

GUTS OUT
Part 1. HOME POOR HOME

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LET ME EXPLAIN

The butterfly effect is a concept in the natural sciences, highlighting how small changes in chaotic systems can lead to significant and unpredictable outcomes, possibly in distant locations.

The 6 Handshakes Theory proposes that any two individuals on Earth are connected by no more than five degrees of mutual acquaintances.

Here is the 1st of the 11 parts of the book series.

All parts are connected, even though all the characters will never meet each other. These books are like a puzzle, they can be read in any order. When you read everything, the picture will come together by itself.

There is no consistent style of illustrations, the language changes (get your Google translator camera ready), there is obscene speech and everything looks messy and chaotic - just like in a human head.

Immerse and enjoy.

ANNOTATION

One day Toke disappeared. For everyone around. Having moved to another country, he started life from scratch and...A few years later he discovered that it stopped where it began. But no worries, soon unhappiness, emptiness and hopelessness will be replaced by the fight against drug addiction. And potatoes.

To those who have ever had hesitations about trying it

To those who experienced darkness of addiction

*To those who believe that happiness can be found in a
pill*

*And to all those who need help to spread awareness
about drugs.*

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1

Silenced lair

7

A dull knock echoed throughout the entire apartment, if not the entire floor, immediately interrupting my dreams. According to the unshakable law of annoyance, bags of cereals and potatoes must be dragged and dropped at 6 AM, when people on the floor are most alert and susceptible to loud sounds.

Toke hasn't been setting morning alarms for a couple of years now, because none of the sounds of rain or drums offered by the phone can compare with the rumble of vegetables. Moreover, even if he could fall asleep again after finishing the cargo work, it would only be useful for a couple of minutes — usually after this pause, neighbor №7 from the fifth floor began to swear at the neighbor from apartment №10, while simultaneously drumming fists on his door.

He got out of bed when he remembered that before work, he needed to stop by the passport department — his documents were expiring, and the photograph taken 9 years ago looked almost nothing like the reflection now in the corridor mirror.

A dark head shaved almost to zero, disproportionately pumped-up dry arms, and a slightly soft stomach; white work scars carelessly covering his forearms and ankles; bitten lips; and an uneven tan. He noticed that the bottom corner of the mirror was broken, and a shard hanging by glue was casting a sunbeam across the room. It's amazing how many times a day one can be so mindlessly distracted.

Baggy jeans, a white T-shirt, and a flannel shirt quickly brought him out of his narcissistic state. It was just like reminding yourself to put on a hat if you don't want to hear "skinhead" on the street again.

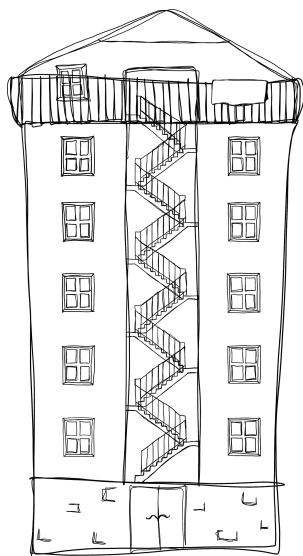
A couple of years ago, he slept with a girl who worked at a thrift store clothing warehouse, and so he formed a wardrobe that prevented people from looking at him askance, as he looked like a typical creative person in his mid-twenties. It is important if you want to get a job without any problems, given such a "suspicious" facial expression and "unusual for locals" appearance.

From the balcony, one could hear that the neighbor from apartment №7 was finishing his monologue because his broken voice, mixed with coughing, was already making

it difficult to convey a full thought to the long-departed movers. A tram could be heard from the street, and at the sound of it, Toke left the house.

The only thing that caught the eye in the police building was the staircase, made of the same slippery material as the road from the first to the sixth floor in the Toke house. Sometimes it seemed to him that the person who designed this house never wanted anyone to live on the sixth floor.

His apartment was the only one of the 11 that had a balcony, and it was the only one on the floor. All the others were carbon copies of the perfect size and proportions with a staircase in between. His shelter was more like a habitable animal's lair with a hole in the middle. No one wanted to live in the attic due to the broken heating and the fact that it was too different from the apartments of other residents, which is always undesirable for those who dream day and night not to be noticed. A ceiling sloping in the shape of a triangular roof, one window with a creaking sill and an ascetic balcony from which Toke hung smoky sheets.



‘Next, number 8!’

There is a flash before the eyes and the newly taken photo is sent to the table for well-known questions:

'Age, how many full years?'

'26.'

'How many years ago did you change your last name?'

'4.5.'

'Sign here and place the finger of your left hand on the black surface. You can pick up the documents tomorrow in the morning.'

Shift is in 13 minutes.

He caught the displeased glance of his boss, who was looking at his outerwear, sweaty from running. You can see how he is now looking for the moment to come up and say 'In FrOnT oF cLiEnTs YoU nEeD tO lOoK aNd SmEIL pErFeCtLy, YoUnG mAn.'

After 2 minutes he was already standing dirty in flour and dust. Which is not surprising, because his duties included doing everything that other restaurant workers don't have time for: moving boxes, repairing broken kitchen utensils, taking inventory, bringing goods and other tasks of the “errand boy” that the restaurant kept to maintain its image.

Many of the workers were very desperate about their positions — some needed to feed their families, some needed to pay for university tuition, some did what they loved, and some were simply afraid of angering the owner by demonstrating the full range of “people pleasers” personality. Toke found simple stability here. It's not news to anyone that people with professions in the humanities struggle more with covering bills than representatives of the sciences. It was this place that allowed Toka to rent his attic and pay for health

insurance. He generally liked this job. He liked the lack of responsibility for other people's lives and the opportunity to harm someone by dragging boxes. He liked watching people through the glass of the bar. He liked the non-conflict team. He liked the carefree vibe that this job gave him.

'Elif, please, you almost knocked me over.'

'Sorry. It's like there's a veil over my eyes today; I can't see anything. Feels like I'm about to explode. Does it hurt?'

Wow. In the 4 years of work here, Toke spoke to him for more than a second only once — when he had just gotten a job and found out that communication was not on his list of skills. The rest of the time, Elif's spoken vocabulary included only “hello”, “mhm” and “get well”. So good morning to you.

'No, all good. What happened?'

'Shall we go have a smoke?'

'They are trying to marry me to this girl I hardly know, they are interfering in my life so much that I can't breathe. At home every time it's like an earthquake when everyone comes home from work: I don't know if they ever talked to anyone in a calm voice. They have been living at home with all our relatives since last summer, the neighbors are complaining — it's scary that they will soon start hitting each other instead of plates. When I come to visit, I feel sick, it's like they're pulling me inside. Since I couldn't sleep at home, I didn't go to the university. I started working here at the first opportunity, but as you can see, it didn't help.'

He kicked the door and exhaled loudly. Toke listened to him carefully and did not ask unnecessary questions.

'Someday I will break contact with everyone, disappear from their lives and go to a place where they will never find me. I'll leave a note, change my SIM card, last name and never come back.'

Toke's skin crawled. It was as if he saw and heard his reflection speaking to him from the past and reminding him of the decisions made 5 years ago.

'Now the boss will start looking, let's go inside. If you haven't cooled down yet, I can sort the boxes for you for now.'

Toke threw several tubes of paint, spray, removable needles, paper towels and some kind of incomprehensible canvas into the shopping cart. From the outside, he looked like a crazy artist, which in a sense he was until his phone vibrated in his pocket in a case that was absolutely tasteless for an artist.

'We need about 4 samples, the measurements are the same. My friend is going to shoot a business card for a dance studio and they want to dress everyone in the same clothes, but so that it doesn't look like they brought all the clothes from the New Yorker.'

'I have had the design ready since Friday, as agreed. Today I'm putting it on T-shirts, but you still haven't told me the color of the T-shirts I need to buy.'

'The color is not very important, the main thing is that the logo and words are visible on the camera. Choose which one you want. What's your favorite color there?'

'Black.'

