.

"Wow!" I was surprised. "The whole office must be obsessed with you, Alexey Semenych! You deliver half their goods alone!"

"To hell with them!" he took the cap off his head, waved it off, and put it back on.
"Sitting there... Hookers!"

I laughed softly, signed the waybill, and handed it back to the expediter.

"That's it, Alexey Semenyich. Everything fits, no short delivery. Here."

"The warehouse is already small!" said the man, taking the paper and looking around with a squint. "It's time for you to expand, to look for a bigger warehouse, Vasilyich!"

Groaning, my father got up, walked around the warehouse and said: "This is enough for now."

"Don't worry, Alexey Semenyich!" I smiled. "We've got everything under control, we've already found a new warehouse."

"Which one was it?" he perked up.

"There!" I waved at the street. "Come on, I'll show you."

All three of us walked out of the gate.

"That one!" I pointed to the warehouse across the street that we had originally planned to rent.

"Oh! That's what I'm talking about! Bigger and higher!" the expediter spread his arms, froze for a moment, and then started running. "All right, gentlemen, time to move on! Bye!"

As soon as the "Gazon" crawled to the gate, my father and I lit up.

"We need to talk to the owners again about renting this warehouse," I said.

"For what?" my father was surprised. "We already talked to them once, they turned us down."

"What do you mean, for what?" I struck an attitude. "If we need a bigger warehouse, we'll have to talk about it again. Or are you just going to sit here?"

"When we need a new warehouse, we'll think about it, but right now we don't need to worry our heads off!" my father exclaimed, taking a deep drag. "Let's go pack up the goods."

"Let's go," I muttered grudgingly, flicking the butt away from the object of the argument. After loading the retail, we picked up the wholesale.

"I'll carry it and you stack it in the back," I said.

"All right," my father agreed, nodding and staying by the "GAZelle".

Sometimes I felt guilty that my father was carrying boxes on an equal footing with me. I understood that we were not just father and son, but equal partners in business, and that it was normal for the work to fall equally on both of us. But my filial feelings still prevailed. Stacking boxes in the back was easier work than carrying them from the warehouse to the car, so I tried to make sure my father was in the back as soon as possible.

"There was a guy who served with me..." he started another story from there.

"And?" I was interested. Working in silence in the warehouse was totally boring. My father liked to tell stories about his military life. I enjoyed listening. But as time went on, he began to repeat himself, telling the same stories over and over again.

"Well, one time we put some cargo in the car together," my father's voice came through. "And he said he'd definitely do business with me."

"Why is that?" I said, taking out two boxes and putting them in the back.

"He says I see Anatoly stacking the boxes, neatly, one by one," my father said with a satisfied expression, squatting on his haunches. "That's how he does all his work, he says, thoroughly and neatly."

"Ah-ha..." I said, going back. "Yeah, that's the way you are, you like order in everything."

"Is that a bad thing?" he said from behind me.

"It's a good thing, I didn't say it was bad," I added, picking up a few boxes again and carrying them to the car. "It's just the way you are, good qualities for business."

"Very good," my father summarized smugly.

"Yeah," I shrugged and put the boxes in the back. "Where is he now, this guy? Why didn't you go into business together?"

"He went to his father's already existing business," my father was suddenly embarrassed.

"Oh..." I said. "It's a shame, you could have done something serious together, but here we are, lugging around these stupid boxes."

My father said nothing, and then we worked in silence.

An hour later we left, dropped off the goods at the kiosks, and forty minutes later we rolled into "Peresvet" like a beehive. People and cars were constantly moving around the depot grounds. Some were unloading, others loading. Noise, clamor, bustle, rumble of engines and heat.

I jumped out of the car and went to the office with the waybills. When I returned five minutes later, our "GAZelle" was parked at the side of the warehouse. My father was behind the wheel, wiping the sweat from his face.

"No room?" I said as I looked at the ramp that was filled with cars.

"No," my father said. "I got in line; we're second."

I went to the warehouse. I climbed the ramp, maneuvered between the pallets of beer, and walked to the open door. The storekeeper, Galya, a good-looking, plump woman in her forties, was sitting tiredly on the bench, smoking.

"Hi, Roma!" she said. "Did you bring something?"

"Hi, Galya, yes, here," I replied, holding out the waybill.

"There," she waved her hand. "Take it upstairs and put it on the table."

"All right," I said and went up the stairs to the second floor.

The storekeeper slowly got up and followed me, tossing her cigarette butt into the trash can. Two flights of concrete stairs and I was in a warehouse full of shelves. I placed the waybills on the desk and turned around.

"Hi, Roma!" the second storekeeper's voice came from behind me.

"Hi, Katya," I called without looking back and ran down the stairs.

The only escape from the heat was the slate canopy over the ramp. I offered my father to have lunch, and we hid in its shade with sandwiches and a couple bottles of soda on a stack of pallets lined with a clean piece of cardboard. My stomach rumbled with anticipation. I shoved the sandwich down my throat and washed it down. A slight heartburn began to set in. After eating, I smoked a cigarette and sat down on the "table". My father sat down on the empty bench with his cigarette, crossed his legs and took a drag. There was a haze in the air. Shorts and a T-shirt – I was soaked with sweat even in this minimal clothing. Everyone was suffering from the heat. Wiping away the sweat, the expeditors unloaded the goods. The mover, panting, carried the goods to the second floor and the customer orders back.

Half an hour later there was room at the ramp. As soon as my father drove the "GAZelle" up to it, I jumped in the back. Scorcher!!! It was like a sauna under the cover! In ten minutes, I had the boxes out on the ramp and climbed out completely stupefied from the heat. We were now third in line. It was moving slowly. Tired of waiting, I ran twenty meters on the hot asphalt and found myself in the salvational coolness of the sales room. The thought that we should find one or two good manufacturers haunted me. But how could we find them when all the known manufacturers were already working with larger organizations? There were no new interesting products on the market. I scanned the windows and warehouses – all in vain, there was no solution. And this time, after carefully walking along the storefronts, I returned to the scorching street and staggered disappointedly back to the warehouse. The line shrank by one. I passed my father, who was sitting on the bench with another cigarette, and went to the second floor to see the storekeepers. In the silence of the warehouse, the heat seemed to die down – no new customers came in, the loader was still lazily carrying boxes downstairs. Katya was having lunch in the back room, and Galya was accepting the goods.

"What's up, Roma, bored out there? Come to see us?" I heard a voice from behind me.

I turned around:

"Yes, Katya, it's terribly hot out there, stuffy. It's cooler here, I guess."

"It only seems that way," the big woman, my height and twice my width, came out of the back room and walked over to the desk with the papers. "Is this your waybill? Shall I take the goods?"

"Katya, there's only one loader anyway, and the boss won't give any more, they're all busy in other warehouses," I brushed off in despair. "So there's no one to lift the goods anyway."

"Well!" the storekeeper brushed the sweat from her forehead. "Then there's nothing I can do! You'll have to wait!"

Sometimes suppliers would bring their goods to the warehouse themselves when there was little of it or because they were in a hurry. We had a lot of it, and I had enough to do all the movers' work for the day. Tired. No, thanks. And I continued to wander around the warehouse, pacing and staring at the shelves and pallets of goods. It was the same here, nothing new. Katya walked by again, shuffling her flip-flops on the worn linoleum.

"Bored?" she said.

"Katya, what else can I get you, huh?" I said suddenly.

"What do you mean!?" she stared at me in surprise and stopped.

"Well, what kind of goods should I bring you so that they cost more and sell well?" I clarified, circling the warehouse with my arms. "Which of these sell well? Not heavy and not expensive. What sells well now?"

"Well, I don't know," Katya shrugged, took a few steps, froze, thoughtful.

"Bring the dichlorvos, Roma!!!" Galya yelled from behind the racks.

"Dichlorvos!?" I was surprised. "Why dichlorvos?"

"Indeed!" Katya turned around. "Bring the dichlorvos! They're selling out! There, yesterday the supplier brought in ten boxes of 'Arbalest' dichlorvos, they were all sold in one day!"

"Wow!" I estimated the cost of the box – it was a thousand rubles. On average, we got about twenty thousand a week from "Peresvet". And that's ten in one day!

"Is there that much demand for dichlorvos!?" I said, puzzled.

"It's the season, Roma!" came Galya's voice.

"It's the season," said Katya, coming closer.

"And why the season? When is the season for dichlorvos?" I kept asking questions.

"It's the heat, the flies are everywhere," Katya waved her hands in the air, pretending to fight the flies. "It's the whole summer, isn't it, Galya? From May to September."

"Yes, all summer!" called Galya from the back of the warehouse. "More like April!"

"And sales like that the whole season!?" I wondered.

"No," Katya said. "In spring the sales are so-so, little by little, and then more and more, and now there are very good sales."

I thought about it.

"So, bring it in," Katya nodded.

"Okay, that's it, I'm done!" Galya came out from behind the shelves, wiped the sweat from her forehead and threw the waybill on the table. "Now we'll take yours, just have a smoke first!"

"Oh, I'll take it!" Katya perked up and held out her hand, "Where's your waybill?"

"Here, Katya," Galya handed the paper to her partner, "I'm going for a smoke."

"Listen, Katya, how much dichlorvos should I bring and what kind?" I got enthusiastic.

"The 'Arbalest' ones are the best, bring them in!" she said. "Actually, bring any, they'll all be gone, the shelves are being stripped bare right now!"

"How much should I bring?"

"Well, you can certainly bring twenty boxes of some varieties, or even more, thirty," the storekeeper waved her hand confidently. "It will sell for sure."

From the side of the stairs came measured footsteps: the loader was carrying our first boxes. Katya went to receive the goods. It was as if I had fallen out of reality – the idea of delivering dichlorvos to "Peresvet" occupied my mind. It looked urgent. I went down to the ramp, left my father with the goods, and returned to the sales room. There, on a shelf in one of the windows, were two aerosol cans. There were no other dichlorvos. My heart raced as I smelled the fat, empty niche of merchandise. After writing down the prices, I went back to my father. As soon as we left the depot, I told him about my conversation with the storekeepers.

"Ooh!" my father said thoughtfully. "That's interesting!"

"The question is, where are we going to get so much dichlorvos?" I waved my hands excitedly. "Even twenty boxes is twenty thousand! Barter? We can get it once, but then they won't give it to us, we'll go into debt! Tomorrow morning I'll call 'Arbalest' and 'Sasha', no one else sells dichlorvos! They're the only ones we can get it from!"

"Do it!" my father perked up and immediately lit a cigarette.

At five-thirty, the cool jets of the shower at home relieved the heat of the day from my body, and my mind finally returned to clarity of thought. It was time to collect the proceeds. We split up – my father to the market and me to the mall. "Yeah, third month in business and still hanging around the profitability level," I thought, after withdrawing a little less than two thousand in cash. I didn't even want to think about the department in the store. The unpleasant thought that it would have to be closed kept replaying in my mind. Another depressing thing

was that we had let both departments go on their own. "Hiring an employee? It doesn't make sense. All the profits would go to pay for their work. And even then, if we get a smart person. Which is unlikely. Paying more attention to retail by hiring a delivery driver and thus freeing ourselves from the daily grind?" Hiring one and putting him on our "GAZelle" meant ruining it in a year. I'd seen cars like that – a rattling piece of broken iron. "Hiring a delivery driver with a car? Expensive. His salary would eat up half the profits. That's half the problem." The important thing was that I realized that if I stopped showing up at the depots, I would lose the "pulse" of sales. I was looking for a solution that would allow me to maintain and develop two departments, and I did not find it. Relying on retail to drive the business did not work. We were left with a hackneyed option: a sharp increase in wholesale. We desperately needed a strong manufacturing supplier. We were caught between two levels of business, and it made me angry. I walked home, and I was angry. I had spent the previous twenty minutes thinking about our systemic problem and the difficult decisions ahead of us. Everything seemed to be going so well, developing, and then the moment of retreat, of regression, was looming.

I came home at half past eight. My father was already sitting at the table in the kitchen, eating his dinner, munching on a cutlet with a disgruntled face.

"So what's up?" I asked impatiently from the threshold. "How much did we get?"

My father finished chewing, looked at me intently, twitched his leg nervously a few times, and announced the amounts. The kiosks gave out more than the norm, even the department in the store sold for a thousand. Hearing this, I felt my spirits rise and began to pour tea, glancing at my father. He was still chewing and looking at me intently.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I was surprised.

"Nothing," my father muttered.

I sat across from him with a mug of tea, grabbed a slice of bread and a cutlet, and as I began to eat, called out the amount of the proceeds in the mall. There were footsteps in the hallway, my mother came in, looked at us with a withering stare, made herself some coffee, and left. My father finished his meal and took his tea.

"Nadezhda Petrovna has written to you again," he said with restraint.

"Huh? What did I fail to deliver?" I was surprised and realized that I might have missed something.

"Nadezhda Petrovna has three items and Polina has one," my father said. "The notes are on your desk by the computer."

I jumped up, went to the back room and came back with the notes.

