

RADIO – A NOVEL
by Vergil Nemchev

Chapters 13 - 19

13. AT DJIBOUTI'S

Dizzy held the elevator door open with a shoulder.

“Destination?”

“Dianabad area. Just follow me in your car, OK?”

It was a nice cool afternoon. Kosyo and Mimmy crossed the street while Dizzy unlocked his Lada, let Vicky in and made a U-turn, cutting in right after Kosyo's car.

“No music, sorry. Fucking burglars. How come no one ever touches Kosyo's car and this poor bastard has been broken into three times already?”

“Stop wining. Kosyo's car at least has an alarm.”

“What would you know about it? You're living with your parents, you don't have to pay your rent, your utilities. Anything you earn is just pure surplus for you.”

“One, I'm not living at my parents', I'm renting this apartment with Dimmo. Two, I'm paying the rent and all the bills. Three, I still have enough left. How about heating, does your car have heating?”

“Why yes. But it has to warm up a bit first. Just enjoy the ride.”

The two cars made a right at the Universiada Sports Hall and sank into the underpass, crossing the boulevard, then moved a few blocks into the district and stopped outside an L-shaped concrete apartment house surrounded by boxshrub. The four climbed up the stairs a couple of floors and Kosyo pressed the buzzer at a steel door. The lock clicked and in the door frame appeared Djibouti, a hospitable smile slapped across his face.

“Good day. Welcome.”

He'd checked them through the spying glass. The four started shaking hands with him, which confused him, the old man fumbled about a bit, then led them into the living room. It was small, with a few shelves, mostly empty, mounted on the walls. A solid carved tea table squatted in the center of the room, surrounded by a couple of armchairs against the short sides

of the table and a long sofa under the shelves across the room, all upholstered in pinkish damask. The floor was covered with white tiles.

Kosyo made himself comfortable in one of the armchairs while Vicky, Mimmy and Dizzy were seated on the sofa. The host's vacant chair stood against a background of elaborately pleated curtains. The furnishing was complete with a porcelain elephant figurine standing on a gypsum column and a round wall clock with a painted deer right above it.

"Tea?"

The four looked questioningly at each other, then nodded.

"It's green tea. Very strong."

"Okay, sir. Thanks."

Kosyo always called him sir.

"Come. I want to show you my new kitchen. Last week I had it..."

The old man snapped fingers, searching in his mind for the right word and Dizzy came to the aid: "Refurbished? Renovated?"

"Yes, rénover."

They stood up and started for the kitchen. Kosyo shrugged:

"I've seen it before."

It was a tidy, ordinary kitchen-dining-room with a bar coated in wood planks and covered with heat-resistant foil, as the host rather proudly noted. He opened a cupboard, took out a tea set and arranged it on a round tray. Mimmy tried to help but the old man stubbornly refused. Then he took the tea jar and measured a few spoonfuls into the kettle. The guests returned to the living room and waited for the refreshment. Dizzy fumbled a bit and broke the silence.

"If he's got a problem paying in cash, I guess he might as well pay up in hash?"

Mimmy fished her cigarettes out of her handbag.

"Very funny. Ha-ha-ha."

The door let in a tray of cups and a kettle, which the old man carefully put onto the table and said:

"I have some Lebanese sweets. You know in Lebanon they are special with desert."

And again he was gone into the kitchen without waiting for a reply to be soon back with a couple of sweet rolls stuffed with sliced pistachio, which he served to the ladies: “Try it please, it is very good.” He then repeated the routine with the gentlemen and finally sat gingerly in his armchair. The old man began to fill the cups. The thin spurt was letting off steam in the slant sunlight that was coming through the curtains. Kosyo leaned back in his chair, crossed legs and winked at Djibouti:

“So you take your small coffee with two spoonfuls of sugar but you have your large tea without sugar? Why is that, sir?”

“Yes. Very clever.”

The old man obviously considered his vague reply quite sufficient. He lit a Rothmans, let out a cloud of smoke in front of his face and inhaled some of it back. Mimmy too lit one. The vapor from the tea and the tobacco smoke mingled in the slant sunlight and the room reminded of a laboratory flask full of unsettled salts. Some time passed where no one hardly moved except for the occasional sip of tea. Mimmy crushed her cigarette, Djibouti lit a new one. They were here to talk about money but couldn't bring themselves to broach the subject and break this unexpected idyllic spell. Very soon, Dizzy thought, they would have to abandon this quaint coziness to resume their uneasy affairs. A bit of lull, in which they did not need to remember even their own names, a world of no mission at all. It was as if the old Arab had actually produced a lump of sticky aromatic resin and had crushed it to dissolve in the tea. The ticking of the clock on the wall reminded Dizzy of the room, in which his granddad and grandma used to spend most of their time in the last years of their lives. There was this big red alarm clock behind the cupboard glass that used to make the same bright and pressing sound. He was not allowed to touch it, it was only his grandpa, who had the privilege to take it from behind the glass, wind it up carefully and put it right by the TV time, while Dizzy sat on a small chair, all engrossed in a slow world, smelling of old age, rotting apples and cheap soap.

Vicky reached out and grabbed the plastic bag lying by the sofa.

“Oh, we forgot this.”

“That's right. We forgot your present, sir.”

Djibouti glanced at them over his glasses, frowned with embarrassment and pushed the glasses up his nose, which magnified his irises double. While Vicky was removing the plastic cover from the box of bonbons, Kosyo placed the bottle of Preslav brandy onto the table. The old man spread out his hands.

“Thank you. I will bring some glasses for you.” Then added apologetically: “But I don’t drink.”

But Kosyo had gotten into his stride.

“Just a drop. To say cheers. For good luck.”

The last argument had some effect and Djibouti nodded resignedly. Mimmy followed him into the kitchen and a minute later the two brought five glasses. Kosyo poured a finger in each and raised his:

“Cheers. Here’s to your health, sir!”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Cheers.”

The old man hardly touched his drink and poured himself some tea. Then took a bonbon and unwrapped it.

“Be careful, it has a...” Mimmy missed the word and turned for help from Dizzy. “There is a...”

Dizzy pointed his finger at Djibouti’s bonbon.

“There is a bomb inside!”

The old Arab raised his eyebrows in dismay and took the bonbon away from his face.

“A bomb?”

While the others were laughing, Mimmy took a bonbon from the box, unwrapped it, bit off half of it and sucked the filling, then tore off half of the sour cherry that was inside the bonbon and showed to the old man the so formed section with the yellow pit right at the center.

“Oh” Djibouti was nodding, moving his eye from the one bonbon to the other. “I know, I know.” And he smiled at Mimmy. “And you are very kind. And very clever, too. And he” Djibouti nodded his chin toward Dizzy, “he always likes to make a joke.”

Kosyo cleared his throat, sipped at his brandy and rested his hands on the arms of the chair.

“Now maybe we can talk some business.”

The old man raised his cup to his lips, holding the saucer underneath it and cast a look over the edge of the cup.

“Yes.”

Kosyo clasped his hands on his stomach and continued:

“The deal is good. Everybody’s been doing fine. However there have been some complaints about missing money.”