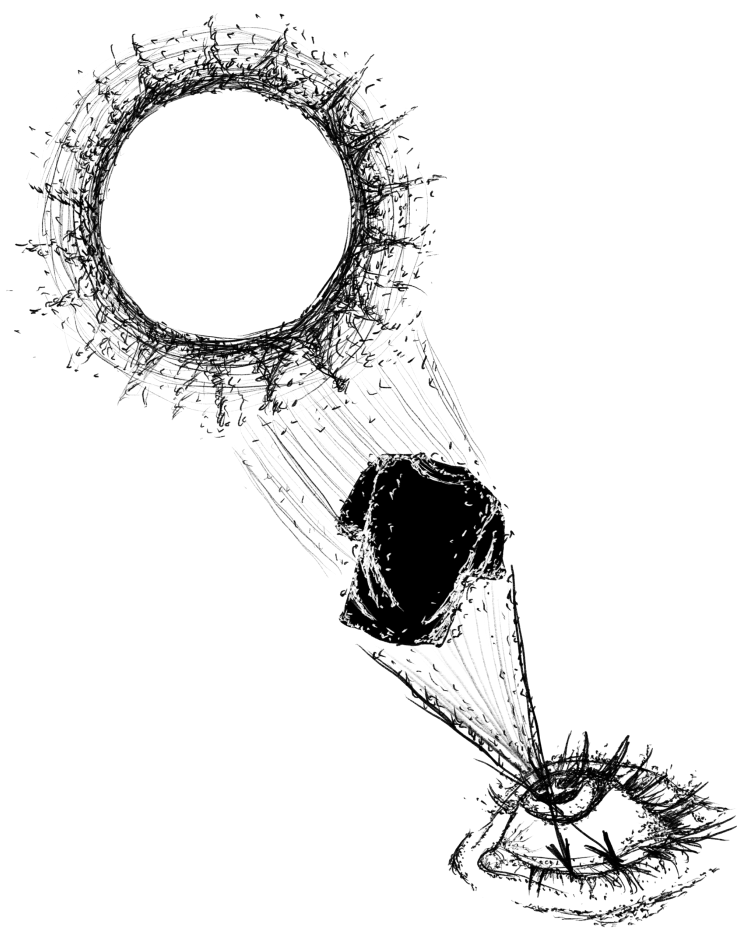
'Great, then black T-shirts.'

'Well, black is technically not a color, but the absence of a luminous flux, and white is.....'

'Then why do you work in a pizzeria if you're so smart?'

'I'm not smart, I'm just being honest about my color deception.' - Toke chuckled.

'Please take your color deception to Marika in the evening, she is just about to gather some celebrating company, maybe some of them need a spontaneous tattoo in the near future.'



Toke loved to draw since childhood, but he did not like to attach meaning to everything that appeared on paper. Sometimes aesthetics are enough, the idea sometimes spoils the carefree nature of the drawing. Maybe that's why he was always so calm about his works — without considering them masterpieces and without setting high expectations, they turned out decent and people liked them.

He realized his potential to the best of his ability, drawing intermediate projects for students, designing pizza boxes, tattooing local tourists, and customizing cheap T-shirts from the supermarket. Surprisingly, due to his calm and friendly unobtrusive nature, he had many acquaintances who were happy to regularly add to his client base.

'Finally, I thought you wouldn't see me waving at you for 5 minutes.'

'I haven't had any coffee since the morning, so my eyes wander to the sides already at 9 pm. Here's your order.' - Toke handed him a tattered bag of T-shirts.

'Thanks, dude, it helped me out in time. Come on, leave your things in the hallway and join us, most of the people have already arrived.' - the guy removed his hand from the doorway and motioned for Toke to come inside.

'No, listen, I'll go home. Tomorrow is an early shift and if I don't get enough sleep again, coffee is unlikely to help me. And lately I've started to feel more relaxed about such events, what haven't I seen there in recent years?'

'And the tediousness begins. You don't even have a beard to talk like that yet!'

'It never grew.'

'Moreover, forever young means.' - smiling brazenly, he nudged Toke's shoulder with his hand and continued to persuade. 'Remember Vito? A couple of months ago he got a job in a good company, found a girl there and now they are moving to another area where there are new

buildings. So we celebrate the beginning of a new life today.'

'The same Vito?' - thought Toke. Suddenly. The last time he talked to him, he lived with his parents, slept 10 hours a day, pretending that he was in search of himself, drank worse than students and kicked girls out on the bus at night, so he had nothing to offer them to eat in the morning from parent's refrigerator.

'Sounds great. Have fun!'

The balcony had turned a dull red as the sunset. Time for the last cigarette of the day. Music was playing in one of the earphones still dangling in his ear, above the noise from the floors below. After a couple of minutes, Toke notices that the music is almost inaudible.

Screams and knocks are heard from the first floor, apartment №1. Toke takes off his earphones and instantly understands what these sounds are.

'For how long will you continue bringing dirt home? Will you ever start listening? You hang around all day, and all you bring home are problems. You little nonentity, he should have brought you to work with him, maybe you would have been of some use. How could you eat the whole plate? He was right, your place is with the rest of the useless street kids.'

Every cell in Toke's body tensed. He stood pressed against the cold wall of the corridor, his heart pounding. 'It's none of my business,' the thought flashed.

Toke perfectly remembered what the boyfriend of that screaming woman looked like. It would be not just a

terrible, but a useless fight. He closes the door to the balcony and takes his phone out of his pocket.

'Rescue service, what is your emergency?'

2

Standing at the crossroads, but nobody is here

Apartment №2

I was once returning from a night shift
Some businessmen were celebrating a successful project
in a restaurant

5:12 am.

First floor, door on the right.

The light was on only by the bed
She quickly packed her things into her bag,
Standing near the stove,
Where the turk with coffee was quietly hissing.

It seemed like
She was stepping on her heels
With all her weight
Like an ordinary person
But from the sounds
She felt like she was walking on tiptoes.

All things are ironed,
The hallway always smells of lavender.

Angelic,
It seemed that if you touched her,
She would break like a fragile vase.

These spells of “invulnerability”
Fell with a roar immediately
After I began to notice how often she was not at home.

Classes at the faculty of journalism
Part-time job in the office
It wasn't close to home.
Tons of homework
Kept her lights on all the time.

Scrubbed floors,
The eternal smell of soups,
Things perfectly stacked on the shelf,
Even her drawer in the laundry room
Was always at a 90-degree angle.

University

Job

House

Homework

Cleaning

Laundry

Cooking

Again.

Instead of eating for three,

She worked for three.

She breathed industriousness

And her exhalations fluttered throughout the floor.

Nobody ever complained about her at house meetings

Utilities and heating were always paid on time.

Her non-conflict attitude

Sometimes irritated the neighbors

Her perfection was stunning

Her incompatibility with this apartment building

Cut her off from everyone

More than me.

And only recently, when, as I was told,
She left for an internship,
I suddenly realized how *invisible* she was.



The ringing of a mobile phone abruptly shattered the night's silence. Toke, barely opening his eyes, looked at his watch. 5 AM. He sighed and picked up the phone.

'Hello?'

'Toke, we need you to come back. It is urgent, we have a problem with the T-shirts. Customer is pissed, says that something is wrong. He cannot explain what exactly, but he is VERY dissatisfied. We need these T-shirts by the morning, otherwise the shooting will be postponed.'

In the background, you could hear the sounds of at least 20 people living life to the fullest, particularly through alcohol.

'It's five in the morning. Can you summarize in one short sentence what exactly is wrong with T-shirts?'

'I can't explain it now, just come as soon as possible.'

Toke, feeling anger rising within him, realized he had no other choice. 'Well, so much for enough sleep before the day shift,' he thought.

'I'll be there in half an hour.'

He slowly got up, got dressed and stepped out onto the balcony. Inhaling the sharply cool morning air, he lit a cigarette and listened. Strangely, there was no sound of

the police arriving earlier, yet everything downstairs was completely quiet as if the night's events had never occurred.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a taxi driver honking.

Toke burst into the room where they were already waiting for him.

'So, what's the issue with the T-shirts?'

'Listen, I'm sorry, but the T-shirts are fine. I just wanted you to come back. You know how boring it is without you.'

'Are you kidding me?! Do you know how much time and money I spent to get here? Should I write 'Don't touch me, I have to work tomorrow' on my forehead?!'

'Yes, I know, I'm sorry, I just... We had a bet. Everyone really wanted to see you.'

Toke, barely containing his anger, turned to leave, but was stopped by a familiar voice.

'Hey, Toke, wait. Are you planning to leave without saying goodbye?'

Toke stopped, sighed and turned around.

Vito was energetically on his feet, although 40 minutes ago Toke was sure that he heard his voice vomiting in the background of the call.

'Do you remember the last time we hung out next to the fountains? It was like 3 years ago. We all decided that it was time to get together again. Everyone wanted to see you, buddy.'

'I do remember it. And this is not a reason to bet on me like I'm a dog.'

Vito: 'Well, yes, I understand, dude. But you've already arrived anyway. Look how happy everyone is to see you. Stay a little bit?'

Toke, feeling his indignation gradually fade, gave in and sat down. Vito handed him something that looked like a glass.