"Oh, that's a shame. I missed it, I thought I put everything in, but I didn't," I scratched the back of my head, embarrassed to realize my mistake. "I'll have to bring it tomorrow."

"It's all your haste!" said my father. "How many times have I told you not to hurry, to prepare orders carefully? All in vain!"

"I always do it well!" I was taken aback by the change in tone and stopped in the middle of the kitchen. "I can't do it any other way!"

"And I'm telling you, you have to do it properly!" my father said, his voice rising. "And not so that there are always shortages!"

"I'm doing the best I can!" I got all worked up. "If you don't like it, why don't we switch places, you do the packing and I do the stacking! I already told you that!"

"The easiest thing to do is to dump your work on someone else!"

"I'm not dumping it! I tell you again, I pack the best I can! I can't take an hour to prepare a waybill like you, we won't be out of the warehouse by nightfall! You can do it yourself if you want! And I'll stack it and carry it to the car!"

"No, you're going to do it properly!" my father glared at me, poking himself in the chest with his finger. "I'm telling you! Got it!?"

I was stunned. I stood there looking at my father in confusion, realizing that I was seeing something new. I couldn't remember such an obvious display of mentoring on his part. There had been arguments, but nothing like this. My father, stubborn as he was, compromised quite easily, often taking the other side. We never had to figure out who was in charge of our business. Besides, how would we find out? And why? It's silly. We started together, from scratch. It was equal. But at that moment I was standing in front of my father in the kitchen, just as Tsarevich Alexey stood in front of his parent in the famous painting, and my growing anger was mixed with confusion. Something subtle flashed in my father's words. "Clink," like a fishing bell, rang out a signal in my mind. "Clink." And then silence.

And then the anger inside of me rose up and I was about to explode. But I pushed my wounded pride to the back of my mind and just said, "Okay, let's not do this."

I brushed it off and left the kitchen. My mood was ruined. In the hallway I passed my surprised mother, who smelled a scandal and was already rushing into the kitchen.

"What happened?" she slurred.

I didn't answer, but sat down on the balcony couch, lit a cigarette, and stared out at the street.

"That's how you do it!" I heard my father's voice behind me.

"How do I do it?" I turned around in surprise, boiling up again.

"You work sloppily, with your left hand, and then we have to fix it for you!" my father came out on the balcony and took a cigarette out of the pack. "Always shortages because of you!"

"Look! I don't get it!" I couldn't stop myself. "You don't like something?! You don't like what I'm doing?! I already told you, do it yourself! If you can't or won't, that's your problem! Then don't stop me from doing it, I'll do it the way I can! You don't like it? Why are you always telling me what to do!? You better watch yourself!"

My father was taken aback for a split second, and then he was filled with rage.

"I am your father!" he barked. "You! Snotter! And if I tell you how to do it, that's how you have to do it!"

I was confused, I wasn't quite sure, but I thought it was the first time my father had ever stooped to direct insult. My heart pounded in my chest.

"Tell you what... If you don't like working together, we can split up!" I said as calmly as I could. "Sell the goods, sell the 'GAZelle', split the money and go our separate ways! Each to his own side! No problem!"

"We don't split anything! The 'GAZelle' was bought with my savings book money, so it's mine!" my father declared so categorically and so quickly, as if the ownership of the car had been decided by him long ago.

"Well," I hesitated. "Why is it yours? Though..."

"Because I put my own money into it from my book!" my father continued to press me. "I withdrew eighty thousand first, brought it in last year, and when we bought it, I added my thirty, did you forget?"

"No, I didn't!" I said without enthusiasm, realizing that I could not fight the truth, and having no such desire, and being convinced that any lasting relationship can only be based on honesty and decency. "I remember everything."

I didn't want to fight anymore. It wasn't because my father had me pinned down. I didn't care about that. It was the very subject of the argument that seemed disgusting. A petty, worthless splitting between a father and his son was disgusting. I felt dejected and retreated.

"Well, if you remember, then shut up and be quiet!" my father finished me off.

"All right, let's leave it at that," I muttered, finished my cigarette, stood up and left the balcony, bumping into my mother in the room, who was once again circling the scandal.

I felt repulsive. It was an unbearable urge to leave the house, to be alone, to speak out. I called Vovka. He said he had a headache and his legs were falling off from exhaustion, so he wouldn't go to the club with me, but he would definitely go this weekend.

"Damn, too bad," I exhaled. "Well, okay, see you this weekend then. Get some rest, you lazy bastard!"

I stared out the living room window for a few seconds before my father returned from the balcony, took some money, put on my shoes, and left the apartment.

I walked around downtown for an hour, had two alcoholic cocktails and went to "Clear Skies". It was already rumbling in there. I stood at the bar for two hours, downing double "screwdrivers" in a row. The knot of bad thoughts in my head would not unravel. I irritably drowned them in alcohol, along with a colic in my stomach. By one o'clock in the morning I was drunk. My stomach felt queasy. I threw up outside the bar in a dark corner and staggered to the hotel, where I got into Edik's car and he drove me home. I didn't fall asleep right away; I tossed and turned on the bed, clinging desperately to its edges, threw up twice in the bathroom, and then fell asleep immediately, sinking into a familiar blackness.

CHAPTER 14

"Here! Here! It's for you!" my father rudely shoved the cell phone in my face the next morning as he stood at the head of the bed. "There's a call for you from 'WholeSale!'"

I opened my eyes and struggled to make sense of what was going on around me. One second I was asleep and the next I was holding the cell phone to my ear.

"Yes, hello," I said, trying to get my brain to work.

The depot manager called and said she needed a ton of laundry detergent. And the product was needed urgently – tomorrow, which meant we had to deliver it today. My brain creaked, woke up and got to work. My father called the supplier – they said they had the product, I dialed "WholeSale" and said we would deliver the order today. It was time to get ready for the road. I got out of bed, groggy from last night's drinking. I wandered into the shower.

At eleven we pulled out of the parking lot. I had a headache. I took a citramone tablet from the glove compartment, popped it in my mouth, swallowed it, and tried to relax. "Two hours of driving, a little sleep, and maybe my head will stop hurting," I thought and closed my eyes.

I dozed all the way. At the manufacturer's office we got the unpleasant news – the detergent was out of stock, it was supposed to be brought by our arrival from a remote production facility, but they didn't make it in time. What are we going to do? It's one o'clock already, and the factory is ninety kilometers away.

"Shall we go?" I squinted at my father, who was standing next to me.

"Of course! What else could we do?" he waved his hands irritably.

At half past one we left the office, drove around Lipetsk, left the city and headed north. The familiar landscape flickered out of the window, tree plantations stretched endlessly on both sides of the road. The headache was gone, and thoughts stirred in my brain. "Strange, we've been working for so long, and here we go. Why did he act like that? I don't understand. Stupid. The 'GAZelle' is mine! Although it's certainly his." Then I remembered that my father was technically right, since he had invested about the same amount as the car in our business over the past two years. "Well, let him have the 'GAZelle,' I don't mind. But he doesn't have to be so aggressive. Strange. Just think how he immediately rushed to share. And with whom, with his son. That's funny. I wonder if I could take a car from my son like that. I hummed aloud at the stupidity of the thought. "Silly indeed, why signify such a separation? I am a normal son – not an alcoholic, working hard, not lazy." Then I remembered that the car was registered in my name. "Maybe he was afraid of that." I hummed again and leaned closer to the window. I didn't want to talk to my father. "Can't he see that I'm doing three-quarters of the work and he's just the driver and second mover?" What had caused these thoughts of mine? Yesterday's fight? "Or maybe all my resentment was building up gradually, just like his resentment?" Last night, my father seemed really angry. I hadn't seen him like that for a long time. Only when I was a child, when he rarely whipped or hit me. "He is cruel. Not tough, but cruel. Always calm and sometimes very cruel."

After the last argument, I became even more critical of my father. The haze of the "father-son" bond was gone, and I began to impartially analyze his actions, past and present.

The conclusions sobered me. I saw a different person. And the disappointment in my soul began to accumulate.

We arrived at the factory around three o'clock. It was an ordinary hangar among other shops and warehouses on the outskirts of the district center. After loading, we drove back at four. We crossed Lipetsk at twenty of six, and at half past seven we flew into "WholeSale".

"That's someone to watch out for!" the familiar stout storekeeper exclaimed as she looked at our car, which made a sharp turn, squeaked its brakes, and immediately rolled backward toward the warehouse gates. I jumped out of the car on the move.

"Roma, what is the meaning of this!?" the storekeeper theatrically put her hands to her sides.

"Just don't start in on me!" I played along and said hello. "It's half past seven! We came straight to you after picking up the detergent, an urgent order!"

"What do you mean, don't start in on me!?" she went on. "You have a habit of coming at the end of the day!"

"First and the only time!" I assumed a pitiful pose. "I promise!"

"Bother it!" the woman brushed me off. "What did you bring? Fifty bags of laundry detergent?"

I nodded, the back of the "GAZelle" approaching the warehouse gate, the car stopped. I removed the cover, opened the side and jumped into the back. Two movers came out of the warehouse.

"All right, detergent, fifty bags, over there!" the storekeeper ordered.

"Hello to you," my father said with a deliberately relaxed walk and a smile.

"Hello to you too," replied the woman. "Tolya, what is this!? What time is it!?"

"Here!" my father pointed to me. "I have the director! All questions to him! I just turn the wheel!"

"Director, eh!" the storekeeper looked at me and rolled her eyes ironically.

"The director carries bags!" I dodged the father's remark and handed over one bag after another. "It's hard to be a director in our company! Merchandise is such a thing!"

"Oh, merchants!" the woman shook her head and went into the warehouse.

We finished at eight o'clock sharp. I jumped out of the back of the truck and there was silence. The day's sales had died down, the customers were gone, and only the tired workers were wandering around the depot. "Nice lady," I thought on my way home, having already realized one of the peculiarities or patterns of life – with whom relations started out difficult, awkward, even hostile, with them they later became the best; and vice versa, you see a wonderful person, soft and sensitive, trying to get round you, but later you realize they're full of shit. The storekeeper turned out to be a nice lady deep inside. At first we fought with her all the time. She scornfully called the merchants "hucksters". And at first she treated us the same way. But when she saw us doing the work ourselves and gaining a living with our own hands, then, I think, she replaced rage with mercy. We remained on friendly terms until the last day of her work at the depot. She quietly resigned in 2008, I think. I don't remember exactly.

"We should take the dichlorvos to 'Peresvet!'" I told my father as soon as I got out of the shower.

"We should," he said, basking in the sunlight on the balcony with a cup of coffee in his hand.

"I think that Ilyukha in 'Arbalest' will not give us the goods now, we already owe twenty in barter, and we choose the goods in advance," I expressed my doubts.

My father nodded and crossed his legs.

"Why are you nodding?" I wondered.

"I don't think he will," my father said without any intonation.

"We could still get dichlorvos in 'Sasha', but the amount is too big, our barter there is a penny, and we always keep a balance of about zero," I continued to search for a solution aloud, wanting to hear my father's thoughts as well. "And 'Sasha' won't give it in advance either..."

My father nodded again and took a sip of coffee, savoring it. I realized that I was habitually irritated by my father's indifference in his answers. No, I didn't mistake indifference for calmness. I had noticed my father's tendency to answer evasively, elliptically, without giving any of his own decisions. Again and again I tried to work out a common solution, to compose it from the thoughts of two people, but my father slipped out of such a dialogue in a practiced way.

"So!?" I said impatiently, spreading my hands. "What are we going to do!?"

"Nothing," my father said in the same tone.

"What do you mean, nothing!?" I almost shouted.

"What can we do?" my father looked at me. "They're not going to give us dichlorvos, are they?"

"They're not!"

"So!?" my father said.

"So what!?" I stared at him.

"Then what do you want from me?" my father took a sip of coffee and kicked his leg.

"I came to consult with you!" I almost choked with indignation. "I came to hear a proposal from you, and you answer me with some neutral phrases, as if you don't care whether we deliver dichlorvos to 'Peresvet' or not."

"Why should I care?" my father asked in surprise. "They're not going to give us dichlorvos, are they?"

"They're not!" I repeated, feeling the growing emptiness inside me cool my enthusiasm.

"Well, here we are," my father said, turning to the window and admiring the landscape of the courtyard. "What are we talking about? They won't give us dichlorvos. That's it."

"Just like that!!!???" I wanted to scream, in a second a storm broke out in my head. I didn't understand why my father was so indifferent, I stared at him confused. My father looked at me with a smirk.

"What are you looking at?" he said.

"Nothing. I'm just surprised at you!" I said. "There is an opportunity to make money and you dismiss it so easily!"

"Why am I dismissing it? They won't give us dichlorvos. So there is no opportunity."

"What do you mean there is no opportunity?" I started to get all worked up again. "And other opportunities to consider or think of!?"

"Go ahead, think," my father shrugged, took another sip of coffee, kicked a few times, and continued to look at me with an unbearably viscous calm.

"Then we need to buy those dichlorvos!" I said. "Just buy them with the money!"

"If we need to, we will, what's the problem?" my father said.