Djibouti responded with delight:

“Yes. I want to tell you how well it worked on the Black Jack the other night. I stole some of the cards before the shuffle and went into the toilet. I arranged the stolen cards there and put them back before the game. I think the young gentleman” he nodded at Dizzy, “understood. I had never done this trick in my life and oh, how happy I was.”

The rest nodded approvingly, but Kosyo coughed and took the bull by the horns:

“According to our calculations about 6 thousand is outstanding.”

“Is what?”

“Is missing.”

The Arab raised his eyebrows so high that his spectacles slid halfway down his nose. He was looking rather perplexed and offended. He’d repeatedly used this look to good effect on croupiers, bosses and customers alike.

“Six thousand?”

“Well, we do our calculations. You know how much you take, how much you cash in, how much you spend at the tables.”

The old man shook his head. The perplexed expression gave way to some tired and sad grimace. He finished his tea, carefully placed his empty cup and saucer on the table and simply gazed ahead. Mimmy lit another cigarette, Dizzy was looking at the ceiling. Vicky spoke.

“Alright, it’s no use just sitting silent like this. Let’s see what we can do about it.” She turned to Djibouti. “What do you think, sir?”

The old man looked at her for a second and the dark features of his face seemed to soften a bit. He reached for his Rothmans box, which turned out to be empty, so he took a

new one from the carton he kept under the table, slowly unpacked it, lit one and let out a thick ball of smoke in front of his face.

“Dear children,” he began to talk rather quietly. “I don’t have six thousand. I lose big on the tables. I have to play big so no one is suspicious. We must be very careful. I think better play big, lose big and no one gets suspicious. From last time I have to give you 2 thousand.” Here he paused for a second to check the effect of his words. Dizzy raised an ironic brow, the rest were sitting still. “I will give you that money next time. Now I only have some to play tonight. We are a very good team and I think we must not.... compromise the deal. I need you and you need me. Now I have no cash because I owe money to someone. Everything I get, I give to them.”

The old man then shut it and just stared at the wall. He was obviously finished and was now waiting. Vicky sipped at her brandy. Dizzy whistled the melody through his teeth and quietly sang: “Soy un perdedor. I’m a loser baby, so why don’t you kill me...” Once again Djibouti adjusted the spectacles on his hooked fleshy nose and assumed his perplexed expression. Kosyo shrugged:

“OK, so that will be that for now. Two grand is still two grand. The more important thing is for our arrangement to continue. I think it’s got a bit dark in here. Shall we turn the light on?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Djibouti hit the switch and an orange lampion filled the room with mild light. “Do you want some coffee?”

Everybody wanted coffee so once again they went through the routine of hospitality chores. Vicky helped the host with the table and ten minutes later the two brought the tray with a coffee set, a sugar bowl and a clean ashtray.

“Who wants some more brandy? Dinko?” Kosyo looked the bottle approvingly and filled his glass a finger. “C’mon, the boss tells you it’s OK.”

Dizzy shook his head, stirring his coffee. Kosyo looked at the clock on the wall. The handles hung beneath the deer showing 20 to seven.

“Well I guess we’re all on the graveyard shift tonight, eh?” He winked at Djibouti: “Sir, I was saying we’re all at work tonight.”

The Arab nodded quite seriously:

“Yes, we are all at work. Very clever.”

The good mood was back. This was a sort of anxious gaiety, as they were due to reconvene a couple of hours later but at other tables and with other faces. A quarter of an hour later, seeing them out, standing in the open door, the host was silent, just a faint smile on his face. A young mother and a small boy came up the stairs, the boy raising his feet high up for his gigantic strides. The kid stopped for a minute to look at the group but his mother tugged him on.

Outside the four split in couples once more. This time Vicky rode with Kosyo - the cashier and the gaming manager were required half an hour earlier than the rest of the shift. Mimmy sat in Dinko's Lada, the two cars drove out of the parking lot outside the apartment house but on the boulevard the BMW turned left and the Lada made a right.

14. AFTER MIDNIGHT

Kosyo was standing by the bar watching the tables. The casino was crowded, the din muffling the music. A shriek came from outside the glass walls and Kosyo glanced over the crowd. He immediately spotted Emmo the pimp and then a couple of guys in black leather jackets, one big and one stumpy. The two were slowly moving round the pimp, who was turning his head left and right, checking them, waiting. Doncho had materialized by the pit-boss and was also following the scene.

"These two are barrettes, special force guys. I guess they're in for a bit of stomping here."

"You know them?"

"They were here interrogating the hookers in the lobby the other day."

"They may be barrettes but don't seem to be in official capacity here. Looks more like a business meeting to me."

The customers were standing still, occasional bets left unclaimed on the tables. All heads had turned around to the lobby. The people were watching through the thick glass wall separating the casino from the lobby bar. Suddenly the three men came to grips. The shouting and the thumping came through the glass wall. Some of the players were cashing in their chips and making for the exit. Others, who found it exciting, never moved their eyes from the fight that was taking place right before them.

The stumpy guy kicked the pimp on the side of his knee, drew back and again attacked. The pimp managed to snatch him by the throat, yanked him and threw the body toward the spectators and against the solid transparent wall. The body hit the wall and came down. Meanwhile the big fat pimp had seized the other guy and was sort of pushing him down to the floor. The barrette was snarling with rage, sweeping the floor with elbows and knees, fighting to wrench free from the clutch that had pinned him to the floor and would not let him get up. A moment later his partner came round and stood up falteringly, knocking over one of the tall brass ashtrays. Blood was gushing out of his nose, big drops splashing on the marble floor. The tall one finally managed to break loose from the pimp's hold and was now punching but was keeping away from the pimp's snatch and his fists were merely brushing the hulk in front of him. He swung and side-kicked the pimp's flank, the pimp in turn tried to snatch his foot and kick off his supporting leg. The tall barrette drew off and quickly looked around, spotting his partner backing away to the revolving door and made a couple of steps backwards in the same direction. The pimp was watching him closely, ready to assault, but did not follow. The barrettes got out through the revolving door and disappeared in the night. The gorilla shook his head, glancing across the lobby at the faces behind the glass wall and slowly made for the elevators.

“Checked that? Man, that guy Emmo's 400 pounds but fast as a tiger!” Doncho wiped his bald brow with his blue coat sleeve. “The tall guy was powerful too. Did you hear that growl while Emmo was pushing him down to the floor? That was out of power, man.”

Kosyo rested his elbows on the bar. “Go and watch the cash desk, OK? It's getting really packed over there.”

Doncho yawned and heavily took the two steps down to the pit. Customers and croupiers had shifted their focus back onto the tables – the circus was over. It was 5 minutes to one.

15. SAND FROM THE ARENA

Kosyo was lying on the bed, watching Katya prepare herself for work in front of the tall frameless mirror, bent against the wall. She dropped her robe on the floor and remained in only her bikini. Then she took the dove-colored frock from the back of the chair, got into it and a young moonlit fly agaric grew up in one short second, then in the same second it got old, then again turned into his Kati. The garment fell freely and her body assumed the rigidity

of a statue. All confidence ebbed from Kosyo like the tide and he suddenly knew what it is like to be defeated in the eyes of the world.