'Tequila or wine?'

'No, thank you. I don't drink.'

Vito, without losing his enthusiasm, took a small bag with sugar-looking powder out of his pocket.



'Maybe this will interest you?'

Toke shook his head.

'No, Vito. I don't do that kind of thing at all.'

Vito grinned.

'You know, when I first tried it, I expected the same effect as from alcohol, only felt threefold. Everyone talks about pleasantness on a physiological level and a feeling of carefreeness when you give control over your body to the hands of the mind, while the sensations become more intense, allowing you to escape from problems. But no one told me how I could feel powerful and capable, how I could concentrate; This is not an escape, but inspiration — a tool for controlling your consciousness. It feels like you've climbed up an observation tower with a view of your entire life, allowing you to see it in full. Because I found control rather than losing it, I doubt it can be called an addiction.'

Toke's ears were drooping from such talk.

'Are you also on drugs now? Is that why you say that?'

'Facts are facts. I may be on drugs, but you can see for yourself how it has changed my life: career growth, important connections, confidence with chicks. Perhaps

this will help you solve your problems that you cannot seem to cope with for four years now. When was the last time YOU experienced something like this?

Toke's teeth ground. He only took a breath to answer something like:

'Hey, be careful!' - there was a sudden shout, followed by the sound of breaking glass and a woman's squeal not far from here. Toke looked around the room. The last sane people ran up to the sounds of chaos and he, taking advantage of the moment, quickly left the house.

Leaving the party, Toke headed home on foot. The streets were empty. Dawn began to prick his eyes. Taking a cigarette out of his jacket, Toke's head was filled with thoughts about the past night and Vito's words. How everyone around him has changed, except him. Someone was rapidly sliding into the pit of degradation and infantilism, someone was rising to the pinnacle of awareness, and only he felt exactly the same as 5 years ago.

When it was already about eight in the morning, Toke realized that he would not be able to get home on time. Putting on his headphones, he headed straight to the police department. Tired, he sat down on a bench waiting for his turn and, without noticing, fell asleep.

His sleep was interrupted by the voice of the girl from the reception desk:

'Toke Titian? Please come to window number three.'

Rubbing his eyes, he stood up.

'Here is your new passport. Sign here.'

She looked at him suppressing her air, as if embarrassed to ask something.

Toke looked at her questioningly and with a polite gesture of his hand hinted to her not to keep this question to herself.

'You have a very interesting surname. I've never met anyone with this matching combination. Very unusual.'

Toke gave a suppressed smile: 'Thank you. I had a double name. I decided that I didn't want to choose someone else's surname that didn't belong to me, so I replaced it with this.'

Each time the reminder of a new surname felt like flipping through a book to the very beginning and discovering that the first pages had been torn out.

3

I am not Tietz

Apartment №3

That was the first time I did laundry in the house.

Second floor, door on the left.

Wool and animal hair were everywhere.

Dirt from paws on the floor,

Bird feathers flying in the air

A real zoo in 29 square meters.

Noise, din, barking and music

They were an eternal sound record in this apartment.

Probably the girl from the bottom floor

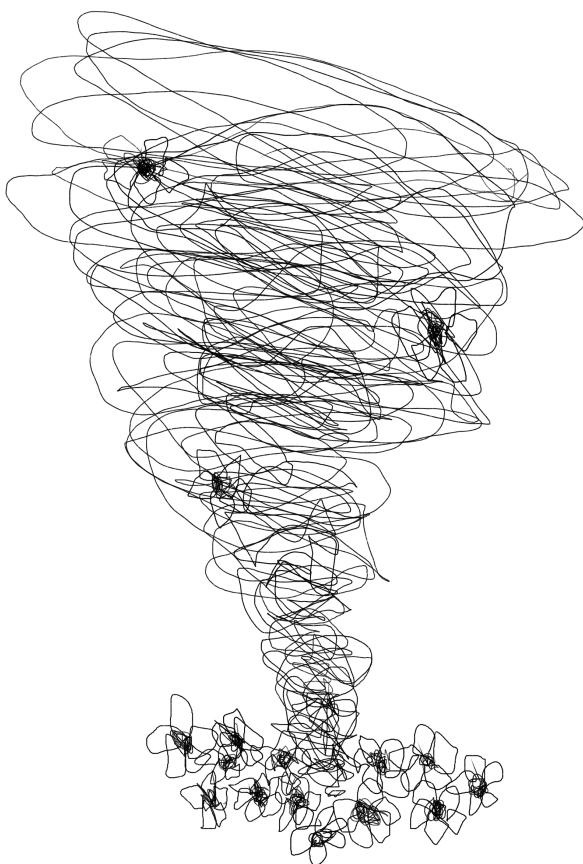
Was terrified just by the thought

Of the imaginable mess in their apartment.

Short girl with curly blonde hair
And a lanky brunette,
As if he had his hair cut at a church school
27 and 28 years old
Married 7 years
Chaotic
Sloppy
Clumsy
Untidy
Unpunctual
And *happy*.

That's all I heard about them at house meetings.
From the other tenants,
After all, they *themselves* were never there.

Maybe this was the main reason
Why the laundry room
Was always full of their things.



Toke slowly walked into the restaurant, yawning loudly, when his boss called him over with a look of urgency on his face.

'Toke, we have an unexpected situation,' he began as soon as Toke approached. 'Elif ended up in the hospital. Family car accident. He said they were arguing about something on the way to their relatives and didn't notice the pit.' - the boss said thoughtfully.

Toke felt a heaviness form in his stomach. Elif continued to step on the same rake, without even realizing it.

Toke nodded regretfully, trying to digest the news. 'How is he now?'

'There are no fractures, but there is a suspicion of a concussion. He is put on bed rest for several weeks. We need someone to cover his shift for the weekend. Can you replace him?'

His words hung in the air, awaiting an answer.

'Yes, you can count on me.'

Toke slammed the front door and slid to the floor, exhaling loudly from fatigue.

'God, this is all so petty. The way I think, what I do, what I spend most of my time on — my entire existence can be summed up in 2 measly sentences. The first would describe the suffering of life until I was 21, and the second would describe how uniformly and meaninglessly I used the freedom I received.

Compared to what happened before, there seems to be no reason to be depressed, but nothing happening can be called life either. I fought for this freedom and security for so long that I simply didn't have the strength to survive the earned chance.

I'm gone. I gave every bit of my insides and there is nothing left. All feelings, all thoughts were burned away by my eternal survival mode. And now I sit on the floor and understand that 5 years have passed.

5 years of suffering seem like an eternity.

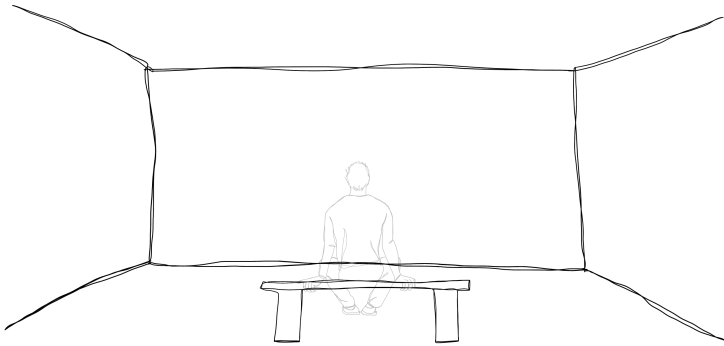
5 years of newfound freedom feels like silently watching the spilled elixir of happiness seep through your fingers and fall in drops onto the floor, making you more and more helpless.

The reckless drinking and sex that first year seemed like the start of something bigger and better. I literally grieved, drinking it away. Having buried myself, hoping for a new beginning, which did not happen for one simple reason - when you bury a loved one, the main task for your brain is to survive this pain to a level where you are in a state that allows YOU to return to YOUR life. And if this life does not exist, then there is nothing to return to.

I don't know what to do with this freedom if I'm empty.

I'm not attached to anything.

I don't know why people wake up in the morning.



Elif became an indicator of my inner realization. I used to feel like him and thought that after the final burning of bridges, life would feel like a sip of soda or some fresh shit like this.

In the end, I look at him and see a hungry child trying to climb over a barbed wire fence, not knowing that an empty, barren field awaits him on the other side.

The phone screen lit up with a long message.

'Sorry for yesterday bro, I really went too far with the bet. I was drunk, I don't remember half of it. But I did send you a small extra payment for the inconvenience, the customer was very glad that everything worked out. He celebrates the opening of the studio today, has a party later. You also had a hand in this, so you are very wanted there. I promise not to call at 5 AM this time and take a taxi at my expense.'