I sighed heavily and tried to calm my irritation. I didn't want to fight. The mutual resentment that had grown between us was already hypertrophied. I pulled myself together, calmed down, and began to think only of business.

"How much cash do we have at home?" I squeezed out.

"I'll have to count it," my father said just as viscously, then added with a hint of reconciliation. "About forty thousand, I think."

"All right!" I switched to action, forgetting the negativity and resentment. "I'll call 'Sasha' now, and if they have it in stock, we'll buy it and bring it to 'Peresvet' right away."

My father nodded gently, but I had already jumped off the balcony. There were dichlorvos. An hour and a half later, we were in the neighborhood of drunks and junkies. We drove into "Sasha" territory. My father stayed in the car, I went up to the sales room. Sergey greeted me warmly.

"What are you doing stocking up on dichlorvos?" he asked in surprise.

"I have an order from a customer," I replied.

"Well, yeah, dichlorvos is being swept off the shelves right now!" said Sergey. "A truck arrived three days ago, and all the dichlorvos were distributed within two days!"

"What do you mean, distributed?" I didn't understand.

"It's the season!" Sergey explained, striking a relaxed pose. "Customers are lining up for dichlorvos! It happens, when a car arrives, we distribute it on the way to whom and how much to give. And this one was almost all distributed immediately."

"Wow!" I was surprised and thought about it. "Cool!"

"Yeah!" Sergey stretched lazily. "That's how it is! We sell by truck..."

"I've put the waybill through, here," said the girl, who came over and handed me the documents. "I'll give the warehouse bill to the storekeeper. Let's go to the cashier."

"Well, I gave you the lowest price here, you buy it after all," Sergey added. "The price is good, I sold it to you at five percent."

I nodded.

"Give me the waybill, Katya, I'll take it down myself," Sergey said.

I counted out twenty-nine thousand at the cash register and went outside, waving to my father, and the "GAZelle" pulled up to the warehouse. I opened the side and started to take out the goods.

"Where are you taking it, anyway?" said Sergey, coming up beside me. "To the region, probably?"

"Yes, the order from the region," I lied.

"Ah-ha," he nodded understandingly.

I closed the side, shook the manager's hand and jumped into the cabin.

"If you only knew, Seryozha, where I'm taking these dichlorvos, right under your nose, not to the region," I thought, and I couldn't help smiling and giggling with pleasure. Twenty minutes later we arrived at the depot. In the cabin I wrote out a waybill, added twenty

percent to the cost of the goods, and went into the office. Then I looked in the window – there was no dichlorvos – and went to the warehouse.

"There is no dichlorvos for a long time!" Galya said sourly. "Just like the last time you came, they were sold out and no one brought any more! How many did you bring?"

"Thirty-eight boxes!" I said excitedly.

"Oh! That's not enough! They'll be sold in two days," the storekeeper brushed me off.

"Come on!" I opened my mouth in surprise.

"You'll see," she said.

"Well, I'll bring you more when you sell it!" I was glad, smelling the profit.

After handing over the goods, we left. It was Friday, July 23.

"On Monday we'll take our goods to 'Peresvet'," I told my father on the way home.

"We'll also see sales of dichlorvos. I'm curious to see how it goes!"

"Oh! It's all gone in two days!" Galya snorted on Monday as I walked up to the warehouse. "The last two packages were picked up this morning, so bring more!"

I was stunned.

"We'll bring as many more tomorrow!" I told my father.

On Tuesday morning, we bought a second batch of dichlorvos from "Sasha" for forty thousand. The round eyes of Sergey, the manager, betrayed his surprise and interest.

"That's quite a customer you've got in the region, growing up! I wonder who it is?" he said, chewing his fat lips thoughtfully.

I did not answer, I was gripped by commercial fever. We drove to "Peresvet".

"No, except for your dichlorvos, there were none!" Galya brushed me off sadly and asked me cheerfully. "Did you bring more?"

"Some Klondike, not 'Peresvet'!" I said to my father on the way home. "We'll have to stop by on Thursday and see if they're still in stock!"

"But we'll come on Friday as usual," my father said. "What difference does it make?"

"A big difference! Every day and every hour counts here! It's the season! A few more weeks, and nobody needs dichlorvos anymore! We have to deliver it while it still sells. We'll come by on Thursday!" I cut it short.

"Okay, we will," my father agreed languidly, reaching for another cigarette.

Thursday. Noon. We're at "Peresvet". There were two boxes of fifty in the warehouse! I was commercially obsessed, my thoughts got loose.

"How much money do we have at home?" I glared at my father when I came back to the "GAZelle".

He thought about it, counted and then said: "About fifteen thousand."

"That's all!?" I stared at him in surprise.

"What did you expect!? Payments are almost everywhere on Friday!" my father shrugged. "We'll get some in 'Peresvet', in 'Mercury', from retail, then there will be more."

"No, that won't do!" I thought frantically. "How much do you have in your savings book?"

"No! I'm not taking it out!" my father cut me off sharply.

"What difference does it make?" I said, perplexed. "You take it out, then you put it back in! We make money on it!"

"I'm not taking it out!" my father grumbled separately, almost syllable by syllable. "That's enough! I take it out all the time!"

"Dad!" I smiled. "What are you doing with all that money? Do you salt it away or what? It's just sitting in the bank for nothing. It's better to put it in requisition! Nobody's taking your money. You take it back when we don't need it, and that's it! What's the problem?"

"I said I won't do it!" my father snapped.

"Well..." I was confused. "If so, I don't know... We can try to talk to 'Sasha' about a partial payment and a deferment. We can also try to ask 'Arbalest' to give some without money, and we buy the rest in 'Sasha' for the money available. Exactly! Let's do it that way!"

I immediately called "Arbalest" from the car. The manager, Ilya, babbled into the phone that the balance was twenty-five thousand in our favor, the debt was large, and it was the season for dichlorvos, they were being swept for money, and I wanted to get them in barter... and blah, blah, blah. Rejection, in short.

"What a jerk," I muttered, already calling 'Sasha'. "Hello, Sergey!"

But there were no more dichlorvos in the company.

"What a shame!" I muttered in annoyance. "As soon as they arrive, call me immediately, okay?"

"Okay, I will, of course," the manager said.

I put the phone down on the seat.

"No dichlorvos, damn it! Bummer! At the height of the season!"

"We can buy them at 'Arbalest'," my father said calmly. "They have them."

"No, we can't buy it from Ilya!" I cut him off. "We barter with him. He's used to it. We'll buy once and he'll start wringing his hands and offer everything for money. Not an option!"

"Well, that's it then," my father said, carefully wiping the steering wheel with a rag.

"That's it," I agreed sourly.

July is over. August began with the closing of the store. We took a step back for the first time in three years. It wasn't nice. A second one was looming. My father grumbled unhappily.

"You see what your 'let's do it' results in!" he lectured me on Monday. "This is the result of the ill-conceived opening of the retail store, taking the goods back!"

"Why are these ill-conceived decisions mine?" I was no longer surprised by the familiar scenario of the dialog. "We work together, we make decisions together. You were not against the opening of this department."

"I was against it, but I know your character!" my father continued to defend himself. "When you think of something, it's curtain, you can't be talked out of it."

"Why is that?" I objected, realizing the futility of the conversation and having another interest in it. "You didn't try to talk me out of it, you agreed right away."

"That's why I didn't try, because it's useless to talk you out of anything," my father spoke for buncombe. "You're as obstinate as a ram!"

"No, you're the ram here!" I smiled, satisfied with what I had said.

My father was astonished, stopped with a box in his hands and stared at me.

"Well, you're an Aries, aren't you?" I continued with a smile. "Aries is a ram."

My father looked at me intently. I looked at him without taking my eyes off him. After a moment, without saying a word, with anger in his eyes, my father continued his work. "Having it? What did you expect, that you could just shit on me like that? No, Daddy, I have no desire to listen to your nonsense," I thought and carried another box from the car to the warehouse, gloating. We spent the rest of the unloading in a thick, negative silence. Everyone is different: some people fight back immediately against anyone who interferes with their personality; some tolerate everything all their lives and lose a person in themselves; some retreat until they reach the limit of their patience. I envied the former, as I was rather mild by nature. The latter were physically repulsive to me. I retreated without responding to my father's attacks until I understood the obvious – under the guise of "fatherhood," he extended his position as head of the family to our business, suppressing my equality, taking my activity for granted, and scrupulously noticing my failures. And that was when the limit came. I was no longer willing to put up with this state of affairs.

"Vova, you're fucking annoying!" I shouted at my friend after looking around to see if my father was there. "You'll break the fucking door soon enough!"

We were in the parking lot of the "Pelican", picking up the leftovers as usual. I called Vovka, and he came in and started to tell me another story from his everyday life, and out of habit he started to swing the door of the "GAZelle".

"Fuck, Ramses, I'm sorry!" he laughed and let go of the door. "I don't know why I keep turning the door around, when I come to you! How's business? You're all getting fat there, aren't you!?"

"Vova, what's with the fat?" I waved as I stepped out of the open cabin onto the gravel. "Did I tell you we were closing the store?"

"No, you didn't!" Vovka shook his head, almost reaching for the door again.

"We closed it on the first of August, it worked for a month – minus ten thousand," I put my hands in my pockets and crunched my measured steps on the gravel. "That's the fat, Vovan!"

"Oh, wow!" he stared at me. "Did the sellers snatch the money?"

I nodded.

"Fucking assholes!!!" Vovka exploded. "We have the same kind of people working here! We have to keep an eye on them! They boost everything in sight! So now you have, what, three outlets left?"

"Well, yeah, three," I nodded as I saw my father walking towards us with groceries in his hands. "That's okay! It wasn't a profit outlet, just a loss, so it's even better."

"I got you juice, buns and a chocolate bar," my father said as he came over and put the groceries on the seat. "I didn't know what kind of juice you liked, so I got you a multi-fruit."

"Thanks, Dad," I mumbled.

Vovka's cell phone rattled on his belt.

"Yes!" he yelled, adding moodily. "Coming."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"They fucking call me in to work! Pissed me off! Oops!" Vovka hesitated, remembering that my father was already there, and his face turned crimson in an instant, and he could only say, "I better go, I have to, I'll be right there, aren't you leaving yet?"

"No, we're not," I said, struggling to hold back a smile as I squinted at my father, who was chewing a bun and smiling. "I'll go with you."

After passing through the gate, we crossed the main asphalt area of the depot to the end.

"I'll wait for you here," I said, staying outside under the awning at the office entrance.

"I'll be quick!" Vovka shouted, shuffling his sandals and ducking into the building.

Outside, under the awning, were three armchairs. They were the kind that used to be in auditoriums and movie theaters, grouped together, with reclining seats covered in dark red imitation leather. I flopped down in one of them and looked around the depot, where people were reluctantly moving about in the hot sun. I sat contemplatively for about ten minutes, trying not to move so as not to sweat. A big blue "Peugeot" came around the corner from the entrance. "Oh, that woman has arrived!" I perked up. The car pulled up smoothly to the office across from the warehouses, and the door opened. "Gina Lollobrigida," as I nicknamed her, got out of the car. A dark blue dress well above her knees, tight around her voluptuous figure, a stiletto, a mop of black hair highlighted with brown "feathers"...

"All right, Ramses, let's go!" Vovka barked behind me.

I looked at my friend, who appeared beside me in three steps.

"What are you sitting there for!?" he barked again, grabbing the free chair at the end and shaking it, the whole trio of chairs jerked up with me. "Get up, you bigwig!"

I got up, looked in the direction of the "Peugeot", the woman wasn't there, she went into the building. We wandered back to the "GAZelle". We passed the "Peugeot", turned the corner, entered the narrow passage between the buildings. We were two steps away from the "GAZelle" when Vovka's phone rang again.

"Yes!" he yelled into the phone.

"What is it?" I said.

"Fuck, it's that fucking wine again, I'm so fucking sick of it," Vovka swore quietly, squinting at my father standing a few meters away.

"Are they calling you back in?"

"Yeap!" Vovka ran his hand over his face, ruffled his hair, and shook his head.

"Don't be sad, Vovan, this weekend we'll go to the 'Skies' and get hammered!"

"No way, Ramses! My vacation starts next week. I'm going to my parents. Can you look after the apartment? Can I leave you the key?"

I agreed and we said goodbye. Vovka slapped my palm with his stiff hand, shook it and staggered back to the office.

On Friday, August 6, I received the key.