She stood there for a minute, silently examining her reflection, then turned around. Her bangs flared up in the November afternoon like a fire in a stubble field. The last green and gold sparks of the chariot she'd been riding in bed settled one by one into the sand of self-possession. The rose of her mouth was shining through the mist, wrapping the white heathen shrine of her face. Her shoulders had become rigid, her back and ass were growing cool but the breasts were still shivering, alive and warm. Her feet got into the boots and the metamorphosis was completed.

She switched on the light in the entrance-hall, rustled about for a while and came back into the room in her coat, all ready to go. He stood up, went to the window and folded his arms. She slung her handbag across her shoulder and lingered in the door frame.

“What’s happening with my car?”

“I’ll enquire about it tonight.”

“What’s the matter with this Dimmo guy? He thinks I’ll be sitting down waiting until he pleases to move a finger? He’s been keeping this car for two weeks for a wishbone change.”

“Since when have you been an expert? Maybe you know another Peugeot mechanic?”

“Oh, stop it. They are not an endangered species, mechanics, are they?”

Kosyo dragged on his jeans and turned on the radio.

“Hello. Am I on air?” “You’re on air.” “Right. I have been traveling for two days, you know, freezing cold and all. As you know I had this mishap last August when my house burnt down.” “Yes. And all our listeners are aware of that fact too.” “So I described the mishap in a brochure, asking for help and they did help me and I want to greet all the people from the village of Bistrentsi. Rouse county, and I wish them sound health and long life and I greet them.”

“So what’s your transportation for tonight?”

“You’re working, right? I’ll ask Nicky to give me a ride.”

“The tall blond man with one dirty shoe?”

Kati made an impatient move toward the door but remained in her posture, folding arms. Kosyo scratched his neck to conceal the guilty grimace.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be mean.”

“No? Well what did you mean then? To be macho? Because the casino is like the center of the universe? Well, I’ll tell you it is no center. Whatever has been going on there was planned even before it started happening. By the people, who told the other people, who told the third people to tell some other people what to do and so it was done. So everybody at your stupid casino is the fourth people.”

“Hardly everybody.”

“Sure, everybody. Why don’t you grow up? And in case you really think something has actually been going on there, let me clue you what you’ve been studying – the fourth people. And you’ve been staring with your mouths open.”

“I see. Well what about you – do you know the fifth law of robotics? A robot must know it is a robot.”

Kosyo reached out to tone down the radio.

“Now you listen: you stop it. Should I spot you again flirting with that asshole the way you were at the Swingin’ Hall the other day, I’ll fix him good. I know you, I know you so well, every little semantic convolution of you. I have delivered and you have accepted about a thousand reasons to show a little affection. So here’s the score: I don’t want to ever see you with that man ever again. Period.”

“Wait, what are you thinking? He’s a colleague, for God’s sake, we work together.”

“I don’t care what the scarecrow is to you.”

“Calm down.”

“Why, is he smarter or stronger than a scarecrow?”

“Well, you tell me. He’s being promoted to become the programme director.”

“But of course he is. Since all the pros are out and now it’s like five people who have articulate speech in the entire radio. The toadies, all shaking over your jobs.”

“So what are you to be judging? A doctor and a public character?”

“Oh great, you’re quoting the classics.” Kosyo pulled the curtain and glanced outside. “No, of course not. I’m just another sellout... But at least I’m not advancing my career by giving head. You’re wasting your talent cheaply there.”

The curtain fluttered in on the draught and the front door closed with a slam. Kosyo crossed the silent apartment, took off a couple of shirts from the wash-line on the balcony, plugged in the iron and poured himself two fingers of Scotch before work.

16. QUEEN OF SPADES AND THE DOGS

The phone rang, Abu Naji crushed his cigarette in the ashtray and picked up the receiver.

“Allo” he pronounced the “l” rolling like all Arabs.

“Your cab’s waiting.”

“Merci.”

He put his cigarettes in the left pocket of his coat and the keys – in his right. Then he turned off the light, pulled the door shut and hurried down the stairs. The smoke from the exhaust of the cab was creeping over the asphalt, the tires were gleaming in the rain. He opened the rear door and sat in the back. The driver nodded in the rear-view mirror.

“Good evening, sir.”

“Good evening.”

“The casino, sir?”

“Yes, please.”

The Arab leaned back in his seat and shut his eyes. The whizz of the car on the wet asphalt lulled him to half-sleep. Increasingly often over the recent months he would have a senile nap, just like a child on a journey, although it was just a 20-minute ride to the casino. His mind filled up with desultory faces and pictures, splitting up and bearing new pictures with new faces, elusive and speechless, while his wane consciousness reflected the shimmering street lights. The cab driver kept changing the radio stations for more newscasts. “Prime Minister Videnov has officially stepped down from office.” “The banks’ finances will be blocked for seven months.” “The dollar reached a BGN310 maximum.” In his drowse, like through a pipe, peeped out the bright-green cloth of a blackjack table with six decks arranged

in fans, each of the 24 aces with its own retinue of king, queen, jack, 10, 9, servants and dogs. Their bored faces betrayed their names had not yet been uttered and therefore they had not yet been shuffled, taken out, matched and severed. There were no loose tresses, no shaggy beards, no angry stares, no leers, no defiantly slanted pikes and swords, no half-hidden faces peeking from behind shoulders and curtains. He would have easily told if they'd been summoned and discharged, if the dealer had launched and called them back in a court of 312 positions, yet not so neatly fixed as at opening. There he is – the old schemer King of hearts – yawning as his eyes water with the daytime tedium in the empty casino. Here is the 10 of spades, frozen still like a cockroach. The Queen is jolly, yes, jolly and inviting, a good sign. She never lies. A shadow is cast over the table, this English boss, checking the cards now, scowling. A clock is hanging on the wall with painted fake hands, peeking over the proprietor's shoulder, reaching out a V-sign to make him horned for the picture, but the Englishman swiftly turns around and the clock stands still. A man in black suit and white helmet crosses the hall, anxiously looking around, raises his eye up to check the ceiling, scribbles something down on his palm and exits.

“12 hundred, sir.”

The cab had halted under the hotel marquee. Djibouti gave a start and fished in his coat pocket for some change. The driver took the 2 thousand-leva bill and wished him a good evening and good luck. The gambler made his way through the hotel lobby and went into the casino. The regular handful of players at this hour of the day were sitting around the only open roulette table. The blackjack tables were empty and a dealer was standing in front of the cards, spread fan-like on the table, checking the action behind him in the mirror.

Abu Naji said hello and sat at the end of the table. The croupier took the two blinds and flipped over the fans of cards. Then he shuffled them with a circular motion, gathered them in a thick deck, split it in two and started riffling. The elaborate shuffle done in compliance with all rules, took about 10 minutes, in which time the gambler managed to order a short espresso, drink it with a cigarette, crush the cigarette, light a new one and cut the cards in the dealer's hand. A cute black-haired girl with big boobs climbed upon the inspector's chair, straightened her skirt over her thighs, and gave the customer a mechanical smile.

“Twenty. Eighteen.” “No card.” “For the dealer: three, thirteen, too many.”