The hope of feeling at least something resembling the spark of life five years ago prompted Toke to type 'okay, I'm in' in the response line.

Loud music always knocked on the eardrums and Toke remembered how he accidentally learned about a certain trick. At one of the parties, from which he did not go to leave, but could not stay, because it seemed to him that his head was about to explode.

You need to stand at the epicenter of the sound and drink a bottle of mixed alcoholic cocktail in one gulp within a minute (only they made him instantly drunk). After 60 seconds, you feel the sounds begin to become blurry. The floor becomes softer, and the skin on your hands becomes silky and smooth.

'Hey, Toke, grab a bottle and let's go. Everyone is ready, you're the only one standing.'

Toke approached Vito with a questioning look.

'Why are you looking at me like that? You need to unwind, meet new people; finally, talk to the girls. No one will force you to stay there, just come in and say hello and when you realize that's enough, I'll call you a taxi.'

Toke was not sure that the driver of the car was sober. Maybe he played along with the others because he was afraid of the 'hey, let's cheer him up' reactions. When the car door opened and everyone was told to get out, Toke's mouth dropped open.

He was not attentive to the road they were traveling on, but the place they found themselves in had the character of a brothel. And not one where you can get pregnant from the wall, but one where alcohol-obsessed people would never go. The oppressive atmosphere of feigned positivity wipes the air with the collective misfortune from which all these people were running away. Toke inhaled. For the first time in 5 years, he felt unsafe again. It seems like this is something to be afraid of, but he had been deprived of the opportunity to feel for so long that even such rubbish as cheap adrenaline awakened and provoked his emotional hunger.

'What is your name?' - a young guy with a scar on his arm said benevolently.

'Toke.'

'Didn't your mom and dad give you a last name?'

Toke swallowed.

'They did. But I didn't like it. My name is Toke Titian.'

The guy with the scar pushed another guy from the group and all the other people standing nearby turned their heads like Dominos.

'Bro, did you hear? Toke Titian!' - he cackled, starting a wave of laughter in the circle.

'I've never heard such a crazy name in my life, I can imagine how difficult it is for you with documents.' - said another and patted the guy with the scar on the shoulder.

'You will be Tietz.' It's shorter and more decent.'

Toke peered into his eyes and with every second he understood that all that was left of the scar guy in this dimension were the words that poured out of his mouth, everything else was detached from this reality. He felt something that controlled him and took away all his worries, like a parent's hand.

'Don't stand in the aisle, you're disturbing the girls. Vito is already inside, you can go through. This is at our expense, you are welcome.' - he handed him a small bag with a white pill and gestured inside.

Toke fully felt the rush of alcohol when he walked inside from the cold and did not resist when Vito pointed to the crowd of equally smiling girls, whispering to him about the right choice.

She danced mind-blowingly. Many years ago, one could say something like “future ballet dancer” about her, “what a high instep your girl has” or “she feels music so well, has perfect pitch”. All that vulgarity that she had to put on herself turned into expensive and trained sexuality on the dance floor.

But it immediately collapsed as soon as they left the room.



She was already kissing him, stretching the fly of his pants with one hand, and with the other she was pulling out that same bag from his pocket. Pressed against the wall of a distant room, Toke suddenly accidentally pressed the switch.

Even with such a dim club light, you could see how pale she was. He saw that the darkness hid more than just that. She was trembling and it was clear from her eyes that she had not been on her feet for the first day.

'What's wrong with you, did I somehow scare you?'

'No, no, what are you talking about? I even thought that maybe Vito brought the shy one. I don't feel well, that's all. Come here.' - he pulled him towards her by the collar of his shirt, but Toke gently removed her hand.

'I am sorry, but you look like a ghost. Let me call you a taxi and help you get home. You can't stay here like this.'

'I'm fine, silly. Don't be distracted, we're busy.' - she smiled playfully, continuing to unbutton his shirt.

Toke stopped her hands and stared at her silently.

She smiled softly and looked at him as if he was a child.

'They will not let me go. According to the agreement, I'm here until 6 AM today and the owner has already seen me leave with you.'

'Let me talk to him, I'll tell him that you feel bad and you need to be taken to the hospital. As a client, I have a say in this.'

'No, fool, you don't. We are only allowed to be used in this area. And if we are not unconscious, without missing limbs or dying, then they do not care about us or our health. They won't let me leave, don't even try.'

'I don't have a first aid kit or water or, or anything on me. Let me get a bottle from the bar and sit here with you until 6. I will pay for the whole 2 hours, don't worry.' - he handed her a small folded wad of money and looked like a child trying to glue a broken toy back together.

'What is your name?'

'Toke Titian. People on the street called me differently today, but it sounds so weird. I am not Tietz.' - he laughed, moving a chair towards her.

'You don't fit here at all, Toke. You take too much to heart. People come here for something else. You didn't even *take* any, right?'

Toke shook his head: 'I like to prolong the pleasure. I pay attention to details and timing, so it comes together perfectly. How about I still take you home after 6?'

She put her arm on his shoulder and signed.

'This is my home. My usual environment. In a normal one I feel too much freedom — I have no idea what to do with it. But it's time for you to go home. At least relax there, please.' - she smiled, stroked his head and quickly walked towards the women's toilet.

When the sound of the ground under the wheels of the car became almost inaudible, Toke slammed the door behind him and went out onto his balcony.

'I don't know what to do with this freedom if I'm empty.'

Toke put the pill on his tongue and closed his eyes.

Fever dream

Apartment №4

I once smoked on the balcony on Saturday,
Dangling my feet over the railing.
At 1 PM.

Second floor, door on the right.
The sounds of an online math lesson
Reached all the way to my floor,
The window was fully open.

Heat, stuffiness and blinding sun.
The boy listened silently
And wrote everything down in a notebook,
His shaggy head was visible
To all the birds on my balcony.

Calm voices of parents
About buying a new TV,
They were drowned out
By the teacher's talk about fractions.

I paint on canvas
Their oak dining table is the only place
Where can you see them all together.

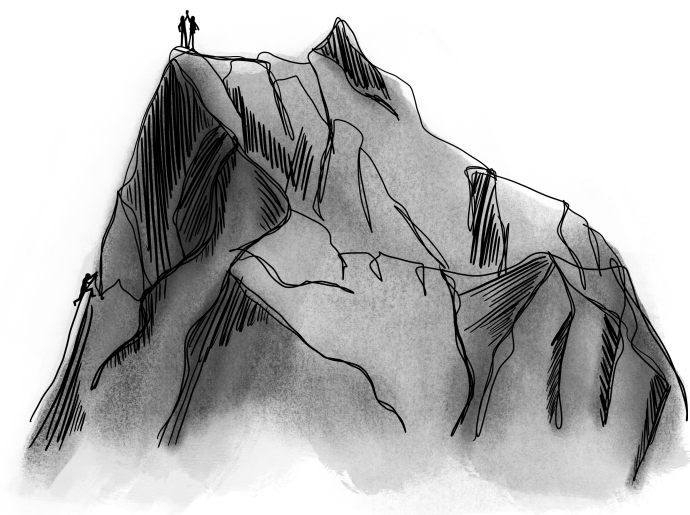
The child looked at them so *indifferently*,
When they laughed and kissed
Or they were heatedly discussing something

I remember this age and grin,
After all, for a boy of 12 years old
There is nothing worse,
How to see parents kiss
OR being kissed by your mom
In front of your friends.

However, I never noticed
For them to do this.

They didn't scream,
Didn't quarrel,
There was no sound of doors rattling,
There was no drama,
No tragedy
Or at least some mention of
A teenager living in the apartment.

'Young man, please don't smoke so close to the eaves,
the child is breathing all of this in.'
They never remembered my name.
(And thank God)



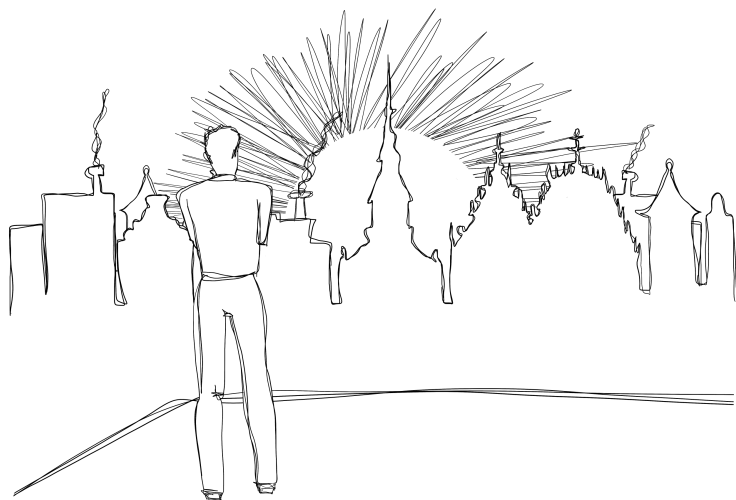
The air in the apartment seemed weightless. The walls and furniture seemed to be moving, creating the feeling that the world around him was warping, taking on new shapes and sizes. Something inside him shed long-accumulated crust and dust as if his soul was breathing deeply for the first time in a long time.