The weekend was approaching, and I was mentally excited at the prospect of taking a girl from the club to my friend's empty apartment. But I found myself there on Monday, after another hard day at work and a minor quarrel with my father. I was in a bad mood. I crossed the threshold of the apartment and immediately realized what I was missing – privacy, the opportunity to be alone. I walked slowly through the apartment. It was quiet inside. I liked it. No one was around. I was alone. Complete freedom of action. I could hear the sounds of the street outside. I stepped out onto the balcony, leaned against the railing and lit a cigarette. Even the cigarette seemed special, as if it filled my lungs not with nicotine, but with the

magic smoke of freedom. I finished my cigarette and dove into the coolness of the room. Then I took a shower, put on only my underwear, and flopped down on Vovka's double bed, stretched out like a star in every corner, and froze, staring at the peeling ceiling. I immediately felt depressed. I realized that I wanted my own apartment. "Twenty-seven years old, living with my parents, a place of my own is nowhere near," I thought, and I clearly realized that living with my parents was a terrible burden – the constant squabbles, the oppressive atmosphere that made it harder and harder for me to breathe. I was suffocating there. "How much longer would I last like this, a year, two, three?" longing thoughts crept into my soul. I decided to distract myself, so I turned on the TV. I felt better. After half an hour, the air from the street warmed the room, dried my skin, and I dozed off. I awoke to see the day fading outside the window. I went to the kitchen and made some tea and some sandwiches. I ate and drove home. It was a strange evening, but I loved it! It was like a breath of fresh air. I spent the whole week on trips like this – getting into a shared taxi after work, going to the empty apartment, staring up at the ceiling from the bed, and thinking. My thoughts wandered in the labyrinths of my brain, looking for a way out and for answers to my circumstances.

"It's a strange situation, it's getting harder and harder. My mother is becoming unbearable. I understand that she's taking revenge on my father for their life together. Go figure, I always thought our family was exemplary – I had the best mom, the best dad, how lucky I was to have such parents. I thought so until... I don't know until when. Until now? Maybe two years ago I started asking myself uncomfortable questions, and here are the answers. My mother hates my father, and she hates him so much that she wants him dead. Her emotional screaming that he should die as soon as possible and that she won't let him live the rest of his life, sends me into a tailspin. I also get it in the neck. My mother thinks that I am my father's sponger, clinging to "daddy" because of money and my inability to make my own decisions in life. In her eyes I look like a total shit. And my father thinks so, too. The human mind is amazingly constructed. You get insulted, you get mud thrown at you, and out of all the insults, you choose the one that applies to the other person. And you support it. This is probably how you try to keep your self-esteem normal. My father takes great pleasure in supporting my mother's attacks on me, saying that I am a spineless amoeba, not trying to make money with my father as an equal, but hanging on to him out of helplessness and inability to fulfill myself. A vicious circle. My mother thinks I am a loser. My father thinks he is my benefactor and I am a cowardly slacker. Do I really look like this from the outside? If so, it's creepy and strange. And where is the solution? I can't buy an apartment, I have no money. Even if we continue to work at the same pace, I will not be able to afford a one-room apartment for at least five years. Unless a small miracle happens. Go to a rented apartment now? What's the point? It's a waste of money. Besides, my father wouldn't approve, he'd say I'm wasting our money. I work every day and I don't have any money of my own. It's a paradox. My father always grudgingly gives me the crumbs that I spend at the club. And they really are crumbs. Vovka and I manage to get drunk for ridiculous amounts of money. My relationship with my father was clearly deteriorating, and worst of all, it seemed irreversible. Because of my father's natural stubbornness, he does not back down even in situations where he is wrong. And my natural softness is rapidly disappearing, I am becoming harder.

I opened my eyes. The ceiling. Thoughts continued to swirl in my head, but they were already tired, pestering me lazily from somewhere in the depths. A half-asleep state. The inner protest that had been crawling in my chest for the past few days subsided a bit. I sucked in the air with my whole chest and exhaled noisily. It was Friday, late in the evening, and it was time to go home. I drank some tea and as I was putting my shoes on the trampled mats in the hallway, I heard my inner voice clearly again: "I will buy an apartment at exactly thirty, and a miracle will happen!"

Vovka came back on Sunday morning, woke me up with his screams, and forced me to go to him. We spent the rest of the day in his apartment, drinking tea, smoking, and chatting about everything. And in the evening we went to "Clear Skies". Life went back to normal.

In mid-August, I thought about the approaching fall and felt sad. The days passed monotonously. The dichlorvos thing was gone for good. "Arbalest" didn't give it in barter, and it never showed up at "Sasha's". I called the manager Sergey, who mumbled in an apologetic tone that he could not help – there was no product, everything was sold out. I was nervous for a while about the lost opportunity to make money, but by the end of August I had calmed down and decided to start dealing with dichlorvos in earnest next summer.

On August 23 I called "Arbalest" about another order. Ilya answered the phone. His voice seemed overly polite and even ingratiating. I was surprised but didn't attach significance. Ilya hastily voiced his order and asked when we would bring the goods. I said in two or three hours. The manager was satisfied and hung up.

When Ilya saw me in the office of "Arbalest", he hustled, jumped out of his chair, shook my hand vigorously and quickly processed the waybills. It was hard not to notice the manager's excessive agility. I said goodbye and walked out into the hallway, where Ilya caught up with me, looked around anxiously, and said: "Roma, I have a situation here, can you help me?"

"What happened?" I stopped at the end of the hallway at the stairs.

"I'll tell you, but not here," Ilya ran his eyes even harder. "You go unload and then call me and I'll go down to the smoking room and we'll talk, okay?"

I agreed and left for the warehouse. Half an hour later, outside, Ilya, still looking around, told me that he and his partner had failed to make a profit in the store and had decided to close it. They had no place to put the unsold goods, and the time to pay for them was approaching, and a poor excuse for businessmen had no money.

"Could you buy the goods at the wholesale price for cash?" Ilya summarized. I agreed to help. My father also said that it would be good and right to help Ilya. At the end of that week we went to the store, which had already closed, to pick up the goods. Ilya, holding forty-six thousand in his hands, beamed with happiness, poured out his thanks, shook hands with my father and me for a long time, and almost shed a tear. His behavior made me smile and I felt good in my heart because we had helped someone we knew. Maybe one day he would help us too?

Summer flew by as if it had never happened. The first week of fall traditionally passed under the sign of City Day. On September 4, Vovka and I got drunk at "Clear Skies". The

place burst with people again. And we spent the rest of the September weekend at the club. And the weekend of October. And November. And all winter. And spring.

In October, I ran into Anya at the center, the one I had the best kiss with in my life. When she saw me, it was as if her eyes lit up. But the meeting didn't make me happy; I was even angry for a moment, remembering all of Anya's antics and affectation. "Plumping out," I thought to myself as I noticed that she hadn't kept her most attractive form, but had become fat and plain.

"Hi," I mumbled as I walked past.

"Hi," the girl squeaked in a slightly confused falsetto.

I passed by without lingering, without turning around, and never saw Anya again.

That day Vovka worked late at the depot, and in the evening I was alone in the "Clear Skies". I was in the grip of autumn melancholy and didn't feel like doing anything. Alcohol did not dispel my moping, it only made it worse. I wandered mechanically through the club, taking turns propping up both bars. After one o'clock in the morning, the guards weaseled out of their duties, and all kinds of human whatnot poured into the place. I felt like drinking again. I went to the small bar, where the bartender was already chatting with a customer. The rather short brunette wobbled, her head dangling from the counter, a disheveled mop of curly hair covering the visitor's face. In front of her lay a bar of chocolate in an open wrapper. The customer's head jerked up and she stared at me with a dazed expression. "Wow!" I thought, seeing a haggard face of uncertain age. She could have been thirty-five or ten years older. The woman's face bore the marks of heavy and regular drinking. Her denim suit looked untidy and as greasy as her mop of clumped hair. I was looking at an alcoholic.

"Wanna some chocolate?" she said with difficulty, swaying on her thin legs.

"No, thanks," I shook my head, grimacing and looking away into the darkness of the dance floor.

The woman stared at me for a few seconds, turned her head toward the bartender, hummed, rustled the foil with her messy hand and dirty, broken fingernails, ran her fingers over a slice of chocolate, and said: "I'll have some," and pulled it into her mouth.

There is something deeply disgusting about female drunkenness. It made me uncomfortable. I cringed again and headed for the dance floor.

After half an hour, I finally got bored, went outside, and wandered leisurely toward the hotel. The alcohol had completely worn off. I mechanically made my way to Edik's car, swung open the back door, and piled into the cabin.

"Howdy!" I said, noticing a lady sitting in the passenger seat. Edik held out his hand, I shook it, looked to my right and was stunned – the same alcoholic from the club. Of course, she didn't remember me. I looked at Edik in surprise.

"And we just... sit... chat..." he grinned greasily.

The broad chuckled stupidly.

The situation was clear. I asked Edik to drop me off, and in half an hour I was home. The next time we met, the student bragged to me about the outcome of his meeting with the broad.

"I drove you..." he smiled happily... And then we went back down the county road, and there were no lights... I pulled over to the side of the road by the woods... And... you know..."

"I see," I nodded, stretching my face into a rubbery, formal smile.

The episode with Edik fed my brain for the day. I didn't understand his behavior. Even if I put the sentiments aside and forgot that Edik had a girlfriend, it still came out shitty – the guy's promiscuity to me was like rummaging through garbage cans for food. I imagined Edik and this down-at-heel woman having sex, and I felt physically sick. "It is strange," I thought, "that people take such pleasure in finding dirt and wallowing in it. Why? And they're proud of it, too."

CHAPTER 15

We closed the department in the mall on Friday, October 29. It was still selling at a profitable level, but the saleswomen informed us that they were leaving, and we decided not to look for new ones. On Saturday we moved the goods to the warehouse, and on Sunday we moved the sales equipment. Angry and nervous, we were exhausted. Sunday evening I spent at the computer, returning the goods in the inventory to the warehouse. A terribly boring job. "Stove Cleaner," I came to another line and sighed heavily. The strange thing was that this product, which Sergey had sold me in "Sasha", did not come out of my head. My introverted mind was looking for a logical explanation for such an action and could not find it. None of the partners had ever done this in all the time of bartering. The act puzzled me. "Why did he foist it on me so openly? I could always return it." In fact, the product was barely selling – out of 48 pieces in our inventory, there were 40 left. "I'll have to return this 'Stove Cleaner'."

There was very little space left in the warehouse. The sales equipment occupied the left corner closest to the entrance. My father squinted grumblingly at the cabinets and showcases, but remained silent. I could read everything he was thinking in his eyes. By November, we were back where we started – a wholesale business with no development and two unsightly but profitable kiosks in the market. I barely had time to catch my breath when, at the beginning of the month, Nadezhda Petrovna's shift worker told me, as I was collecting the proceeds, that she would work until the end of the month and then leave.

"Where is she going?" my father stared at me in surprise when he heard the news lying on the couch.

"I have no idea," I shrugged and put the money on the table. "Who cares? What are we supposed to do? Should we find someone else, or will Nadezhda Petrovna work alone?"

"We have to find someone," my father sat up on the couch, massaging his face with his hands and blinking frequently, shaking off his slumber. "She can't do it alone. Working without days off?"

"With days off, of course," I specified. "And that's if she wants to."

After agreeing with my father, I suggested that we ask the old lady's opinion. She agreed almost without hesitation, saying that she would make more money on her own. The problem seemed to be solved, my father, obviously relieved by the saleswoman's words, slapped his hand on the window of the kiosk, wished Nadezhda Petrovna good earnings, and went to the car. But as soon as we were in the "GAZelle", I attacked him:

"So what should we do with Nadezhda Petrovna? Should we let her work alone, or should we find someone else?"

"Haven't we already decided?" my father asked in surprise. "Nadezhda Petrovna said she would work on her own. What else do you want!?"

"It was not our decision, it was her decision!" I began to get angry. "In my opinion, the kiosk is ours, and it is better to have it working every day, not like the other one – Saturday till afternoon and Sunday closed!"

"Well, what do you suggest!?"

"I suggest that we think about it, maybe we should try to find a second saleswoman so that the kiosk can work to its full potential. It's the best outlet of the two. I'm not talking about Polina, she sells God knows how, there's no way to fix it. But this kiosk sells very well. Four

full days and four half days, that's six days of downtime. Why lose the profits? I mean, we could try harder and find a saleswoman."

"Then do it, who's stopping you?" my father stared at me indifferently.

"Now that's just typical," I said sourly, inwardly indignant and seething.

"What's typical!?" my father threw up his hands and slammed on the steering wheel.

"Never mind," I brushed him off and turned to the window.

"If you don't like it, go and do something! Go ahead! Nobody's stopping you!" my father got angry too.

"All right, all right, I get it," I muttered conciliatorily without turning around.

"Oh, you wanted me to start looking for a saleswoman, didn't you? I would run and make a fuss and you would just sit there and tell me where to run and at what speed!?"

"Here we fucking go," the thought crept into my head with a nasty taste.

"I didn't want anything," I said absently.

We both fell silent. There was tension in the air.

"Shall we go?" my father said.

"Yes," I replied as I looked away from the window and sat up straight.

"Where to now?" my father asked his overused question.

"It's all in the waybills," I said nonchalantly, knowing the effect my sentence would have.

"Where are we going, I ask you!?" my father became indignant, gritting his teeth. "All in the waybills! Look at him, what a guy!"

"What's the big deal!?" I looked at him defiantly, barely able to contain the anger that was rising inside of me. "It's all in the waybills! We loaded together! You know what we loaded for and in what order! So let's go!"

"Listen, you!" my father gritted his teeth. "Don't get smart with me! I asked you nicely, where are we going? You'd better answer! And don't show off!"