The Arab took off half the profit and added the other half to the original bets. “Sixteen? Thirteen?” “For the dealer: six, sixteen, too many.” The dealer paid up and again the player added half the win to his two good bets. That was \$45 a box.

“Blackjack. Twenty.” “For the dealer: eighteen. Blackjack pays sixty-eight fifty.” The Arab took away the 2 and half dollars, threw it onto the table to tip the croupier and pushed all his chips across the table. “Change please.”

The dealer cut the two stacks of red 5-dollar chips and announced a change. The inspecting girl nodded and eight purple chips perched in front of the customer while the fives went into the table tray. \$75 a box now. “Seventeen? Twenty?” “For the dealer: seven, seventeen. Pays, stand off.” Abu Naji took the win as well as one chip from either bet. “Thirteen?” “Card please.” “Nineteen. Blackjack. For the dealer: thirteen, too many.”

The dealer got nervous and looked at the inspector as if anticipating some silent reproach. The girl was watching the game with indifference. The end of the shift was near. The croupier dealt anew, the black card came out and he announced “last hand of the shoe” with audible relief. The hand proved to be the last for the entire session as the customer stacked his chips and asked for five hundreds in exchange for his stack of purples, and quietly retreated to a table by the bar.

Abu Naji was in a wonderful mood. The gambler’s fascination comes not with chaotic luck but with going along the grain of the game. Each decision is unique and foreseeing the consequences makes for a strategist’s epiphanic moments. The speedy win of a few hundred dollars was just a landmark in the complex thrill of mind and heart. The Arab gave the waitress a smile and left a tip on her tray. He stirred up his coffee, lit up a cigarette and hid behind the thick bluish clouds, through which he calmly observed the room.

Four petty gamblers were sitting at the roulette table. The game was being dealt by one of the older croupiers, a priggish blond guy, who was knocking the dolly against the table board, waiting for the ball to drop. “28, black, even”. The number was empty, the layout was cleaned off in a second and the ball flew off one more time. After a 28 the Arab always played 16 and the neighbors. He would have played the big black Voisins du zero. Experienced but inattentive croupiers tend to repeat the section. 33 came out. Abu Naji focused on the wheel. Next came 25 and 17. Right. He approached the table. 32 came out.

The Arab let the dealer spin the ball and placed two 25-dollar chips on the table. “Zero and the neighbours, please.”

The dealer took the bet. 26 came out and the bet won. 10 to place, wins 350.

“Cash please.”

The gambler pocketed his win and waited for the next spin. Obviously the dealer was repeating, then shifting the sector a bit, then repeating again.

“New dealer after the spin. Bets, please.”

The new croupiers were filing by the pit-boss, being distributed. Pity. He glanced at the line of croupiers and saw there Miss Maria and Mister Dinko, who’d obviously been watching him because he gave him a slight nod, meeting his eye. The Arab pretended not to have noticed, took out a 50-dollar bill and asked for one-dollar chips. “Green, please.”

17. DIZZY GETS A BREAK

“31, black, odd.”

Dinko focused on the chaos of bets on the winning number, which Sammy was trying to put in order. “Oh, God.” Last night’s drinks were keeping him hung up with a splitting headache. He was hot, the neck-tie felt strangling tight. He eased it up a bit with a silent sigh of relief.

“173 yellow. One hundred cash.”

Joyful excitement set in at the table with everybody winning plus even the five dollars on first column. Dinko okayed the payment with a nod and leaned back in the chair. With some disgust he recalled the four big rakiya drinks he’d had at the pub and the unknown number of small whiskies he’d had at the disco. He’d broken the rule mixing grape and grain. His last night’s plan had only been supposed to include a couple of small brandies, stuffed peppers to eat and going straight home but no. The reminiscence of his pathetic self-indulgence cranked up the heat under his collar. “We’re the best!” And who exactly is you, you service business boy? You should have at least banged some fellow casino girl but here you are left with an empty wallet and all the toxins in your system. Well, what is a sucker with the day shift over supposed to do but spread arms to embrace the night. Sammy was impatiently waiting for an OK.

“Go ahead, man.”

Finally the table was all set for a new spin and the dealer shot the ball off. Dinko narrowed his eyes, dazed by the two opposite circular motions and through the veil of hangover saw the forces of physics clasp vectors around number 4, several rounds before the end.

“4, black, even.”

Impeccable. Only, if he were to stand across the table, all those weapons would instantly turn to dust. Acid tugged at his stomach like tapeworms and he again vowed to go straight home after the shift was through. Franco delivery. Whoever would try to bait him, Vicky, Mickey, Tricky, no. Five beers at home, man, is as good as it comes, as his granny would have put it if she'd been alive. And the next day he'd get up early to get something done in the daylight. Like catch up with university studies. The fear of his ambivalent relationship with the institution averted him from that line of thinking. “We'll see.”

The ball was again galloping around the wheel like a cowboy around a herd, and a red cow broke away from the rest with the white horse across the wheel and drew the horseman's attention. Fourteen? The cowboy swooped on the wrong-headed animal almost toppling over the saddle, the ball stood for a split second on the bar between two numbers and dropped back.

“Fourteen, red, even.”

A presumptuous ray broke through the clouds of hangover but a sharp pain in the back of his head planted him back in the mid- shift reality. Dinko timidly looked around and spotted Djibouti sitting at the poker table. Mimmy was dealing the table with Kosyo inspecting. Dinko passionately wished he wouldn't get into the scam action this day – he was lacking clearness of mind and deftness of hand. Surely Kosyo was aware of his poor shape and would bear that in mind. Let them do the doings and just leave him sit quietly. For once they could handle it without him. Anyway, so far he'd been the most active and the most effective.

The ball whizzed once more in the groove and took the inspector for another ride. Seven? The ivory piece dropped into 18, then jumped over to 7, then to 28 and fell asleep in the green bed.

“Zero. Even chances lose half.”

Dizzy took his eyes off the table to look left. The three guys at the poker table were silently watching the consequences of their own moves. Without as much as a twitch of nervousness or impatience, they looked like a bunch of leisure travelers stooped over a road map. The boss was doing remarkably well for a man in his situation. His relationship with Katya was moving from bad to worse and Kosyo would be the last one to acknowledge it. Dinko could have clued him like a month earlier. At Kosyo's birthday party Dinko'd heard Katya talk on the phone and from the way her muffled alto sounded, he knew it was a man she was talking to, and a man of intimate acquaintance. It would not have changed things. Kosyo was crazy about her and that was that. But once the whole thing crumbled down, he would easily recognize the symptoms of infidelity and would say to himself: "I was blind for all of this because that is how I wanted it to be." He was trying to take it like a man and not let out the pain. Without connection Dinko recalled that one time in the preparatory class at the high school when Kosyo was walking right behind the history teacher giving her the old bras d'honneur and she saw his reflection in the glass wall. Way to go, Judas man. Still, *Iron Maiden* is the best.

The white planet was weaving off its orbit along the red-and-black circle of the serpent biting its tail. Tier. Dinko wearily made the rather indefinite bet only to see how the ball slid across the numbers in the section skipping it.

"One, red, odd."

The dolly perched on the blue chip placed on straight-up and the losing bets flowed into the chipping area like cooling lava.