Having overcome the strange magnetism of the space, Toke began to feel that the apartment was too small. He went out onto the staircase, pressed the wall lever with a bang and climbed out onto the roof of the house through the open window.

A piece of the city opened up before him in a moment. Its lights twinkled like stars on earth, and the air had a strange aftertaste.

This sensation was like the effect of a painkiller, turning everything around into less acute and real things.

A painkiller for the pain that was the epicenter of his life.



But after 12 hours *it* started.

Toke lay under the blanket, sweating even though he was cold. Wiping his nose from a sudden runny nose, he held the “vomit basin” with trembling hands. His joints ached like he did in third grade when he got sick and had a temperature of 39.

The thought that he shouldn’t have done this flashed through his head every time he leaned over the basin. Although in the morning it was similar to the taste of chocolate after many years of only water and bread.

Every hour he dissolved more and more into his bed, patiently waiting for the end of this torment, as if awakening past habits of enduring something. When relief finally came, his eyes closed at that very second.

At the age of 4, I climbed onto the mezzanine along the shelves of the bookcase, hid behind a gray curtain, and pulled my knees to my chest, simultaneously covering my ears with my hands. While the mentality of “home = safe place” was crumbling inside me, I continued to hear the screams of adults coming from the living room. The sound was drowned out by strange squeaking in my ears and my head became foggy. Even if I tried to listen to what four adults were arguing about, I couldn’t.

At the age of 7, I celebrated my September 1st in a hospital block, where doctors were surprised to discover that I had nervous asthma.

At the age of 9, I watched my older sister get married, and 3 weeks later she put foundation on a bruise on her face.

At the age of 12, my hands became covered with red spots and it became very difficult for me to breathe. While I greedily gulped oxygen, I heard a crying nurse trying to stuff a bribe into my father’s jacket, and he was yelling something about medical malpractice and statistics on accidental childhood overdoses.

At the age of 15, I watched from the window as my father injected heroin into his vein.

At 17, I placed flowers on my sister's grave, deciding to gain my freedom differently.

At 21, I finally detached from this nightmare.

Lace-up sneakers

Apartment №5

I was once lying on the bed
After the Friday shift,
In the silence and darkness of golden time.
10 PM.
She knocked slowly.
Third floor, door on the left.

Makeup,
Shapewear clothes
Loose, styled hair,
Playful smile
Confident posture.

'I didn't have time to meet you'
'The house didn't make you feel so welcome'
'I wanted to ask you for help with the doorknob'
'I'll be glad to do something for you in return'
'You look so responsible'
'We can split the evening into 2 parts if you're tired'

The whole house was buzzing about it

How *sociable* she is.

No one said it out loud

The word “whore”

But everyone thought so.

Nobody really knew

Where does she work,

Where she regularly disappears for months.

No one has ever seen her

In cozy clothes

Or without makeup.

Moreover,

No one has ever seen

A man

Coming in and out through her door.



Toke tried to take on as many shifts and orders as possible every day to push the thoughts out of his head that he hadn't fully tried *it* out. He tried to think about how often to take it as a pain reliever to somehow reduce the risks. Day after day, evening after evening, his head was gradually cluttered with obsessive thoughts of expectation. Waiting for him to calm his rational self and finally give his soul some well-deserved rest.

Elif extended his sick leave 12 hours before going to work. When Toke picked up the vibrating phone, he saw a message:

'Bro, I'm sorry, but these weeks I started feeling a desire to live. Far from home, with doctors and in silence. I need another piece of this paradise, take my weekend shifts, I beg you. Just the thought of returning home makes me feel sick in the hospital.'

Toke threw his head back and exhaled sharply.

Leaving the restaurant, instead of the usual path home, he took the bus, at the same time counting with his hand how many cigarettes were left in his pocket.

The block turned orange-red due to the rapidly approaching sunset and Toke frantically began to increase his walking speed — in the dark he would spend twice as much time searching. Trying with all his might to recall in his memory the route along which he practically crawled the last time, Toke was still thinking about turning back and never returning here again. Attacked by these dilemmatic thoughts, he leaned against a residential building and slid down the wall, throwing his head back.

All these thoughts instantly evaporated when his gaze fell on the corner of the fence 20 meters away.

Sneakers.

They hung on cords at the very corner of the fence bordering the passage to the neighboring area.

Like a glowing Christmas tree, the inviting sign was the only thing Toke remembered from talking to Vito the last time he tried to persuade him to come again.

After 5 minutes of the final walk around the city, Toke was trying to look out in the crowd for Vito, his girlfriend, that prostitute, or at least the scarred guy, when he heard a voice behind him:

'Have you been using *recently*'?

Toke was taken aback and turned around: 'How did you guess?'

'You look around like a second-grader who can't find his friends in a big building, you rub the back of your head nervously as if you don't know what to expect from this place. You look at people's faces, hoping to see those who brought you into this business.'

'Very impressive. My name is Toke.' - he extended his hand.

'Riga.' - she shook it in return.

'How long have you been using yourself?' - he sat down on the next chair.

Toke examined her from head to toe. Red freckles, well-groomed skin and hair pulled back into a ponytail, decent clothes, a lot of jewelry and *astonishing tranquility*. She sat, drinking coffee (still no clue where she got it from) and watching the people around.



'I first tried it at school, in my senior year. As soon as my parents divorced and my mother stopped noticing me, I noticed myself in drugs. A couple of years of addiction and 2 days ago I celebrated 2 years of cleanliness.

'Since you are clean, why do you come here?'

'Makes it easier for me. My life didn't become a bed of roses after I stopped using. I still have the same problems that I started with and therapy can't cure everything in you, all at once. I feel calm here, it seems that I'm not the only one fucked up. Trains my willpower and reminds me of what I've been through.

She noticed his ununderstanding glaze and looked him deep in the eyes:

'I like to suffer, so I feel that I deserve pity and support for myself.'

Toke had not forgotten why he had come here, but she made him sit firmly in his chair for a while.

They talked for several hours.

It all seemed so absurd because all this time they sat surrounded by drug addicts actively confirming their status.

Toke found out that Riga had moved from Hungary a long time ago a couple of years ago and made her the first person to whom he told his own full story.

However, when Toke shared his current doubts and worries, he did not hear any support in response.

'If you want to feel something, there are plenty of other ways. *No one in their right mind would give a five-year-old child heroin to stop him feeling sad after a terrible loss or trauma.*'

She didn't sound preachy, she didn't try to dissuade him, she just threw this truth in his face like a wet towel.

'Something definitely made you happy in life. Remember and figure out how you can revive this feeling artificially. If it doesn't help, there are a lot of different ways to hurt yourself, it's difficult, how to put your life

in danger. Well, if you go and throw yourself off the cliff, it will be more useful.'

Toke listened to her with difficulty. He still didn't understand why the hell he was still sitting on this chair and discussing this with her if he was already tormenting himself with such thoughts every 20 seconds.

'You're not the first and you won't be the last to go through this,' she continued. 'But this does not mean that it is necessary to turn a minority into a majority. There is no real scenario where drugs lead to anything good.

Once they enter your body, you will be changed forever. Old Toke has already disappeared, and there will be no point of no return.'

How the final blow sounded:

'You've been through so much, take yourself seriously.'

Irritated, he mumbled something like it was nice to meet you and rushed towards the man who was sitting at the counter. Angry at the truth, Toke told himself that he was not the same for a LONG time.

He opened his mouth and swallowed the pill.

Swamp with strings

Apartment №6

I was once taking out the trash
Late in the morning
On Wednesday.
Third floor, door on the right.

She took flower pots outside,
He poured water into a watering can.
She quietly hummed a song to herself,
He was watching the news at the same time.
Working like a well-coordinated clan of ants,
They did everything automatically
It's as if this program was built into them from birth.

He is 61 years old
He takes the bus every day
Walking towards the zoo
Except Sunday and Monday.