"I'm not," I replied, suddenly calm and almost smiling. "We work together, don't we? Together. So get involved in the work. Or do you want me to call everyone, collect orders, make waybills, plan the day's work, and you just drive and ask every time – where are we going? Is that it?"

My father glared at me for a few seconds.

"Here! Sit! Drive!" my father slammed his hands on the wheel, bursting a vein. "I told you a hundred times! You don't like it!? Get in and drive yourself!"

"And I told you a hundred times," I continued in a calm voice. "You don't like it? Go ahead, call and work on the computer yourself. We can swap places. I'm in! I will plainly turn the wheel and ask each time where we are going and carry the boxes as you say."

My father continued to stare at me. I knew he had no answer for this statement. It wasn't the first time we'd had this kind of argument. We both provoked each other into more and more scandals and negativity.

"Where are we going!?" my father repeated angrily.

"Arbalest," I said nonchalantly, staring at him with clear eyes.

My father's hand, white from clenching, clicked into gear with a crunch, the car moved, and I turned back to the window. How dreary November is in our part of the world. Winter is approaching and it's grinning bloodthirstily, and everything in nature is freezing and

dying with its grin. The mood of nature is transferred to people and gives rise to gloomy thoughts. This year, everything came to a depressing point: some business failures, the separation of my parents, tensions between my father and me, stomach aches. And the kind of damp weather that makes you want to give it all up and hibernate. But there was worry, nothing but worry. Alcohol was the only thing that relaxed me and chased away my anxious thoughts. I drank more and more. It was in November that I first felt a slight addiction. On Friday evening, while I was processing waybills on the computer, I suddenly felt a strong desire to drink. Not to dance and have fun, but just to drink. I called Vovka, who was down with a fever. I wished him a quick recovery and went to "Clear Skies" alone. After ordering a double "screwdriver" and drinking it in about five minutes, I took the next one. I drank it more slowly and also enjoyed a cigarette. It was getting good. After the third double, I was in alcoholic nirvana. "It's half past eleven and I'm already feeling good," I thought. After going to the bathroom, I clung to the bar again. Midnight. A fourth double and a cigarette. I pulled my face into a drunken smile, aware of how stupid I looked, but I didn't care and felt very good from the alcohol. After taking the only quiet place in the crowded club in the archway of the grotto, I drank two more doubles by 1:00 a.m. More than half a liter of vodka was splashing inside me. I was intoxicated and began to wander around the club, swaying in senseless directions. The euphoria turned into numbness and indifference. The seventh double finished me off. "Too many," I realized, staring into the half-empty glass. It's twenty to two. "It's almost closing time, I have to go now, or in half an hour the people in the checkroom will be choking to death," I thought, got up, crumpled and gagged, took two swigs from the glass, pushed it aside, and, holding on to the wall, went to the exit. Someone said goodbye to me just before the checkroom, and I mumbled something in response. Did someone say goodbye to me at the checkroom, too? My consciousness was in a thick fog. I probably said goodbye too. "I'm polite, I always answer, yes, yes," my drunken brain moved my thoughts. I didn't immediately find the sleeves of my jacket, but I put it on and, holding on to the railing, I walked up the stairs, my jelly legs barely moving. The guards inside at the exit. Did they say goodbye to me? I pushed the door open, the cold, damp air hitting my face. I stepped over the threshold and took a deep breath. The air seemed unusually clean and fresh. I inhaled it again and again and could not get enough of it. Nearby, the drunken crowd was yelling as usual. I stepped aside. The aggressive shouting suffocated me and I wanted silence. The oxygen made me even more dizzy. Finally I felt the cold of the street. It crept under my jacket through the open collar and sobered me. I lit a cigarette, zipped up my jacket, shivered, and walked at a wobbly pace to the hotel. Edik's car was parked in its usual spot. The warmth of the car heater on the way home made me woozy. After Edik left, I stood in front of my entrance for a few minutes, deliberately unzipping my jacket and feeling the ravenous November cold underneath bring me back to my senses. At home, as soon as I had undressed, climbed into bed under the blanket and warmed up, I felt the first attack of vomiting. I started tossing and turning in bed. I crawled to the floor and staggered to the bathroom. After a while, almost falling asleep by the toilet, I returned to the room. I was dizzy and shaking. A terrible condition. My parents were asleep in their rooms, the apartment was silent and dark, and I was sitting on the floor. The thought of the bed made me sick again. The toilet. The floor of the room again. The cold hit me with renewed force. "I'm

sobering up," I rejoiced languidly. After dozing for a while on the floor next to the bed, I climbed up on it in a dopey state and fell asleep before I could feel the dizziness.

We expected another delivery from Krasnodar on December 10. But the decrepit "MAZ" broke down, another truck was sent to us a day later, and everything went out of whack.

It snowed during the night. For a few minutes before I went to sleep in the darkness of the room, I stared at the snowflakes falling with a mixed feeling of joy and frustration.

"I'll have to shovel it away," I realized in despair, and went to bed.

Overnight, the city was completely covered in snow. Road crews were out clearing the streets in the morning, rumbling. Five degrees below zero and not a breath of wind. A perfect winter day. A weekend ahead, a break. If only! Within half an hour of digging out the "GAZelle" in the parking lot, we drove to the warehouse and bought two snow shovels on the way. All the roads on our way had already been cleared, and even the dirt road from the intersection to the factory gates had had time to be graded. The factory itself lay untouched under a thick blanket of white. We did not even dare to drive the "GAZelle" to the warehouse. We took our shovels and began to dig our way down, drowning in knee-deep snow.

"Oh dear," I said when I got to the warehouse and saw the amount of work that needed to be done.

The work was in full swing. There is no point in describing it. Tedious, hard work, seemingly impossible at first. First we cleared the area in front of the gate. The piles of snow near the warehouse walls were growing dangerously fast. I was getting warm and even a little bit out of breath. My father lit a cigarette. For the next half hour, we cleared about the same amount of snow. "What a hole, how did we wind up here?" I was angry in my mind, realizing that it was in vain. No one but us cared about clearing the factory grounds. A forgotten and abandoned place. "It's about thirty meters to the turnoff and a hundred and fifty to the gatehouse," I shuddered as I looked at the road that needed to be cleared of half a meter of snow. We decided to just clear the track. An hour later we were at the turn. It was after two in the afternoon. I marveled at our enthusiasm. Two people, on the outskirts of town, in an almost deserted factory, clearing the road of snow, doing work they shouldn't be doing under any contract. But they do. Others, if they were us, would be ringing all the landlords' phones off the hook to remind them that the factory is their property and that they, the owners, are obligated under the lease to provide snow removal from the property. And that's true. But we didn't call. We knew it was pointless. If you want something done, do it yourself. A lot of people would have put off the delivery until the snow removal issue was resolved somehow, by somebody. We didn't put it off. Responsibility, commitment, diligence are our family traits. If it has to be done, it has to be done. Sometimes, in similar moments, I have seemed like a fool to myself. Too dutiful and efficient. It made me want to be different, more loosened up and carefree. To think and do less for others. I couldn't. Angry at my upbringing, I realized that excess was bad even for good character traits. "Moderation, everything is good in moderation," I thought as I cleared another meter and looked dejectedly at the even layer of snow at the beginning of the road. After an hour, fatigue gave way to indifference. As I shoveled monotonously, I could no longer remember why, but I knew I had to.

"All right! Enough!" I said when we had cleared the path between the buildings, leaving about twenty meters of snowfield in front of the gatehouse.

"How's it going to get here?" my father hesitated.

"It will! Loaded, it will accelerate from the gatehouse, the car will go down the slope to the track by itself."

"Wow! How am I going to get through here!?" the truck driver asked at noon the next day, staring at the untouched snow cover.

I explained to him.

"There's no other way!" he agreed cheerfully, climbing into the cabin, slamming the door and starting the engine. A cloud of black smoke rose from under the truck. The tractor roared and pulled the semi-trailer behind it. The truck passed the gate and began to crush the snow with its wheels. Speed began to drop. Seven meters. The tractor roared, maintained its speed, and kept going. The snow in front of the wheels grew thicker. The car roared again and continued to move, losing speed. Three meters, two, one. The tractor got into a rut, slowed down and stopped roaring, went downhill more easily, pulling the semi-trailer behind it out of the snow. In the curve the truck slowed down, dragged the wheels of the trailer through the snow and stopped only in front of the warehouse.

After unloading six tons in a couple of hours, we drove home, tired but satisfied. I ate dinner, spent an hour in a hot bath, dozed off, got out of the water with an effort of will, fell into bed stupefied, and fell asleep immediately. A phone call woke me up. Vovka shouted in my ear, reminding me that Saturday was on the calendar and we had to be at the "Skies" tonight. I opened my eyes, the clock flashed eight. Two hours later Vovka and I entered the club.

The spring and fall campaign of opening and closing two retail departments was already forgotten. The hustle and bustle was so much less. I forgot what measured and unhurried work was like, so I took it as a vacation. The business became monotonous. There was no sign of development, no sign of stagnation. We were frozen in a pleasant equilibrium, work was being done, money was being earned and accumulated. There was a decent amount of extra money in circulation, and we took it out of the business and put it in my father's savings book. Once a month a car from "Luxchem" came and once a month we went to get detergent. The new year was coming. Along with the pre-holiday mood came the desire for a miracle. Wanting the business to grow, I considered even the most unthinkable options for development, but my intuition was silent.

"We have to find something by spring and work well in the summer! Dichlorvos would come in handy, but where do we get it?" I turned the problem over in my mind as we drove around town in a cozy, heated cabin. To solve it, we either had to find a new aerosol production facility unknown to the city's wholesalers, or... well, the second option was obviously out of the question for us – "Arbalest" and "Sasha" were well "seated" in reputable aerosol factories. We were no competition for them.

The manager of "Arbalest", Ilya, began to avoid me after the events with his shop, I felt it. I still went upstairs and called him regularly, but our communication became drier, our dialogues shorter, and Ilya's gaze began to avoid meeting mine.

December turned out to be ominously snowy. It snowed regularly, every other day or two. It wasn't that heavy, but the snowdrifts near the warehouse walls reached up to the roof. In the middle of the month, the saleswoman who had left us returned. I came to the kiosks that day to collect the proceeds and found her hovering guiltily around Nadezhda Petrovna. After I got the money, I went home. The snow-covered city lay in the darkness of the winter evening, colored by the lights of street lamps, advertisements, shop windows, and apartment buildings. The weather was beautiful. "If I were an office worker, I would be happy about this weather and the soft snow falling all the time, but I'm not so happy about all the snow I have to keep shoveling," I thought, squinting at the white flakes floating in front of my face. I clearly understood that hard and monotonous work kills any perception of beauty in a person. You walk mechanically and don't notice the beauty around you. New Year's Eve came in the same mundane way. It happened in a family of three half-strangers. My father and I still did not get along with my mother; she did not try to get closer to us, but only distanced herself, spending more and more time in her room. Her reclusiveness was aided by the television, which my mother watched almost 24 hours a day, never leaving her bed. The TV had been bought in the fall at my father's request, who complained that she would sit in his room for days on end watching "his" TV. My relationship with my father became so strained that we didn't even get each other anything. We exchanged dry congratulations, drank a glass of champagne, picked at the salads my mother had made for old times' sake, and went to our rooms.

In the second half of January, the "Epiphany frost" hit. The temperature dropped to twenty-five degrees below zero, and I realized that I hated winter. It was freezing for ten days and we had a lot of trouble with the "GAZelle" again. It just would not start. Every time after work we took the battery out and carried it home. This was the only way to have a chance to start the car in the morning. The engine would freeze up overnight. Only the warm battery we brought from the apartment would turn the shaft in the cold crankcase oil. We started to go out less often. Our poor saleswomen! I couldn't imagine how they worked in the cold! We told them right away that we could close down and not sell at all. But the hardship forced the saleswomen to work.

Just in time for the frost, our stock melted. We placed another order for early February. But already on Tuesday, January 25, the phone rang.

"Why did you send it so early!?" my father was surprised, listened to the answer and added irritated, "Yes, I understand that you need it to go! But we don't!"

"The car is on the way, isn't it?" I asked him when the conversation was over. We both had breakfast in the kitchen, I had tea and my father had coffee. He crossed his legs and began to twitch one foot, trying to calm his irritation. The prospect of unloading the goods in the freezing cold didn't make me happy either.

Two days had passed, but the driver still hadn't called.

"Broke down somewhere," I said on the morning of January 28, looking at the thermometer outside the window. The weather was changing. The temperature was rising. The thermometer read twenty below zero. "It'll be fifteen by noon," I thought cheerfully, looking up at the crystal clear sky pulling on a blanket of thick snow clouds.

We went to work and forgot about the lost car for a day. The evening news reminded us. A heavy snowfall began in the Rostov region, paralyzing traffic on the M4 highway.

"Their car should be there somewhere now, shouldn't it?" I suggested, glancing at my father, who was intently watching the news on TV. "Maybe that's why the driver hasn't called, because he's stuck there."

"Maybe," my father shrugged.