18. REDOUBLE

The CD was over but it didn't occur to Vesela the barmaid to play another one. The kind of tranquility that didn't pay well but felt so good. The time was 00:05. Six hours left, maybe more, depending on how the rookies would handle the count. Vicky stepped into the small room where they kept the chips and the video recorders and checked blackjack two on the monitors. The table was empty, the cards were off. Djibouti had probably moved to a roulette table. She checked all the players at the tables but the Arab was nowhere to be seen. So he must be having coffee, she guessed as the man could not have left unnoticed. She grabbed a wad of fifties and returned behind the cash-desk when Djibouti's lean figure loomed from behind the slot machines. He bent over the cage counter without looking at her

and placed a handful of chips on the counter. Vicky arranged the chips, said the amount aloud, counted 17 hundreds and pushed the cash toward the customer. The old man pocketed the money, pushed his glasses up his hooked nose and cleared his throat:

“Big problem.”

Vickey raised a brow.

“They stop the game” the gambler explained and made for the exit, hands in pockets. She took out the list of amounts cashed out, paused for a second and put down \$1,700 against Ahmed Abu Naji’s name. The phone rang, she rolled back in her chair to the cupboard in the back of the room, picked up and turned around so as to see the inside of the casino.

“Hello.”

“Well I’ve been trying to get through for half an hour.”

“Honey, you shouldn’t be calling so often. They’ve already warned me once.”

“Fuck’em. Where’s the remote for the TV?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t watch TV.”

“You haven’t been tidying up or something?”

“It must be there. C’mon honey, I’m busy.”

“You be home on time?”

“I hope so. I hope the rookies don’t make a mess of the count.”

“I should come to drive you home but I’ve already had a coupe of drinks you know. Wake me up if I’m asleep.”

“Okay. See you soon.”

Vicky hung up and went back to the desk. She noticed her stocking had run a ladder and realized she’d forgotten to take spare ones. She looked at the monitor showing the empty lounge with the slot machines. The hour was 00:25. The croupiers inside had just changed positions. Kosyo was supposed to come and copy the changes made. Instead, with a swift stride and a red file under his arm, there came Martin.

“How much did Abu Naji cash in?”

“Here’s the list. Marti, what’s up? Where’s Kosyo?”

Martin retorted over his shoulder as he was already walking back into the casino.

“I don’t know, they called them up in the office.”

An elderly couple of foreigners took the last cup of tokens and Vicky went inside the back room for some more. The tables were quiet, the dealers had changed, the players were the same: a couple of “statisticians” as they called the petty players, who kept record of all the numbers that came out and only betted once in a while; an old lady all covered in gold rings and bracelets, and five Chinese customers at the poker table. Such calm nights when one fancies early closing, fast counting, going home early enough for a small vodka and a snack and still enough time left for a good sleep before the looming early day-time shift – such nights are unlikely to remain calm. There was some clamor in the lobby and Vicky checked the outside camera. A few big men with close haircuts were fussing at the entrance. She sat by the cage counter. Doncho’s ushering hand appeared to be hidden by a torso in a black suit. Bozov, the famed mobster, heavily strode in, followed by his gorillas. Just as he was passing by, Bozov bent over to look through the cage slot.

“Oh, baby, you’re on tonight?”

“Good evening, Mr. Bozov.”

“You know you’re lucky for me, don’t you? I’ll be back for some cash later on, and then we can go for a drink, me and you.”

The gorillas grinned and followed their employer. Doncho came over to the cage.

“He’s loaded. He’s brought a hundred K to try to get even for the big loss the other night.”

Well, she didn’t have that kind of cash in the cage so if by any chance the guy won, they would have to issue him a note for the difference. Such notes were only good as a word of honor was but there wasn’t a lot of people willing to swindle Todor Bozov. This man had more money, better connections and surely less restraint than the casino proprietors. Vicky again went in the back to watch the cameras. They’d open third roulette, Bozov was sitting there plus some kibitzers, security men and Martin with the red file. The croupiers had changed once more but Kosyo and Mimmy were nowhere around. The guys up there seemed to have got wind of the scam. The phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Hello you.”

Dimmo's voice was thick and husky.

"Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, I miss you."

"Please go to bed."

"Don't be putting me to bed, I'm not your toddler."

"Alright then."

"What's alright about it?"

"I'll be with you in just a few hours."

"It's that every night I have to sit here all alone like an owl."

"I'm not doing it for fun, you know. We need the money."

"Oh, so you're bringing up the money thing now?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Well what did you mean?"

"Let's hold this over for later, when I come back home."

"Sorry, sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Get some sleep and when I come home I'll wake you up with some coffee."

"Kiss you."

"Kiss you too. Bye."

The ladder on her stocking had grown by a couple of inches. Vicky went in the back and sat in the low chair, squashed between the iron shelves. She took off her shoes and her stockings, keeping an eye on the cameras. Martin was standing in the middle of the pit, preparing to distribute the croupiers but Kosyo and Maria were not there. The Chinese were still sitting at the poker, shrouded in cigarette smoke. She'd have given a hundred dollars just to know whatever Dinko knew at that particular moment. Vicky chucked the stockings into the waste bin and put her shoes back on. She stood up against the mirror and fixed the black strand of hair that had slid from her ponytail. Her face was a bit pale, the white and the grey of her eyes shining as if she'd had a drink. She turned around and sat at the cash-desk. The hour was 1:05.

Now he felt how long he'd really spent here. Five full years by 52 weeks less a couple of paid leave - 250 weeks or 1250 work days. A nice, harmonic number. Just like an easy to figure roulette win. He noticed a plastic blackjack shoe lying in one of the corners. Black, precise, heavy, shiny. Then in his mind's eye he saw the back of a railway station with big trees with spotted bark. Were they called platens? Or sycamores? Big trees all slanting in the same direction and at the same angle, as if intently waiting for the train. Maybe it was because of the constant wind. A station is never tranquil. A train could be tranquil though. An empty station is sinister. But once you get on the train and gain speed and break away, you're jubilating like a fugitive. The train is belting, carrying people and shipments all the same.

"Go on, speak!"

A crushed formless shoe under a dark blue trouser. Deformed with standing, maintained for years. Day shift, off, night shift, day shift. Clean socks, dirty socks, clean shirts, dirty socks.

"Who are the others, who are the outside people, how long? Get started before we take you for a ride in the car trunk."

"You've seen the cameras. You know all about it."

"You're here to tell us all about it, college boy. Start telling and do it before your comrade pisses in her panties."

Oh, Mimmy, Mimmy. She'll be OK, she's no chum. Is my voice shaking, man. Stray dogs and night walks. I could really walk all the way down to the edge of the world. That I could do. Drunk at 2 a.m. staggering ahead with hardly an idea of destination in mind. In a cab one might get sick. A walker has no trouble with that, pissing and vomiting his way ahead without a care in the world.

"Now listen carefully. You're not getting away with this. We've got evidence, we've got video recordings, we can put you in jail. You're a nice, educated guy. Are you aware how much your type is appreciated in the can? We want no courts and no fuss. We just want our money back. You've been in the business for quite a while and you must be aware of certain realities. Remember what happened to the smart guys at Rodina Casino? One of them ended up Dead. Someone shot him. Tell us who's in, give the money back and you will get away with as little as the sack."