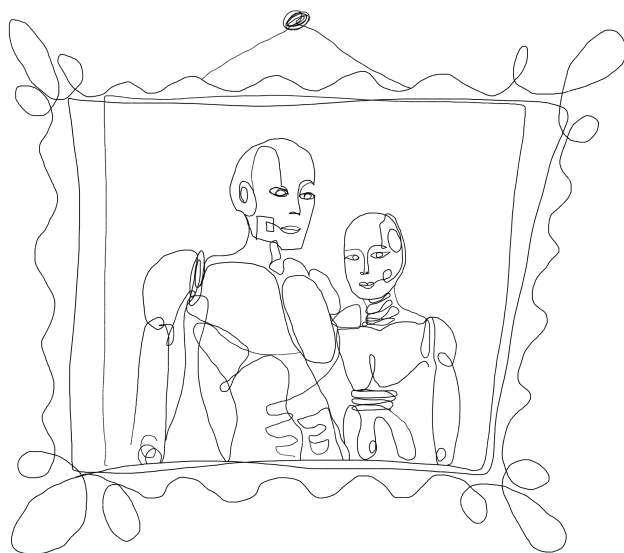
Animal caretaker
Having been married for 38 years,
Talks to giraffes, raccoons, elephants and squirrels
More often than with his wife

She's 57
She keeps the house and food under control
Drawing in another room
And knows about the characters of his favorite TV show
More than about him

When she's sick
He takes her in the backseat to the hospital
When his clothes are torn at work
She sews him a new one.

Trying to draw their door.
The sign with the name spoiled everything
After all, instead of a surname sign
I wanted to write "*symbiotic*"

In that apartment, everything works like a clock —
unerringly and artificially.



Time no longer worked hand in hand with Toke.
It played with him like he was a helpless string puppet.

Days mocked him.

Weeks tormented him.

Months tore him apart inside.

The time interval between doses decreased at a
breakneck speed.

Now that there was *something* inside him, it was beaten
and destroyed every second he wasn't on drugs.

Addiction ate him from the inside, leaving no crumbs.

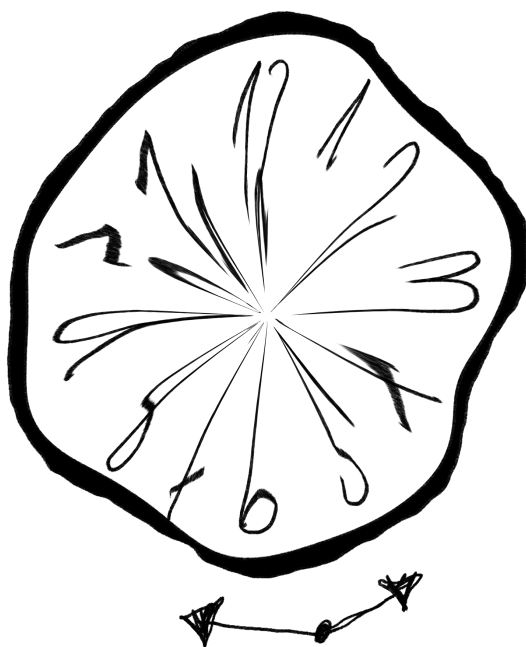
He couldn't be around people like before.

He couldn't ignore them.

Couldn't hold back when they opened their mouths.

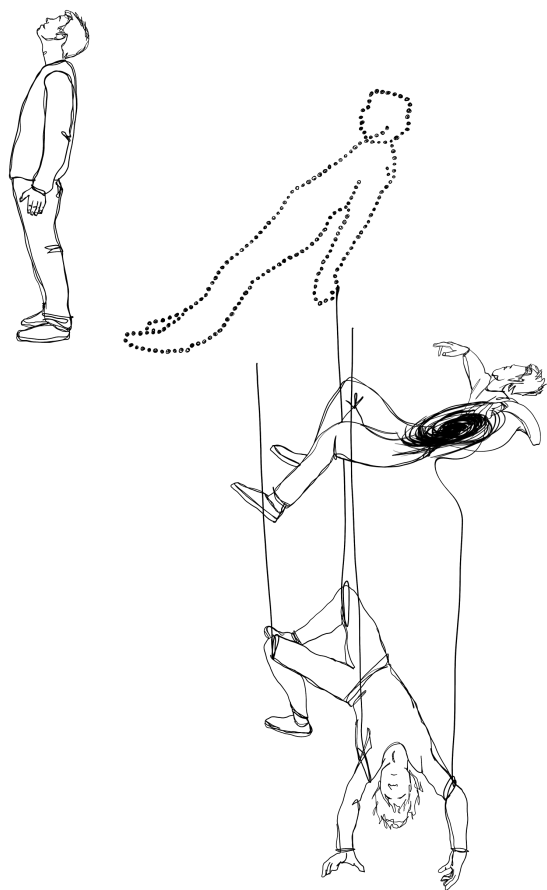
He quit in September.

But this only increased his time spent with himself and
he realized that he could not stay in his body for long.



The body seemed to be forever crying.
Wet eyes, although he didn't want to cry.
Perpetual drool hanging from the mouth, like a dog's.
He was sweating while sleeping without a blanket.

His own breathing irritated him.



He had not seen Vito for almost a month, so he was very surprised when he noticed his face in the crowd.

Toke began to get irritated again as he waited for them to bring him what he had come for.

It's like they're deliberately stalling for time.

The same impatient man, as if reading his thoughts, nervously shouted to him that he would break his head if he hurried him.

Toke went outside so that the cold would somehow bring him to his senses, distracting him from the dragging minutes of waiting. Chills had become his best friend over the past few months.

'What did you say, freak?' - Toke heard behind his back.

Turning around, he realized that they were not talking to him.

'I told you to move your heroin-rotten carcass away from the door.' - the second guy answered, nervously rubbing his hands. Toke saw him 15 minutes ago, he couldn't pay for the dose.

The first guy tried to mutter something similar to a sentence, but immediately after an unsuccessful cognitive attempt, his fist was lightning fast on the second guy's face.

Toke reflexively took a step back and felt himself hit someone's back.

'Hey, you have the same problem or what??' the guy shouted angrily and grabbed Toke by the collar of his jacket.

A fight broke out instantly. Being not particularly coordinated, people pushed each other causing a chain reaction of discontent, expanding the epicenter of the conflict more and more.

While Toke was delivering punches left and right, the same guy who started this chaos grabbed him. He growled something incomprehensible about the clumsy coward, leaving bruises on his neck and stomach. When Toke's muscle memory finally woke up, he, all red, jumped behind someone's back and swung his fist.

Second and he fell to the ground unconscious. The silence that followed was broken only by the sound of an approaching police car.

He froze, feeling the cold blade of a knife pressed against his stomach.

7

I don't need your *teapot*

Apartment №7

I marked it on the calendar
All his vacation days.

I knew them
Without asking
His morning curse
Worked as my snooze alarm.

Floor four, door on the left.

I knew the notes of his voice by heart
I felt his every emotion
I was sure that
There had never been anything
More stubborn in my life
Than his morning appearance.

40 years,
A little tan
Accent,
Egyptian door decorations
And a great feeling of hatred
For the neighbor
From apartment №10.

His hair was always wet
The skin is always dry and cracked,
And his clothes always smelled
Like industrial bleach.

Previously, he worked as a diver
In the seas and oceans,
Now — in small reservoirs.

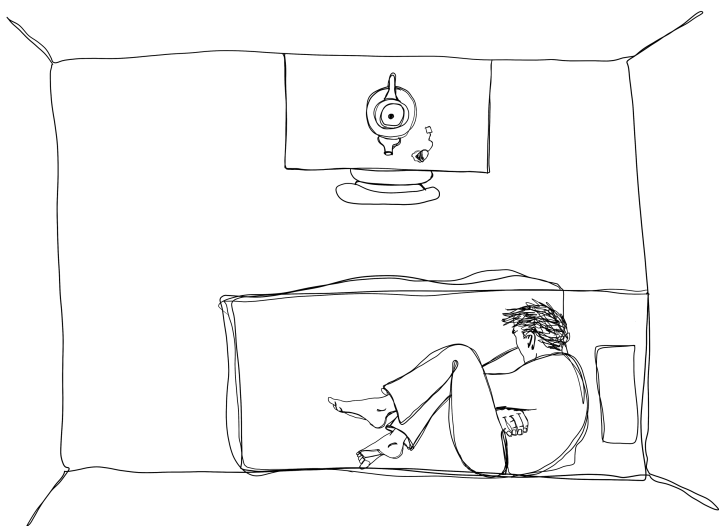
He probably chose this profession
Because only under water can he remain *silent*.



The police car into which he was pushed abruptly moved away. No one went into detail — as soon as the police saw the knife, they took away all the visible participants in the fight.