Throughout the next day, there were news reports about the worsening situation on the highway. "Traffic jam... a blockade many kilometers long... more than one hundred and thirty trucks piled up and their number is growing... the heaviest snowfall."

And the next. "The traffic jam has reached thirteen kilometers... trucks are parked on the side of roadside cafes... several have overturned... traffic is completely paralyzed... EMERCOM is bringing in road vehicles and setting up fast food stations."

On the third day, January 31, Edik called: "The car overturned... Yes, our goods were in it, and then the car had to go to another city for raw materials... We'll probably have to send another car to tow the overturned one back to Krasnodar."

On February 1, the news told the same story. "Difficult weather conditions, heavy snowfall, rain at sub-zero temperatures... traffic has resumed... large congestion of trucks... more than seven thousand people have gone to the EMERCOM fast food stations... overturned trucks are being lifted... no casualties."

On February 2, the tension on the television went down. "The crisis is over... it's snowing all the time... the machines are working around the clock... the capacity of the highways has been restored."

A day later, Aslanbek called himself.

"Here, for you," I brought the phone to my father, who was eating breakfast.

"Good morning, Aslanbek Akhmedovich!" my father enunciated, after hurriedly chewing a piece of food.

The conversation was short. "Luxchem" decided not to take the overturned truck back to Krasnodar, but to bring it to us. But our consent was needed. Technically, we could have refused. The cargo had probably already lost its marketability. And according to the contract we had the right not to accept it. But humanly, we didn't want to refuse. I stood next to my father, listened to the dialog and decided that we had to accept the truck and check the goods. That's what Aslanbek had persuaded my father to do on the phone.

"Well, let them bring the goods to us?" my father said, covering the cell phone with his hand.

"Yes," I sighed. "It can't be helped. Let's see what's inside."

The car arrived on Sunday, February 6. It had warmed up a lot that day, ten degrees below zero after a twenty-five degree frost felt almost like a thaw. When we arrived at the warehouse, we saw a "Volvo" tractor with a semi-trailer container. Edik fell out of the cabin in his sheepskin coat and cap and waved hello. The driver also appeared.

"You took another car for the trailer, didn't you?" I said after a friendly greeting and handshake and a quick look at the truck.

"Yes, we towed the overturned 'MAZ' truck home and brought the trailer to you!" Edik waved his hands again and gave off the smell of beer.

I began to remove the lock from the warehouse gate, and my father questioned Edik about what had happened. The hinges creaked and I opened the gate. My father's penchant for idle chatter was becoming increasingly tiresome, so I shielded myself from it without listening. My mother would sometimes say, "You're working with your father and you're becoming as boring as him!" I began to understand her. According to Edik's story, the driver drove the truck to the side of the road, couldn't handle it, the wheels of the trailer slid down the embankment, and the truck flipped over. Edik babbled, tipsy.

"Now, Anatoly Vasilievich, we'll see, of course, we'll try to leave more goods, so that you have something to sell, and we have less to bring back," he fussed, looking now at my father, now at me with shifty eyes.

I already regretted that we had gotten into all of this. I mentally chastised myself for being too compliant and too kind, knowing that once again we would get nothing but fuss and trouble.

"Edik, let's first see what you've brought us, and then we'll think about it," my father retorted, lighting a cigarette. "We can only take intact, undamaged goods."

"Come on, open it already!" I added, waving at the container.

The driver removed the lock and opened the doors.

"Wow!" I blurted out.

"Yeah..." my father said as he took the cigarette out of his mouth.

"What a hotch-potch," I added.

"The only thing that fell here was what was on top! Roma, what are you talking about?" Edik waved his hands. "Here, underneath, everything is in line, it hasn't moved anywhere! Everything is intact!"

"Edik!" my father interrupted him. "We're going to see for ourselves! What's fallen and what's intact! We have to go through everything, look what a mess it is!"

"All right, Anatoly Vasilievich," he melted, putting his hands in the pockets of his sheepskin coat and shivering with cold. "We'll do as you say."

I looked into the container. The boxes, originally stacked a couple of meters high, were now a mishmash.

"Who's going to take them out of the container?" I smiled and looked at Edik. He climbed in, pressing his knees to the cold frame of the semi-trailer and grunting. The driver followed.

We spent more than four hours going through the jumble of goods, it was long and tedious. A quarter of it had completely lost its appearance: torn packages, crumpled half-empty bottles, cleaning products strewn all over the floor. The container reeked of acetone and lye.

"Roma, it's a good package!" came a shriek as soon as I put one aside.

"Edik, how exactly is it good?" I was surprised, picked up the package where some of the bottles had leaked, sloshing all over. He shouted again that I should check it and find the whole ones. I refused to go through them. Edik fussed, got down on the ground, went over to the pile of crumpled packages and began picking at the one that started the argument. Even my father got indignant. It didn't work – the commercial director kept picking at the bottles and piling them up in the snow.

"Edik!" my father barked just above my ear. "Stop it, for God's sake!"

I was disgusted by the pettiness of the co-owner of "Luxchem".

"Why are you trying to sell me something so blatantly inferior!? Do you take me for a fool or what!?" my father became angry, his jaw clenched, his face sharpened.

"Anatoly Vasilievich, why, why the inferior!?" he made an innocent expression of astonishment. "I'm standing here choosing normal goods for you!"

"Either he's really that stupid or he's that cynical," I was stunned, trying to figure it out.

Edik went to the warehouse, found an empty box, and started putting the bottles he had picked up into it. My father gritted his teeth and almost forcibly snatched the box from his hands.

"Get out of here! Stop screwing around!" my father shouted.

The situation heated up. And then Edik's nature kicked in, his face dissolved into a cunning smile, and there was relief. I smiled, my father hummed and reached for a cigarette.

"I'll have one too," I said.

"And I'll smoke with you," the driver's voice came from the container.

"Anatoly Vasilievich, could you give me a cigarette, too?" Edik grinned.

We all smoked.

My father stared at Edik for a long time, and as if he could not bear it any longer, he hummed: "Well, Edik! You are a one!"

I looked at the driver, he snorted, smiled and turned away. Edik felt uncomfortable, shrugged his shoulders as if something was bothering him between his shoulder blades.

"Anatoly Vasilievich, I'm doing my best for you!"

"Oh, Edik, shut up!" I interrupted and waved him off.

The driver hummed again.

It had been a hard day. We were frozen to the bone. I burned my fingertips with lye. I didn't immediately understand why they suddenly began to sting so sharply, as if many needles were digging into my fingertips and penetrating deeper. I immediately pushed my hands into the snow.

"It stung!" I screamed, wiping the yellow, frothy liquid from my hands with the snow.

We returned home after dark, hungry, cold, and tired. Not more than a third of the goods returned to Krasnodar. I remember thinking at the time that our deed would be noted and would strengthen our relations with "Luxchem". A stupid thought, I know.

Throughout February, we sold goods from the affected batch. We had to make some fuss. Everything was solved thanks to good personal relations with the employees of the wholesale depots. I understood that we were making uncomfortable requests. We created our problem with our own kindness and we had to deal with it ourselves. Surprisingly, everything was sold out.

CHAPTER 16

March started with a big shipment of blue. We received eight hundred packages at once, filling the entire warehouse. Spring came, but not the warmth. The temperature was below zero all month. Because of the cold, the blue sold slowly. Hopes for an early spring were not fulfilled, and I was as black as thunder, like a bear with a sore head. The puddle at the warehouse gate added to my anger; the sun was already burning through the cold air, and melted snow flowed down to the gate during the day and froze at night. The lower edges of the gate would stick to the ice, and my father and I would take a crowbar and hollow it out. And so it was every morning for the second half of March. In April, the temperature rose to ten degrees and stayed above freezing at night. The puddle that had stopped freezing swelled and flowed over the threshold. For a week we waded through the mud in the warehouse until the sun dried the ground completely. The inner tensions of the long winter and the poor sales were gone, and my father and I breathed a sigh of relief, and immediately, on April 13, we argued until the sparks flew. Everything that had been bottled up came out. It didn't solve any of the old problems, but it added new ones and made the rift even worse.

"Still sitting around playing?" my father said as he walked into my room.

Sitting in the shabby armchair by the computer, I caught a note of irritation and frustration in his voice, I tensed up and said: "Playing, yeah, what else am I supposed to do?"

"I wish you'd do something useful instead of playing these stupid games!" my father added, without softening his tone of displeasure. "You sit there like a child, playing all day!"

"What useful thing am I supposed to do!?" I looked away from the monitor and half turned to my father, who was standing by the balcony door, grasping the handle. He was going out on the balcony to smoke as usual, twirling a cigarette nervously in his other hand.

"You'd better think about your work!" said my father, turning the handle, opening the balcony door, and putting the cigarette in his mouth.

"What's there to think about!? Everything seems to be all right, doesn't it?" I supported the tone.

"All right!? Well, if you think that opening and closing two retail stores is all right, then yes, everything is all right!" my father froze in the doorway, took the cigarette out of his mouth and began to crumple it up again.

"What's that got to do with it?" I winced at the unpleasant turn of the dialog.

"We put so much effort and time into it, we ordered the equipment, and now what!? Now it sits in the warehouse collecting dust! Wasted money!"

"As far as I know, we made the decision to open outlets together, or what!?" I threw up my hands. "If you had said you were against it, there would have been no outlets! Is it my fault that they did not work well!? And what does that have to do with me sitting here playing games, I don't get it! Who am I bothering? I'm not saying that you go out on the balcony to smoke again and hang around with a cigarette all the time! Or are you thinking about work there!?"

"Thinking about work, yes!" my father said, coming back into the room and sitting on the edge of the couch.

"And what did you have in mind, tell me, I'm interested!?"

"Don't be smart here, got it!? I am your father, so bite your tongue!"

"Here we go again, when we think about work, we're partners, and you have accusations against me, and when I ask the same thing, you're the father! You're good at that!"

"Yes, I am!" my father gritted his teeth in anger.

"What's the big deal, I don't get it!?" I got angry too. "Is there something you don't like!?"

"I don't like you always being on the Internet and playing games!"

"What do you care what I do in my free time!?"

For a few seconds in the resulting pause, we looked at each other with hostility.

"Or would it be better if I went to a club? Then say it! Winter is over, it's getting warmer, okay, I'll go clubbing. But you're always unhappy when I ask you for money to go clubbing, you always say I'm wasting money! What am I supposed to do, sit at home like you and spend all day on the balcony smoking a cigarette and, God forbid, not spend an extra ruble? Is that it!? I stay at home anyway, I play games on the computer, so what? I don't get it, going to clubs is bad, staying at home is bad, so what's good!?"

My father glared at me, his jaw clenched.

"Why don't you say something? Speak!" I threw up my hands.

"I got nothing to say to you!" my father brushed me off, stood up and took a step toward the balcony.

"As always! If you have nothing to say against me, then there is nothing to talk about..."

My father lingered in the doorway, glaring at me, but restrained himself, stepping out onto the balcony. I turned to the monitor, but the mood for the game was already gone, the adrenaline coursing through my blood, preventing me from relaxing and feeding the resentment boiling inside me. As I absentmindedly clicked my mouse in tension, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that my father had finished his cigarette. I tensed up. I didn't want to continue the argument, but I didn't want to give up my position. On the contrary, with each new conflict, I answered my father harsher and harsher. He sat back down on the couch and snapped. I braced myself for the continuation.

"So?" said my father.

"So what!?" I said, not taking my eyes off the monitor and clicking hard with the mouse.

"How are we going to work now, Director!?" my father said with a grin that I caught in my side eye.

"What does the director have to do with it!?" I turned to him. "We work together, we don't have a director."

"What do you mean, we don't? You're always saying you make everything up, and I'm like this: fetch, serve, bugger off, don't interfere. Something like that!?"

"No, it's not like that. Who told you that? We work together and we make decisions together, that's all. It's simple."

"But you say you learned and figured it all out on your own," my father was clearly provoking.

"What exactly? All right, let's talk about it, I don't mind. You, on the other hand, always tell me that you taught me everything. What did you teach me? How to fill out a

waybill and how to calculate taxes!? I don't deny it, you did! Go on, what else did you teach me!?"

My father was silent and looked at me.

"Here's the computer!" I pointed to the monitor. "Did you teach me how to use it? No. I learned how to use it on my own. You don't even know how to use it!"

"How am I supposed to work on it if you're on it 24 hours a day?"

"Did you ever want to learn how to use a computer?" I was surprised.

"Of course I did! I told you it would be good for me to learn the computer and this accounting program of yours!"

"What a statement! I don't remember you saying that!"

"You don't remember a lot of things!" my father went on the offensive. "I have noticed that your memory is very selective!"

"Is that so!?"

"Yes, that's so. What did you expect? You thought I'd jump around you!?"

"Why would you jump around me!?" I was surprised by the strange logic. "Okay, you want to learn the computer, and I'm such a usurper, sitting here and not letting you! Please! You can sit down right now and learn it, I will help you as much as I can, I will explain it to you!"

"Don't give me that shit!"

"What shit!? I suggest you start learning the computer like you asked."