Fuck you. You can't sue me. On what charge, grand larceny? Video recordings are not legal evidence. Grand, my ass. Grand is when you end up in a Porsche up the narrow roads in Chamonix, with the rev meter shooting up, with valkyries in the speakers, with the cops only seeing two red lights and a cloud of dust and with her waiting in the hotel bar. Scrap that last one.

“What were you thinking? That you can just walk in and take fifty thousand, then go to the beach? Start naming the others! You've got five seconds to do so.”

Here we go. Gele is finished, enter the stinking security guy. The goofy, the bad and the ugly. You can always tell what the next line will be.

“Come again?”

The little boss sort stood up and walked around with a face that was redder than his usual ham pink. He must be really pissed off with such insolence. 'Cause if it's other people getting robbed, that's OK, but them English bosses? Not in the universe. And all the security guys standing with hands crossed and legs spread apart in their sad shoes. Kutsi hasn't even shaven properly and Sergo is looking mean and all. And you Bebbo, you backstabber! I used to give you a lift, we used to have friendly chats about girls, about tips, about the bosses. Now be looking ugly, you bald-headed prick. 'Cause you've got a wife and a kid and should they sack you, you'll be back in the street, driving a cab day and night. You, dogs. You won't see a dime of that money, 'cause it belongs to the pigs and we're the cats. No cats on the *Animal Farm*, were there? No. Van Halen, an angel with a cigarette. Eighth grade.

“I said I'm not dumb. I've only taken chances that I've figured out upfront. One, I'm not giving away any. You've got your cameras, you handle this shit yourself. And two, do not be telling me about court – I've never heard of a convicted croupier. You want to be the first to do it? And you will not dare thrash me. People know me, the whole thing will stink and that's hardly worth the casino reputation, is it?”

Gele is silent, trying to figure out how to explain to Fitzpatrick the fact that the business is out of control.

“Speak. You've stolen a load of money, you even bought yourself an apartment. We know that and we're using our lawyer to appropriate that apartment. But that's not all the money. So what happened to the rest?”

“The apartment I bought with some money from my father and it’s technically his. But look. The money, it wasn’t so much. We’ve only been pulling this for less than a month, you nosed it out pretty fast. As for the money I made, I blew it all away on the slot machines. That’s all there is to tell.”

What a gib. That’s a funny face, Sergo. Oops. Bang!

Things happened so fast for Kostadin Dosev. The punch came unnoticed and competent as if he’d been sold a warm roll at the bakery. The room tumbled over and the floor caught his head. More out of embarrassment than out of fear he started to get up immediately, kneeling down, watching the growing dark stain beneath his face. Sergo was standing kind of sideways, then turned around and kicked him in the ribs, the air in his lungs went out with a wheeze and he fell on his eyes on the yellow carpet.

Well, who? Mimmy yawned against the empty white wall and straightened her skirt over her thighs. She held her hair in tail for a second, then let it fall over her shoulders.

The security guys are all too stupid, it can’t be them. Could they have seen something on the cameras? Quite possible. Or maybe the old man bragged before the other Arabs. They see he’s got money, they become suspicious. But why tell the bosses instead of coax some bucks out of him? Sounds odd. An insider? N-no. A customer? We’ve been careful but the possibility is there. Then it must be a workmate. This one sounds plausible. Yet who could have seen us do it, figure the whole scam out and have a grudge or use in telling on us? What kind of benefit could it be? A couple of extra tips bonus points? Whoever did it must have done it for the sport. Out of spite. Well, it won’t be so hard to find out.

She scrutinized a spot on her shoe that was nervously swaying over the carpet but had nothing to clean it up with. What time was it? She had the feeling she’d been there half the night. What is it they’re doing to Kosyo? If they think he’ll be letting anything out, they’ve got another thing coming. Not that there will be many of us left, but at least Vicky could hang on. Oh, I need a smoke. Why can’t I just get my ass up and leave? What would they do? Who knows what they’ve smelled. Dinko’s lucky anyway, he might get away with it. Imagine him goggling at some table, waiting to be called up here too. She stood up, crossed the small room and put her ear on the door to the corridor that led to the office but could only hear muffled voices. She pressed the handle and opened the door ajar. Security guy Ivo waved her back in.

“You got a smoke?” she said in a quiet tone. The man fished in his coat pocket and offered her a box of Victories. “You got a fire?”

A lighter clicked under her nose, she lit her cigarette and rolled a querying eye toward the office. Ivo shrugged and gently pushed her back into the room. She paced anxiously, flicking the ash onto the floor. Her mind focused back on the casino. Tony must be in already. She pictured her new boyfriend – the small Italian man with his bushy grey hair sitting at the blackjack table, watching the croupiers and wondering where she’s at. She recalled the previous night spent at his apartment with silent old furniture in the spacious bedroom where they’d had three hours of unexpectedly passionate love making. She recalled the big lamp shade, the big bath tub, the view over the vaults of St. Alexander of Neva Cathedral, over the House of Parliament and over Sofia Hotel, just like a live postcard with shimmering lights, muffled street noise and the distant chain of lights on the side of the mountain. The morning turned out to be even nicer, the huge tapestry of the city lay, sprawled down to the slopes of Vitosha Mountain, while they drank coffee at table by the window. This morning would be the same, he would wait for her in the hotel parking lot, then they’d get some food and wine on their way to his place...

A door clicked, the voices grew louder, a door clicked shut and it all got quiet again. Poor Kosyo. They’ll find this hard to swallow. Especially Abu Naji. Fitzpatrick personally shook hands with him every time he visited the casino. Anyway, I know what they’ll do: they’ll tell me that I’ve been fired and that I’m to come get my papers next week and to forget about any tips. God, I’m tired and I need a smoke.

Maria opened the door and beckoned Ivo, who was leaning against the opposite wall, to oblige with a cigarette. She then sat and started a sort of recapitulation of her finances. She was potentially a jobless croupier, accused of theft. That latter circumstance would not be reflected in her papers but if she went applying for a job anywhere they’d be looking into her and talking to her ex bosses and that would be the end of it. Good thing she managed to put a few dollars aside. Plus a country house in Lozen. It’s something. And she had enough to keep her going for a year if she couldn’t get a job. But she would have to get a job. What a shame she couldn’t work for Tony. The firm was so small and he already had an assistant. The thought made her uneasy as if she’d suddenly turned into a free-loader. She dropped the cigarette onto the floor, crushed it with her foot and kicked it in a corner. The staffroom was probably ablaze with excitement. Kosyo and Mimmy caught in a dodgy dealing with Djibouti, man. What a treat.