'The presumption of innocence is the need for strong evidence to formally accuse a criminal. No one has the right to arrest you just because you live near the place where, for example, a murder was committed. This requires compelling reasons — video footage or witnesses who saw you entering the murder scene. From this follows the rule: everyone is considered innocent until proven otherwise. A similar principle in the judicial system has been protecting people for many years, throwing Russell's magic teapot into their hands.' - Toke remembered the words of the teacher spoken at school many years ago.

But now, squeezed into the corner of the police car, he felt anything but innocent.



The sound of the iron beams hitting the huge door bolt brought Toke to his senses.

He sat down on the opposite bench from his offender and exhaled. He had 'street problems' as a child, but it rarely ended in a bullpen. He went back into his thoughts again, not understanding how he ended up here.

'A similar principle in the judicial system has protected people for many years by throwing Russell's magic teapot into their hands.'

He was quickly pulled out of his daydreaming again.

The guy, out of nowhere, started banging his head against the bars and screaming.

'Don't touch me, I have nothing, leave me alone!' - he sharply ran his pressed hand along the rough iron bars and instantly saw liquid scarlet drops sliding down to his elbow.

Toke's eyes widened when a second later he grabbed his arm, leaving traces of blood all over his shirt.

'Let go of my hand, you crazy person!!!'

Toke still stood as if paralyzed, not understanding how to react to this.

A guard quickly came running in response to the noise, and a minute later an investigating officer entered the cell, observing a shocked Toke in one corner and a creature twitching in emotional convulsions in the second.

He came closer and asked them both the same question: 'Who started the fight and why?'

For the first time in his life, Toke, stuttering, could not utter a word and the officer silently turned to his "opponent".

He whined, drooled, snotted and cried, his whimpering would be the envy of every capricious child, he begged and looked up at the chief of police with his puppy dog eyes. As a result, he was so choked in his sobs that, out of hopelessness, he lowered his head, covering it with his hands and quietly puled in the fetal position while his body shook with large tremors. But as soon as the door slammed shut, he raised his chin and opened his eyes

directly into the lens of the corner camera. His eyes, lips and face were framed by the most insidious smile Toke had ever seen. He coldly wiped away the last tear from his cheek and smiled arrogantly at the indictment sheets that lay on the table.

'Will you tell me now that I'm wrong, narrow-eyed?'

The officer took Toke for questioning an hour later after pointless attempts to get something out of the second guy other than 'they attacked me here and there, it's not my fault.'

His questions were precise and laconic, his gaze was unreadable, but Toke was calm. He understood that he had almost no information about the appearance and sale of drugs, about these people and the reason for the fight. He dumped his bewilderment directly onto the table.

'I recently quit my job to develop more in freelancing. Wanted to say my final "goodbye", and I agreed to meet with my friend from the restaurant. He lives in this block and walking by I just asked one of the people for

directions. This one attacked me and I got into a crowded fight.'

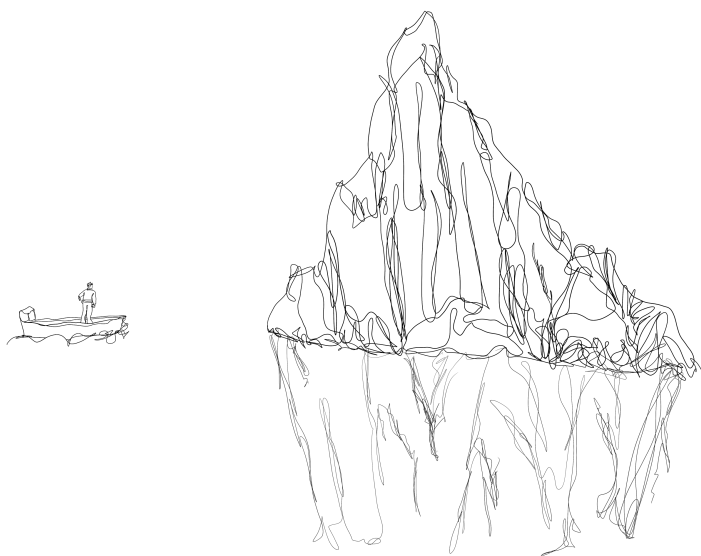
The officer silently wrote down his answers, peering at Toke from time to time, as if trying to read his thoughts. The final hook was the drug test, which, after several days of cleanliness, was resoundingly negative.

'Now you will be taken to solitary confinement. They will keep you here until we find out all the circumstances.'

The night in the cell took the whole soul out of Toke. The withdrawal was eating him from the inside, pressing his bones into the plastic bench. When he finally managed to fall asleep, the sleep seemed to last no more than 20 minutes.

'Titian, come out, you have been given bail.'

Riga, standing on the threshold, was the last face Toke expected to see.



How did I scratch the basin?

Apartment №8

I once heard
How she called an electrician.
Fourth floor, door on the right.

'Hello, 2 pm is fine. I won't be at home, my wife will
open a door for you.'
Wife?

I've never seen anyone
Coming out,
Coming in,
Making sounds
Or any other signs of life
In this apartment,
Except her.

2 weeks after the electrician,
I was scrolling through my TikTok feed
And I saw her.

'POV: you have agoraphobia. you haven't left your
apartment in 2 years so your wife takes pictures and
videos everywhere saying 'I wish you were here with
me.'

A 28-year-old blonde
In the avatar of the message sender
Seemed incredibly familiar.
Her facial expression
Was exactly the same
When she greeted me
With a smile
In the mornings
Passing.

After that day
It became more and more noticeable
How unobtrusively *secretive* they are.

They were laconic — they said exactly as much as was
required.

Never complained about the noise.

Worked as minimalist interior designers

And apparently,

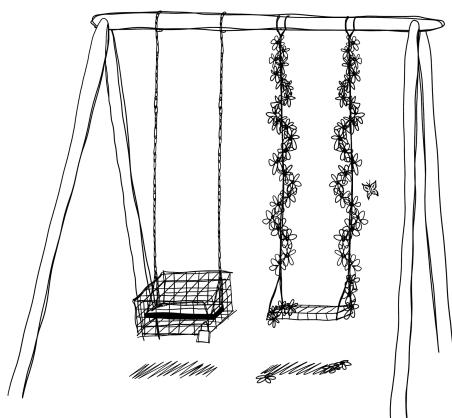
Lived their life by Chekhov's quote:

“Brevity is the soul of wit.”

Quiet,

Silent,

Isolated?



'Pseudo-decent people always believe that they are very far from drugs and addiction, that bad companies and brewed methamphetamine are sky-high far from their routine existence. They always think that this can never happen to them.

And then they take tablets with 500 mg of painkiller several times a day on a regular basis.

They mix sleeping pills with chamomile tea in a mug every night.

They gorge themselves on sweets after a hard day of work in front of the TV.

They drink alcohol because 'today is Friday/Saturday/Sunday/Monday.

They chug coffee or energy drinks with every meal.

They smoke at every break with their colleagues.

They check their phone every 2 minutes.

They cannot spend even an hour alone with themselves.

They slowly increase the dose of all this every day and are content to think that they have no addictions.'

He held the basin suspended, clinging to it with her nails, while he doubled over and vomited into it. His attempts to overcome abstinence syndrome seemed as pathetic as jumping over his head. Riga had been staying with him for a week, turning this critical time into a critical time with tea and tramadol.

'You're just like Master Yoda.' - Toke chuckled once, lying opposite her. 'It's like you always know what to do, what to say and how to react to everything. I don't understand how you are so calm all the time?'

'I'm not calm, I'm patient. I'm waiting for you to stumble, then I won't be calm. Therefore, it will be great if you keep yourself under control after I leave tomorrow.'



Emotional swing became his new best friend after Riga left. Apparently, the calmness that she radiated affected him too.

Wednesday.

Toke noticed that cigarettes made him sick too. If you take away the fact of taking drugs and an almost empty stomach, then Toke, in fact, felt like a pregnant woman.

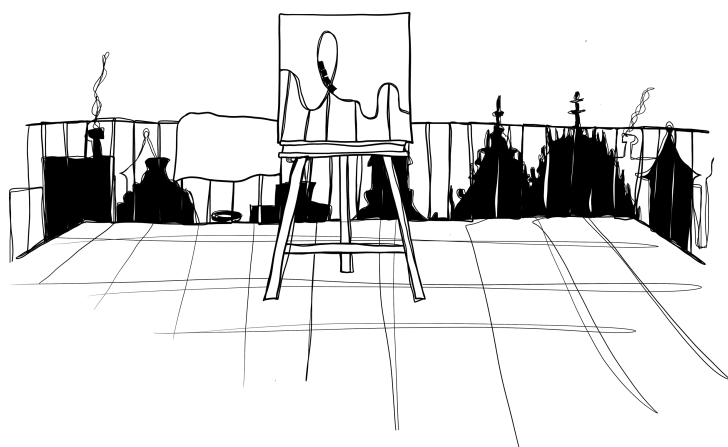
photo of Riga's cigarette in chat

'Imagine that you are sitting behind the house with me and covering your mouth with your hand because the smoke is getting into your nose again.'