"This shit! You'll be sitting in that chair again tomorrow and you won't get kicked out!"

"What kind of nonsense is that!?" still surprised, I began to realize that my father was simply changing the subject. "I don't understand you! Do you want to learn the computer, or are you looking for reasons not to? Like I won't let you? Here! I'm offering! Learn!"

There was a rustling behind me and I turned to see my mother standing in the doorway. Angry, I reached out and pushed the door shut. My mother barely had time to react before the door slammed shut in front of her surprised face. My mother's habit of eavesdropping all the time drove me mad. Her footsteps were hastily muffled in the hallway.

"I see you've settled in well! Your father is driving, carrying boxes, and now he's going to do the accounting! Splendid! And Roma will only get his half and do nothing!" my father wiggled out awkwardly.

I realized that he didn't want to learn anything. But why blame me?

"Why, do nothing!? Let's swap places! I'll drive, and you keep the books, call the customers, schedule the work, and run with the waybills. Deal!?"

"You can't drive!"

"Why can't I drive!? I don't have much experience, I've only driven our 'second'. But if I have to, I'll learn to drive normally."

"Come ooon!" my father brushed me off. "You, drive! I know you!"

"What's wrong with that?" I didn't catch the gist of the sentence. My father would change the subject of his own complaint as soon as the solution was in sight.

"You're going to hit something! No, no!" he brushed me off firmly, crossing his legs and leaning back on the sofa.

"So you're going to keep driving yourself?"

"Looks like it!" my father slapped his thighs as he prepared to get up and added. "All right, there's no point in talking to you!"

"Then why did you come here like a wheeler-dealer and start dividing!?" I added fuel to the fire.

"You better watch your language, you!" my father clenched his teeth, his face sharpened, his eyes narrowed and glittered with pure rage. "Hold your tongue, you brat!"

"Oh! I'm a brat now! I see," I turned away from the glare and stared at the monitor, clicking my mouse aimlessly, shaking my head and drawing disappointing conclusions to myself. "Then we have nothing more to talk about."

"So sit there and play your games like a little fool!" my father slurred at my back as he left the room. The door slammed again.

"I will," I muttered calmly, but my insides were boiling.

"What's wrong!? Why is he deliberately and obviously getting into a fight!? Why is he pushing!? And this name-calling, not for the first time! What is he trying to achieve?"

A jumble of thoughts whirled around in my head like a centrifuge.

"Old bastard," I muttered, picked up the phone and called Vovka.

For the next two days, our only communication was about work. My father drove and smoked as we rode along the beaten paths, while I turned away and stared sourly out the window. At the end of Friday, we had another fight. A big one again!

Everything went on as usual. We arrived at "Peresvet" at half past six, the last stop, unloading and then home. I jumped out of the car, registered the waybill at the office, took it to the warehouse, and came downstairs. My father was already sitting on the bench with his legs crossed, smoking. The "GAZelle" was parked near the ramp. I jumped in the back and unloaded the goods in a few minutes. Galya came out of the warehouse, sat down on the bench next to my father, lit a cigarette and started to check the waybill.

"It's correct," she said, signing the waybill and handing it to me. "Are you done?"

"Yes! We are!" my father slapped his thighs briskly, got up from the bench and smiled. "Now go home and rest! The work week is over!"

"Lucky people!" said Galya, taking a drag on her cigarette. "And we still have two days..."

"Listen, Galya, have they started delivering the dichlorvos for you yet?" I said, remembering the business.

"Yes, they already showed up. But only 'Arbalest' delivered theirs, there are no more."

"That's good," I muttered, bit my lip, looked at my father and added, "All right! I'll just check the window and then we'll go, wait for me here, okay?"

"If the director says so, it will be so!" my father said with dramatic diligence, looking at the storekeeper. "Me and Galya will sit here and talk about life..."

"Who is that?" she smiled, astonished. "Is he the director!?"

"Yeaah!" my father kicked his leg and looked at me with a mocking look. "My director is very strict, you know! Oooh!"

Galya laughed out loud: "Romka, are you the strict director!?"

"Aah!" I brushed her off. "He will tell you things, listen more! Okay, I'll be right back..."

On my way to the depot's sales floor, I pondered the strangely frequent use of the word "director" in my father's speech to me. While seemingly innocuous, it had a double meaning, the mocking, teasing, and smirking way in which it was uttered. The storefronts that I had studied to the smallest detail over the years, I looked through in a minute. Nothing new. "We have to go to 'Sasha' and get some dichlorvos, otherwise someone will put them in here before us!" thoughts of work were already running through my head. I memorized the prices and went back.

"That's it!? Let's go!?" exclaimed my father, who was still sitting on the bench with Galya.

"Yes, that's it, let's go!" I hurried to the car. "Bye, Galya!"

"Home!?" my father said happily in the cabin as I sat down next to him.

"Yes, home," I said distantly, thinking about business.

"What's wrong now?" the worried look returned to my father's face.

"Nothing's wrong, let's go," I said in the same tone, hurriedly.

"There's no pleasing you," my father said petulantly, with a squeamish look on his face.

The car started and drove slowly away from the depot.

"There's no need to please me!" I escalated. I was a little too upset for my sense of justice, so I stuck my fingers in the fire to sort things out, and we both lit up like matches.

"Then what do you want!?" my father's tone rose, his face hardening.

The car passed the gate and stopped in front of the exit onto the road. I glanced to both sides of the wide street; it was almost empty on a Friday night.

"I don't want anything! I want you to either stop calling me director, or stop telling me at home that I don't do anything, and that you invented the whole business and brought me out into the world, as you put it!"

"How sensitive you are!"

"Yes, I am! And you sit there and tell Galya that there's a director, like, let him run around, and you're just a humble driver, like, you don't decide anything, so you sit quietly on the bench!"

There was a gap in the traffic. My father shifted gears and we pulled out to the left.

"Well, that's good for you! You're in charge here, you think so too!"

"I don't think so and I never have, don't lie!!! Why are you lying here!?"

"What the fuck do you want from me!?!?" my father shouted, jabbing at the transmission.

"I want you to think too and offer some solutions, not just stupidly chewing mine!!! Suggest, come on, how do we develop our business!?!? In what direction?!? Because you have a smart attitude! When I ask you to suggest something new, you don't give a damn! And when I suggest something, you go along with it, and then if it doesn't work out, it's all my fault! Why did I suggest it? What a waste of money! Then suggest it! Suggest it if you're so smart! Why don't you say something!?!? Everybody's a big critic! You always said it was your time. Then do it if it's your time. Why are you holding on to the steering wheel?"

My father gnashed his teeth and looked between me and the road.

"For fuck's sake!!! I am so fucking sick of you!!!" he said through gritted teeth, turned red, pulled to the side of the road, turned off the engine and jumped out of the car. "Asshole!!! Motherfucker!!!"

My father slammed the door with all his might and walked away along the side of the road, shaking, lighting a cigarette and swearing. Confused, I was left in the ringing silence. Shame came over me. I blushed and my face burned with heat.

"What did I say?" I mumbled, looking at my father and around me, as if everyone passing by had seen and heard our scolding, and now they walked on, judging me and shaking their heads in disappointment. "Yeah..."

I sat there for ten minutes. I was consumed by remorse from all sides, devouring the faint sprouts of inner objection that what I had told my father was essentially true and that I had given him nothing new, perhaps too straightforward, but all the better, and better to say what one thinks at once than to brood over an insult for years and come to such a quarrel.

"Yeah," I repeated, exhaling heavily and somewhat relieved by the task at hand; I had to get home. I moved to the left seat and started the "GAZelle". I drove quite well on the half-empty streets. I parked the car in the yard and walked home.

"Where's your father?" my mother asked, surprised to see me alone on the doorstep.

"He probably hasn't arrived yet," I said in a casual tone. "He'll be here soon."

I had already showered, eaten, and was sitting on the balcony smoking when the front door slammed. I got nervous. I didn't want to continue the fight, and I knew that we had both just passed another point in the chain of destruction. Destruction of what? The father-son relationship? Or the relationship between business partners? Or all of the above? I didn't want to look into that future. Did I want to divide the business? No, of course not! I'm not an idiot! We're a family, what do we have to divide? I always couldn't understand close relatives fighting among themselves and creating all kinds of divisions. So stupid! The bad thing was that our mutual dislike was exposed. And my father and I couldn't hide it anymore.

"You know what, buddy?" my father's voice came from behind me, and his heavy hand rested roughly on my shoulder. I froze, and inside I shrank into a lump, and the wild thought of a possible fight flashed through my head. Outwardly, I continued to smoke calmly, and when the hand was no longer on my shoulder, I turned cautiously. My father looked at me sternly and said:

"You and I probably won't work well together!"

It took my breath away. The darkest images flashed through my mind: the division of the business, the division of the money, and the destruction of everything that had been painstakingly pieced together over the years. I gathered all my composure in my voice and, thinking carefully about the phrasing, said:

"Well, if we don't, we don't, whatever you say..."

My father hesitated. On the one hand, I made it clear that I had no intention of giving in. On the other hand, I put all the responsibility for the next steps on my father. My father was confused and melted. It worked. I was counting on it.

"Don't let me hear you talk like that again!" he said after a pause, drumming his index finger hard and unpleasantly on my shoulder. "I won't let you talk to me like that! I am your father! Do you hear me!?"

"I do," I muttered, and immediately felt myself calming down. My father stomped behind me for a few seconds and left, and I continued to smoke, thinking about calling Vovka. The weather was great, spring was in full swing, crushing the remnants of winter everywhere. I closed my eyes and put my head on the window sill. The sun immediately began to warm my face generously. I couldn't believe that winter was over. The last few months had been more stressful than any previous winter. Three months of constant and emergency snow shoveling, and the raw March with ice chiseling under the warehouse gates – brrr, horrible. I instinctively shivered with my whole body and even felt the winter chill for a second, as if I were freezing. "I hate winter!" I mentally barked, and then the cell phone rang behind me in the room.

At nine o'clock in the evening, Vovka and I were walking through the center of town. My stomach began to hurt, so I poured an alcoholic cocktail laced with nicotine into it. My stomach became quiet. Inner tension pushed the words out, I had to speak. And I began to whine almost continuously, pouring out all the accumulated grievances on my friend's head. Vovka listened, nodded, objected, sometimes scratched his head in confusion and mumbled incomprehensibly.

"Yeah, Anatoly Vasilievich is very serious. It must be hard for you to work with him."

I told him that it was very hard, that my father was boring and too straightforward, and that I understood my mother: living with a man whose strongest positive emotion was a strained smile was a painful experience. When we got to the club, I continued to pour my heart out to Vovka, who nodded his head and licked all the girls who passed by with his eyes.

"Well, you see!" Vovka said. "He wants to teach you something, wants you not to violate his authority, and you're so, so naughty, he can't handle you!"

We stood with our "screwdrivers" in the archway of the grotto. The alcohol dampened my agitation. I was grateful to Vovka; he had listened to me whine all evening, pretending to be interested. I, on the other hand, felt as if I was stuck. I tried to find logic and justice in my father's words and actions.

"They said we'd work till the end of April, and that's it!" Nadezhda Petrovna's shiftwoman looked at me, clapping her bulging eyes. It was 7:10 p.m., Monday, April 18.

"Well," I sighed, taking the money, "if that's what they said, then we'll work till the end of April..."

"And what will we do then? What will it be!? We won't work in May!?" I was inundated with questions from the saleswoman.

After listening to the woman's lamentations, I withdrew the proceeds from the second kiosk, and in half an hour I was at home, where I broke the news to my father, who was dozing on the couch. The management of the market had decided to start building in the place of the rows of stalls and to move the kiosks and pavilions. The new place didn't seem as lively. I said that the income of the kiosks there would probably be lower, which meant that their profitability would be the same or even lower than that of the wholesale.

We were already sitting on the balcony, basking in the evening sun. After listening to me, my father was silent for half a minute, puffed on his cigarette and finally spoke: "And what do you suggest?"

"I don't know, I'm not suggesting anything yet, let's see what the market owners decide about the kiosks. But if our retail stops, I won't be upset."

On the one hand, the loss of an established, profitable place was devastating. On the other hand, all this time we lived and worked as if we were tied to the kiosks. Come rain or shine, we would pick up orders and take them to market. The stability we needed at first began to weigh us down, and the kiosks became shackles. They began to hinder movement and development. Besides, we were actually too late with retail. The kiosks were already an anachronism of the 90s. By the time we bought them, retail had already moved on in terms of format and organization. The big stores were overtaking the small ones. We couldn't handle the new format. I understood that once the kiosks stopped making money, we would just have to let them go. I wasn't hoping to sell them. Who in their right mind would want halves of separate containers? The stalemate with the kiosks so overwhelmed my brain that after a while I gave up on the problem, leaving it to life itself to solve.

"If we close the kiosks, we free up about a hundred and twenty thousand. And there's also retail inventory in the warehouse. That's about two hundred. That's three hundred free. We're stuck with the small stuff. We need a big supplier. Three hundred thousand, even at ten percent, is thirty, more than retail and the same money. Yes, we have to get rid of retail and boost wholesale. Otherwise, neither here nor there." So I thought the next morning as I lay half asleep in bed. We needed a radical step forward, a breakthrough. I tried to find the right solution, the way out, but my intuitive horizon was empty.