She pondered on the odds of finding a job in her vocation. As a draughtswoman maybe, for a couple of hundred Deutsch marks a month. Or as a technical supervisor, where the money would be better. She pictured herself in concrete-smearred overalls, checking the casing work at a construction site. Funny. Well what the hell, some people would do it, the ones, who'd enrolled in the University for a reason and never got off course just for money. All of a sudden Mimmy recalled this strange encounter with former classmate Gerry a few days earlier. She'd gone out to do some shopping before work and as she was stepping off the tram in Bacho Kiro Street, she kind of pushed a street vendor, who was picking up some box from the ground and the woman turned round to look at her. It was Gerry and they sat in a nearby café to talk about the past. It'd been a few years since they'd finished high school together. It was hard for Mimmy to believe that woman in a training suit, with red, cold-bitten hands, carrying a dirty cardboard box across the street, is Gerry, now coming back, tucking her short blond hair behind her ears, smiling sweetly with her dry, scurfy lips. The two sat in a smoky café and began filling in each other. It turned out Gerry had a girl, two years old. "What can I say, my father is sick, he stays at home and looks after my daughter. Mum retired and is now sowing in some Greek-run factory, we're making ends meet. How about you?" All of a sudden Mimmy had felt cold and bored in that dim-lit café and would have left if she'd thought of a way to say goodbye. She'd felt bad about wearing \$200 shoes, about having a job and not having a kid and not having been dumped by the kid's father. Gerry'd understood her fix and an instant smile shone on her face. "Here. Let me tell you something. Last night we had this fight with father, he'd had too much to drink and you know how people in the neighborhood talk about abandoned young mothers, and I was kind of really down. So I put the girl to bed and then could not get a wink of sleep all night. I could hear all of them breathing in their sleep and I was telling myself I wanted to die, you know how stupid one can get sometimes. Anyway, about 4 in the morning I must have fallen asleep and started dreaming and here comes my granny. She passed away a couple of years ago, you know, in this small town in the country. So I see her in my dream and she's looking so happy, so content and I say, granny, how is it up there? And she says: well, it's jolly good, she says, we're paid just fine, a hundred per stick, she says, a soft job for a pile of money. And you do not be worried, she says, you will be just fine, we're being told all about your things up here. And her eyes were bright like a young girl's. Well, I don't know how that sounds but when I woke up I was feeling so serene, and I've had this feeling all day. It was so real, I still see her in my mind."

The handle clicked and Tashkov got into the room. He leered at her for a moment, holding his eye on her thighs, then munched and waved her out.

“You’re fired. You can come over in a couple of days for your papers, after which you will not be admitted to the premises any more.”

Mimmy lunged past him and called the elevator.

“Oh, and have no illusions – there won’t be any tips bonus.”

“C’mon, you midget! Spin it up.”

Bozov was leaning rapaciously over the table, waiting for the ball to spin. Kuncho changed the direction of the wheel, pushing it hard and the ball whizzed into the groove. Bozov stormed the game and pink chips started plopping on the green cloth, matched with snarled call bets.

“Complete seventeen.”

“Seventeen to the max, change after the spin.”

“Three.”

“Three to the max, change after the spin.”

“Complete twenty.”

“Twenty-eight to the max, change after the spin. No more bets please.”

Kancho was trying to tidy up, five pink chips were sitting on the wheel.

“Six.”

Inspector and dealer figured out the total amount of the bets, returned the change and the croupier placed the winning bets on the line between three and six. Bozov sat down and addressed a man who was sitting at the corner, resting his elbows on the table.

“Even.”

The man at the corner yawned. He was in his 40s, muscular, with white hair and a handsome, listless face. Dizzy had the feeling he’d seen him somewhere before.

“New bets, please.”

“Go ahead, you little poodle, spin that up.”

It began to rain chips again, Dinko was repeating the bets made aloud, Kancho was trying to place the bets called on the layout. Twenty, five, thirty-three, change after the spin. The ball clattered to a halt:

“Zero.”

“You, stinky little faggot!”

The change was a couple of blacks and three purples. White shirts appeared in the far end of the casino and the croupier impatiently announced:

“New dealer after this spin.”

“Go on, get lost, you curly faggot.”

Gencho and Nadya appeared, dealers and inspectors changed positions and Dinko sat with some relief at the poker table.

“Ni hao.”

The Chinese appreciated the greeting with a laugh. They were petty cheats and he was kind of neglecting their small violations. They talked in their unintelligible language, telling each other what they were holding, burning the table with a handful of dollars maybe. Some time back, there was this Chinese couple, diplomats or something, who used to be regular customers at the casino. Before some skinheads beat them to death one night near the Sitnyakovo Marketplace. Those two Chinese were nice, personable, cultured people, the woman had this long shiny hair and a beautiful, delicate face. And those dirty Nazi scumbag zombies did them in. What a fucking confused, frozen, spellbound country this was.

Dinko threw a quick glance toward Third roulette, where things were getting serious. Bozov had lost all his winnings and was now peeling off bills from a large wad, chucking them onto the table. Let him lose or win, Dinko didn't care. He was now aware that the managers had not uncovered the whole deal but only half of them. He'd seen Maria leave without as much as a wink, and he'd been trying to read the faces of the security guys but had only found out that Kosyo was still up in the office. It was not the first time that some one would be sacked in the middle of the night but it had never before taken so long. They would usually ask a couple of questions, hear a couple of lies and say bye. Dinko was getting a bit sleepy at this relatively early hour. He wouldn't miss the deal if he suddenly got sacked, nor would he miss the job. He might miss some of the people though. All the workmates, waitresses, security, nice and not-so-nice people.

The croupier opened up a full house and collected the bets. The Chinese o-ho-hoed in awe. Dinko shook his head and scratched his chin understandingly. All the tables were fairly vacant except for Second blackjack, which was filled by three unfamiliar players and two familiar Italians. Tony was sitting behind his whisky, staring at his cards. She left, dude. Only, you don't know this yet and it's embarrassing to ask. She'll be calling you any moment now. She was looking real happy lately. Why not? Tony is OK, maybe a bit old, but women seem to consider that fact of lesser importance than other stuff, like, say, trustworthiness? Oh, Mimmy, I'll miss you. I'm missing you already. Funny, it hasn't been an hour since you've been gone but knowing I won't be seeing much of you anymore really makes me feel bad. I guess I'll always be sorry for not making it to bed with you.

Tony answered his phone, finished the conversation with one word, made a gesture for the dealer to cash his chips and said "ciao" to Uncle Carlo. There, what did I tell you? Well, goodnight Tony, goodnight Mimmy, good morning and all the best. Do you remember when I was going to have you dressed in peasant dresses that night in the park? No, you don't, because I never told you. Macedonian folk style, like a trousseau in a chest. Something that won't change whatever you do, whatever you may become. Something that this writer guy Talev spent a lifetime depicting and for a good reason. But it's this fucking system that has us always crossing each other with just a hint we might meet some place else. Bite the bullet.

The Chinese man took out a \$20-note, Dizzy drove the tester over it following the procedure and nodded the dealer OK to perform the change.

And did Abu Naji get nervous when the manager closed the blackjack table, leading the croupiers away. Goggling behind his glasses, like "What's the problem?" And then leaving quietly like a fart. How do you explain the situation – "Oh, we've had this amazing series of unbelievable cards for the single player that happens to be me right here!" Plus what could you think when the manager comes down to discharge a pit-boss and an inspector from the same table. Anyway, that was the right thing to do – make himself scarce before something else occurred to these nice people, the new capitalists. The possibility that can clearly be ruled out is Djibouti ratting us. One, he wouldn't cut off his own source of financing and two – if he had, me and Vicky would be up there with the others. Surely, it must have happened accidentally, someone saw us by chance and reported.