"Oh shit, dichlorvos!" I yelled, and the sleep vanished in a flash. I grabbed my cell phone and dialed 'Sasha' number. "Hello, Sergey! Hi, Seryozha!"

The voice of the manager of "Sasha" sounded pleasantly soft but slightly alarming in my ear.

"We have dichlorvos, yes, but we are closing up," he said in a sad tone. "Out of the blue, Davidych decided to close 'Sasha'. Now I'll call the suppliers and tell them to come and pick up the goods and pay. It's good that you called. You'll have to come and pick up your stuff, too. When can you come?"

"Well..." I paused. The news was startling. It sounded unexpected and strange. I saw no reason to close. Normal business, working steadily. Although, who knows?

"I can do it next week," I said. "Are you working as usual?"

"Yes, till the end of the month as usual."

"Well, then next week, Thursday or Friday, we'll come and settle up."

"Okay, I'll wait."

"How about Saturday?"

"You can come on Saturday too, but only until three o'clock, no later."

"Great, then maybe even on Saturday. Listen, one more thing, I've got your 'Stove Cleaner' stuck, so I'll put it through again and bring it back to you, okay?"

"All right, bring it back, hee-hee-hee!" Sergey suddenly cheered up and laughed into the phone.

"Well, see you next week!"

"Bye."

I got up and took a shower. A second, indirect problem was added to the kiosks.

"Sasha' is closing! We have a problem with dichlorvos!" I broke the news to my father as soon as I got out of the shower and into the kitchen.

He, who had been chewing in a dignified manner, stopped working his jaws and froze, his eyes batting.

"By the end of the month we have to pick up our goods, see what we have of their garbage, put it through again and bring the balance up!" I added.

"Yes," my father nodded, taking a sip first. "We have to, of course."

"We need to look for dichlorvos!" I sat down at the table in front of him. "Summer is ahead of us!"

"Yes," my father nodded again. "We need to look for dichlorvos."

"All right," I brushed off the growing irritation, "We'll figure something out."

The last two weeks of April went by in the market with a sense of foreboding. Rumors varied: all the kiosks would be closed; some would be closed; all would be closed, but some would be moved to the other side of the market. The speculation made my head spin. Sellers and owners of kiosks and pavilions were nervous. Some even stopped delivering their goods. Others had decided to sell until the last moment, just like us. By Friday night, everything was settled.

"Roma, hi, it's Nadezhda Petrovna!" the old woman's voice came into my cell phone as we were loading up at the warehouse. "Now I was told that after lunch, in the evening, there will be a crane here, and the kiosks will be moved to the other side of the market! Well, those who want to! Are we going to move the kiosks? What should we do!?"

The old woman's voice was shaking. We decided that we would collect the goods from the kiosks in the "GAZelle" and then we would see. At three o'clock we arrived at the market, which already resembled a beehive.

Half of the neighboring row of pavilions was gone – the crane had moved them to another part of the market in the morning. Nadezhda Petrovna and Polina were busy packing up the goods. The old woman did it skillfully and quickly. Polina clumsily shoved the goods into boxes.

"Anatoly Vasilievich, what about our kiosks? Are they going to move them there or what!?" Nadezhda Petrovna almost shouted when she saw us.

"We don't know yet," my father froze, scratching his little finger at the back of his head in confusion. "We should find out what's going on."

"And what do they say, Nadezhda Petrovna?" I said.

The old woman said again what she had said during the call.

"We should probably go to the administration and find out everything, because all these rumors are confusing me. All right!" I turned to my father. "I'll carry the boxes to the car and you go to the administration and find out what's going on?"

"Yes, I think we should go," my father said and started scratching behind the collar of his shirt.

I picked up the biggest box and carried it to the car, almost catching my father on the way.

"Well, get out of the way a little," I muttered, seeing my father still at a loss, and quickly carried the box to the 'GAZelle' and went back for the next one.

My father hesitated and took the box from Polina's hands. I was immediately angry with him, because I understood the meaning of the move. Our conflicts with the claim to leadership were fresh, and now, in a simple situation, he did not take over, but stayed in the background and took the box.

"What did you take it for!?" I couldn't bear it. "Come on, go! Find out what's there! I can carry the boxes myself, there aren't many of them here!"

"Really?" my father hesitated and put the box back.

"Really! Go!" I added with pressure.

The saleswomen, as if they could read in my eyes an internal decision about the kiosks, began to collect the goods, but without any hope of further work.

"Aren't you going to sell the kiosks?" the old lady asked suddenly.

"Sell!?" I stiffened with a box in my hand.

"There were buyers here this morning," Polina grumbled. "Or rather, one buyer, a woman, asked if anyone would sell the kiosk here. Well, we don't know if you're selling or not. She said she would come back in the evening."

"Oh! Wow!" I was surprised, a thought occurred to me, and I looked at our neighbor who was emptying his kiosk. He and I did not get along very well, but it was worth a try. I turned around – my father was waddling away toward the market building. As I approached the neighbor, I immediately offered to exchange his half for Polina's kiosk, so that we would have a single container. He hesitated. I was ready for his refusal, I knew for sure that if I didn't get anything from the kiosks, I would just leave them behind. Perhaps the neighbor sensed my mood, because instead of the usual bickering, he said a simple "Okay, let's do it."

When I was done with the boxes, I settled up with the saleswomen.

"Well, Roma, that's it, isn't it?" the old lady said with a bit of bitterness in her voice, separating each word with a pause and hiding the money in the pocket of her light jacket.

"Nadezhda Petrovna!" I began, sighing from time to time, worried. "I don't know what will happen next, honestly! Maybe we'll move our big kiosk to the other side and keep selling. Although I don't really feel like it anymore, I have to admit. Maybe we'll sell it if there are willing buyers..." I looked around, my father walking back, clinging to the flying and lying debris with his feet now and then. The market was like part of a city, its people fleeing in a hurry from the advancing enemy, taking with them what they could carry. Everyone was scurrying about. A woman rushed between the thinning rows of stalls.

"That woman over there," Polina muttered. "The one who asked about the kiosks."

I took the keys from the saleswoman, glanced in the direction of the approaching woman and my father, thanked Polina for her work, said goodbye, and she staggered away.

"Is everything loaded?" my father came up and said, feigning inappropriate complacency.

"Are you selling the kiosk?" came from behind me.

Everyone turned around. The rushing woman was standing nearby.

"What can I tell you, we can sell it if you give a good price!" my father said in the same playful mood that I didn't understand. I began to get angry. Obviously the buyer came, why play games with her? Negotiate and sell!

"How much do you want!?" the brisk woman twitched her shoulder and adjusted the straps of the bag.

My father hesitated. Nadezhda Petrovna and I looked at him questioningly.

"And what kiosk do you need?" my father threw up his hands. "A whole or a half?"

"Why would I need a half?" the woman stared at him. "A whole, of course! And what is yours!?"

"We don't have a whole..." my father began.

"We have a whole one!" I shouted, slamming my hand on the kiosk. "This one is ours!"

My father blinked in confusion.

"This is yours!?" the woman looked at the kiosk and immediately found herself next to me. "Great! It's perfect! How much do you want for it!?"

The woman looked at me, then at my father.

"He's in charge here!" I suddenly cheered at his confusion. "All questions to him."

"So how much do you want for the kiosk!?" the woman pressed my father.

"Well..." he scratched a finger at the back of his head, put his other hand to his side, and put his leg forward, assuming his favorite pose that promised a long and thorough conversation. "Something to think about. The two halves together would be worth seventy thousand."

"What!?" the woman wailed.

My father put his leg back.

"Seventy thousand," he repeated. "That's how much we paid for the two halves. Thirty thousand for one, forty thousand for the other."

"No, I can only give thirty, that's all I can give!" she snapped.

"Well," said my father. "Ours is worth seventy, no less."

"All right!" said the woman. "I'll go to the other kiosks and ask around. When you decide, find me."

"Why do you need a kiosk? Where are you going to put it? Are you going to take it somewhere else?" I asked.

"No, I want to move it to the other side, I agreed with the administration, one place is left for me, the crane will arrive at 7 p.m.," the woman said.

I looked at my watch – 5:08 pm.

"Okay, we'll find you, if anything, we'll think about it," I said, and the woman ran away.

"Anatoly Vasilievich, well, I should probably go?" said Nadezhda Petrovna.

A minute of awkward farewells and parting words, and the old lady, with the bag in her hand, walked in the opposite direction of Polina.

"What did they say at the office, at the market administration?" I looked at my father.

"I didn't see anyone there, I walked around, looked around, people were making a fuss, like that woman, running around. And no one can say anything properly," he said with a wave of his hand.

"People like this woman have already found out everything and secured a place on the other side of the market, and you have been walking there for half an hour and still haven't found out anything, we have a kiosk but no place," I thought irritated and immediately stopped myself with another thought, "It can't be helped. Everyone has the character they have. And everyone has to live with it. That's how we put up with each other."

"I see," I said and went to the 'GAZelle' and started to close the back to occupy myself.

"Maybe you could lower the price to thirty!?" the woman appeared as soon as I had finished. "The crane is coming in an hour, I would buy the kiosk and move it to a new place!"

I looked around, my father wasn't there. In a second I saw the future of the kiosk: it was in its new place, Nadezhda Petrovna was behind the counter, there were few customers, the turnover was low, money was invested in goods, my father and I were arguing, a for-sale sign was hung on the kiosk, but no buyers, and so on for a few years. I shuddered. No, thank you.

"Yes! I'll give it to you for thirty!" I said.

"Really!?" the woman almost screamed. "Oh!!! That's it, I'll take it!!! Oh! It's just that I have money at home, but I live here, nearby, I need ten minutes, I'll be back soon, okay!?"

"Go ahead, I'll wait for you here," I said with feigned indifference, and as well as if I'd been dealing with rusty kiosks all my life. "Just don't be too long."

The last words had a stronger effect. With a cry of "I'll be right back!" the woman ran off into the blinding sunset. I beamed with premature joy. "Why would he want seventy thousand for this shitty kiosk if it's not worth that much?" I thought of my father's innate inability to trade. "We've already recouped our investment and made a profit anyway. Sell it and forget it! Thirty thousand is a good price."

My father seemed to have vanished into thin air.

The woman came running in, handed me the money, and we scribbled a contract on a piece of notebook paper. The woman ran off into the sunset out of sheer happiness. As soon as I put the money in the pocket of my jeans, I let myself go – I smiled happily – weight off my shoulders!

"What are you so happy about?" my father came over.

"I sold the kiosk," I smiled to myself.

"Who bought it, that woman!?" my father looked surprised.

"Yeap!" I squeezed one eye shut.

"For how much?"

"Thirty."

"Right," my father hesitated. "Why so cheap?"

I pulled out a wad of money and shoved it into my father's hand: "Here! Don't be greedy! We wouldn't have gotten this either! This rusty can is worth nothing; I wouldn't give a ruble for it!"

My father stared at me as if I had committed an unforgivable act of willfulness by making my own decision.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I grinned.

"No reason," my father's sharp face flashed with displeasure. "Fast one!"

"Well, what's the point of stalling? There was a buyer, I sold. That's all!"

"And the goods for retail, where are we supposed to put them now?"

"We're going to sell them! What do you mean, where!? We'll distribute them to the customers, and they'll be sold in a couple of months or less. And we'll free up the money and put it into sales turnover."

"What turnover?"

"Any! It's the start of the dichlorvos season! That's where we put the money! And dichlorvos is a monetary commodity, it needs money! And we'll have it now."

"Oh, you've already made up your mind, haven't you!?"

"Listen, what's your problem!? Do you want to spend the rest of your life carrying boxes to these kiosks? I don't. I don't want to do retail anymore. I'm sick of it."

My father, glaring at me, paused, muttered, "sure," and lit a cigarette.

I looked at the phone screen – 7:32 p.m.

"Let's go home, there's nothing to do here. We'll unload the return from the 'GAzelle' tomorrow, we'll go to 'Sasha' anyway..." I said and went to the car, my father followed me.

At home, as usual – shower, dinner, computer. I sank into my armchair and clicked the mouse. "Gotta call Vovka," it flashed in my head. I grabbed the phone. And it rang.

"Ramseeee!!!!" my cell screamed. "Ramseees!!! Fuck!! Whassuuup, maaan!!!"

"Fuck, Vova! Your yelling is making my ear fall off! Hiya, you blockhead!"

"Fuck, sorry, Ramses! Yooo, Ramses... I mean, are we going to the 'Skies' tonight, or what?!"

"But of course, what kind of question is that, Vladimir? Ten o'clock at the hotel, as usual."

"Deeal! Greet! All riiight! Seee yaa!"

I stared at my desk, wondering what else had been left undone. In front of me were two notebook pages, scribbled on both sides by the saleswomen. Our retail was already gone, the business could wait.

"Fuck it all!" I blurted out loud, waved it off, and jumped out of my armchair.