"Twenty-nine."

"Ho-ho-ho."

“Yeah!”

“Oh, sweetie!”

“All cash.”

Bozov had obviously struck back. Some commotion set in at Third roulette. The two big men were leaning over the table, watching closely the dealer. The white-haired guy helped his pal do the calculation while the dealer on his part did the same, waited for approval from the inspector and the pit-boss, and took out some cash chips, nearly 10 thousand - a full stack of pinks. And yet Bozov is not the serious player, he's too cautious. Once he gets ahead, he quits. Because the thing is not the absolute amount won or lost but rather the proportion of it to what you can afford. The amount of risk involved, that is. It's one thing to have one hundred K and lose one thou, and quite another - to have one thou and lose one thou. We could speculate on the idiocy of losing the kind of money that would sustain you one year, but the feeling of losing that kind of money we wouldn't know because we wouldn't do it. Losing one's very last cent. Being left naked and helpless like a snail. Winning is easy, losing everything to the last dime seems too far. That's why I am no good as a gambler. I'm just like Bozov. And it's not about fear. It's attitude. So again: stupid fucking gambling extremists.

Bozov turned around with two handfuls of pinks and headed for the cash-desk, followed by the white-haired thug and the two bodyguards. Vicky arranged the chips and started counting the cash. The opaque glass of the cash-desk cage let through her dark silhouette while a pair of white hands counted the bills on the desk. Bozov was leaning against the cashier, talking. Fucking mobsters. The image of the shapely thighs in black stockings and the knees, pressed chastely together while the brains beneath the calm expression kept working and the grey eyes kept watching, counting the thous. Turn it whichever way, it's strictly Victoria - a gorgeous girl without imagination. Go on, give him the money and let him fart away in his stinking Mercedes. And you think of other things - of that shirt you spotted yesterday and will buy today. Of your brother, rolling with the elder in the hood, learning how to steal Citroens. Or of what you're going to get Dimo for his birthday next week. Or of that abortion you told me about before, at Kopitoto, that no one knows about, except the doctor and me. Or of me and how we missed the chance to sleep together because you were drunk as a swine and I'm not the kind of guy to take advantage of such a situation, and had to listen to your stories about your unexpressed feelings for a list of people that I'm not in. Don't think of me, I hate your thinking of me. Cold and straight, like a classmate's. This is what I am to you - a guy from the other class. We're alike but I care

about you and you don't care about me. So finish with Bozov, this night is getting tiresome and there's a couple of hours left. But it will eventually be over as have all nights so far.

His peripheral sight caught some movement and he turned around to see the people coming in after the break, changing positions. Not for them though. The Chinese were still gambling with passion and wonderment like they do. The casino was quiet and almost empty.

There's hardly anything real about this whole business. We're not real, they're not real, the goods are not real. The money is real, it never vanishes, whatever gets in, stays in until it gets out in the morning. The whole thing is a dream but is the money there? If it's there, you're OK, but if it isn't, then it's got as much to do with you as Kancho with the English Queen. Which is, there exists a connection but it is totally impractical and purely metaphysical. We stay the same here. And there are these little oddities. Specifics of the interior, so to speak. Like no windows. Why no windows? Not for security reasons, for sure, even banks are made of glass these days. Rather, the reason is the same as the reason for no clocks. No watches on the staff, no clocks on the walls. No radio either, as the radio sometimes tells the time. Only pure, pre-programmed music. Too much psychology for a regular business if it was one. Like why would they provide friendly advice: consider series of small and big numbers, two out of three dozens is a good, wise bet and so on, since there is no strategy and there can be no strategy and that is a proven mathematical fact? Study the last 30 numbers that came out on roulette. Idiocy. Did I grow a beard at this poker table? Twist that arm a bit, man. You don't get it.

“The time, the time.”

The Chinese man showed him his watch, nodded back and won 15 dollars with 2 sevens.

“Xie xie.”

He grabbed a couple of beers from the corner, scanned the parking area for Kosyo's car, which wasn't there, unlocked his Lada and chucked the shirt on the back seat and the beers – on the front. A quarter of an hour later he parked in the little street by the big apartment house near Shipchenski Prohod Boulevard and killed the engine. The windows of Kosyo's apartment were dark. He made one more vain attempt to reach the boss on his mobile but refrained from calling at his home as Katya was probably asleep and he didn't want to worry her. He cracked a beer open and drank half. The night was thinning to dawn, his feet

grew cold. He needed to take a piss and his socks had got smelly. He finished the beer, wound down the window and threw the empty can into the bin, a cat jumped out and dashed across the street. He was going to the University today and would best take a couple of hours' sleep. Que sera, sera, felicitata and the rest of them. He wound the window up, started the engine and turned on the beams, pale in the morning light.

19. EXPRESS YOURSELF

In the last November afternoon of 1996 Peter Ginley entered the gaming room and directed his steps to the bar. Vessy was washing cups and ashtrays and arranging them onto the coffee machine to dry up. Peter opened up his jacket and placed his maroon tie onto the bar, which caused his 5-foot-4 stumpy figure to resemble a factory director, chased by the wind of change.

“What do you call this in Bulgarian?”

“Pishka.”* <*Bulgarian slang for penis, pecker>

“What?”

“Pishka.”

“Oh. Vessy, do you like my new pishka?”

Vessy glanced at him indifferently and proceeded with the rinsing.

“Yes. Very nice.”

“I just got it. From a very expensive shop too.”

“Congratulations. I hear you sacked Kosyo. Is it true?”

“What? Kosyo? Fucking thief. Yes, Kosyo's gone. You sorry?”

“No coffee. Finished. Somebody must go get coffee.”

“Oh. No problem. Tell Ogie to get some.”

“OK.”

Peter paced across the casino and stood by “Uncle” Lyubi, who was inspecting the blackjack game.

“Hi Uncle Lyubi. How're you doing?”

“Very well, thank you.”

“You like my new pishka?”

Uncle looked up. The Englishman was waving his tie under his nose.

“This is my new pishka.”

“Yeah?” Uncle presumed it was just another lame English-Bulgarian joke.

“I just got it. Very expensive.”

“It’s beautiful. Bravo.”

Peter went on swaggering under the pretext of checking the tables, he needed some more appreciation. A couple of small fish were playing at First roulette and he patted the closer one on the shoulder.

“Oh, hello, Mr. Peter, how are you today?”

“Very well, thank you. Got a new pishka. I’m going out with my girlfriend tonight.”

The customer was about to demand clarification on that but the ball clattered into the wheel, hit number 8 and the gamblers hollered with delight. Ginley was bored and left the table. Girlish voices came from the outside and a couple of waitresses, one of whom - the aforementioned girlfriend got through the blue-jacket-guarded glass door. Peter perked up, let the two girls slip their arms through his and led them up, hustler-style, to the bar. There the three stopped and turned around to face the casino. Bissie was a short blonde with big breasts, bulging under the crimson costume. A few heads turned around to observe them.

“I have two sexy girls and a fine new pishka.”

Vessy quietly stepped back into the lockable recesses of the storage room.