Thursday.

No one reminded him how well orders were made while he was using and how difficult it was to get anything out of himself in this gray state. Once, when he was using in summer, he used 3 canvases in 2 days — simply because it seemed to him as if he was inside the painting.

Now he was sitting in front of the tablet and could not draw even a relatively straight line.



Friday.

The strategy of interrupting loud thoughts with loud music did not work well. Riga suggested imagining that he was at a concert of a band he was listening to and making a slam.

Saturday.

He sat leaning against the wall, holding the phone with his ear and shoulder.

'Riga, what do you mean when you say that drugs are *forever*? You gave up drugs and are helping me. Do you use figures of speech?' - Toke smiled sarcastically.

'I already explained to you that drugs are like a point of no return. That Toke who did not know them and did not try them will never exist again. Even after you overcome addiction, life will no longer seem so bright. And the search for a feeling brighter than what you experienced while on drugs will feel like years of digging in the ground, hoping to find a rare diamond.'

Sunday.

Toke went out onto the balcony. Cigarettes still make me sick, but the balcony habit remains.

He opens the messages on the phone.

'I'm planning to buy rats.'

'Whom? And for what?'

'To love them'

'But they live very little'

'It's okay. I could die any day as well.'

'Then I will come to you and pet them. Otherwise, you are not allowed to buy any.'

'I am obsessed with rodents'

9

Maybe it really is Tietz

Apartment №9

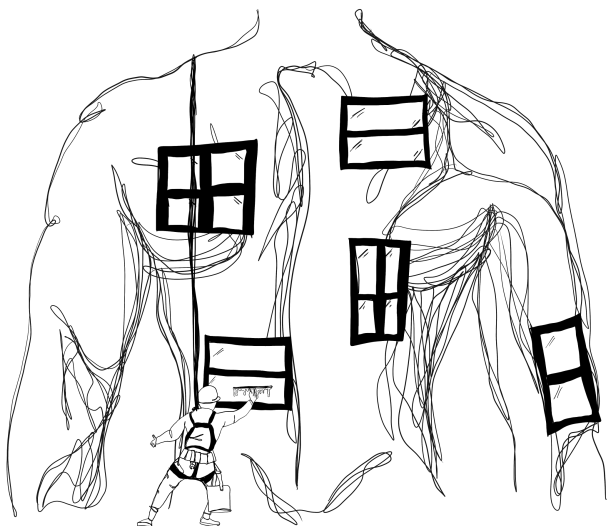
I once looked out onto the stairs
During another *potato performance*.
Fifth floor, door on the left.

Tall,
All hung with equipment,
Ropes sticking out of pockets
Spare carbines,
Paint on the jacket.
There was a feeling
That he was ready for every single life circumstance.

Literally clinging to life,
He washed tall building glass windows
According to schedule 2/2.
He took shifts for sick people,
Washed other people's clothes from the dirty laundry
basket,
Cleaned the staircase railings every Tuesday
And almost every single day,
He tried to dissuade his neighbor from bringing potatoes.

Waking up from the sound of potatoes,
I heard,
How the door to his apartment opens
And he rushes to lift the bags.

Along with this door,
The door of his *complaisance* was opening.



I'm 4 years old again and I'm sitting on the mezzanine. My parents don't look for me until it's bedtime. My sister opens the curtain and picks me up, sleepy, in her arms, lowering me down to the floor. The beeping in my ears stops as soon as I hear her voice. I didn't hear what they were shouting about.

Toke shuddered all over and opened his eyes. Still the same apartment on the sixth floor. Old new reality. His eyes filled with tears and he fell face down into the pillow and sobbed muffledly, clutching the white blanket until his hands were white.

The same thing from morning to evening.

The thoughts felt like a child tugging at his mother's skirt without stopping to ask, 'Are we there yet?'

You can't run away from them.

You can't make the sound a couple of decibels quieter, you can't close the door to your own head or curtain your existence.

Even scream, cry, or even bang your head against the wall, nothing will change.

You just feel very bad and in pain.

They suck out your last vital energy through a straw, injecting pain and fatigue through it.

These thoughts weigh on you until every cell in your body turns blue.

They take away your 'nothing.'

He sees nothing more than drugs.

He couldn't do anything, couldn't write anything, couldn't draw anything, couldn't produce anything close to being marketable.

Toke paid for the rent a week ago, but in the refrigerator, he only had cold air and the smell of sour yogurt.

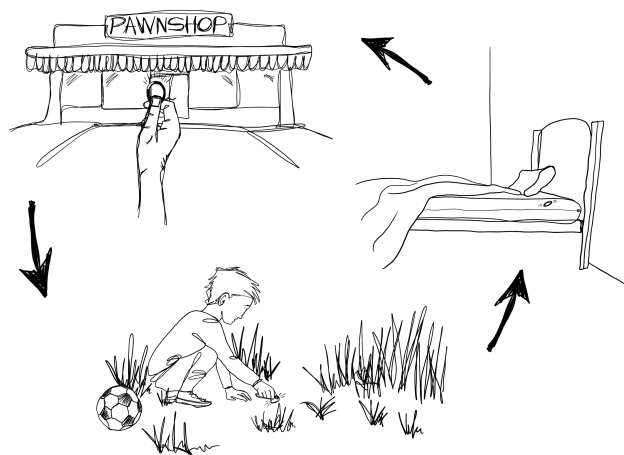
Toke stepped on the threshold and heard a welcoming bell overhead.

'How can I help you, young man?'

Toke handed him the ring with a forced smile, finally rubbing it with his finger.

Many years ago, while still a child, Toke found this ring in a field near the factory while playing football with friends. For some reason he never stole, so when money became tight, he always remembered that he could sell it. Even though he did not show it to anyone, it was clear to the naked eye that the ring was worth something. The round financial pillow was stored in his mattress cover for many years, and without ever being worn, it disappeared into obscurity.

After 10 minutes, Toke left the pawnshop with a wad of money equal to 2 months of his apartment rent.



Standing in the supermarket, he remembered Riga saying that it would be great to one day swap the library and grocery store systems. Arrange all books according to “compatibility” and genres, and in the store arrange all products in alphabetical order. According to her, if this had happened at night, many illiterate people would have become wiser, and smart people would have gotten what they wanted faster.

'And in general, the light in supermarkets is like in a morgue — no positive message. Eat and die is the only thing that comes to mind.'

Cucumber

Apple

Dumplings

Instant noodles

Coffee

Milk

Approaching the checkout, Toke realized that he could not smell the chewing gum from the shelves. Weird.

Coming home, it was as if he had put another comma in the cycle.

He was boiling like a kettle.

Throwing the groceries on the floor, he took his phone out of his pocket.

'Hey, Vito? I need it as usual.'

'They don't sell in the neighborhood anymore, a lot of people have been driven away. You know the price, come to the old school by the fountain in an hour.'

Having 3 layers of clothing on his body, Toke was still shaking like an autumn leaf and while passing by a shop window, he suddenly noticed how much weight he had lost.

He blinked.

And now he's already standing and giving the money to the guy with trembling hands.

After 30 minutes, he again stepped on the threshold of the house and felt that he had given the comma into the hands of that guy with the package.

He closes his eyes and puts the pill in his mouth.

The phone bounces on the table from vibration.

He hasn't responded to Riga's messages for more than a day.

He had nothing to say at the moment, so he waited until he became sober to finally call.

At the moment of the next attack of severe withdrawal, the phone goes silent.

After 15 minutes a message appears on the screen:

'I know why you don't answer. I hope the pill was tasty.'

Toke reflexively pressed the phone to his ear so hard that he almost broke the ear cartilage: 'Riga, wait, don't freak out, why are you reacting like that?'

'I thought I was helping you. And you had no intention of getting clean. You decided to try to quit, as if it were a fitness diet, and then binge. Until you REALLY decide, my efforts are useless. Nothing is connecting us, there are no obligations between us either, so I have no reason to save you. Look, swallow carefully, otherwise, you'll get it stuck in your throat.'

Human prototype

Apartment №10

He was 66 years old
And it seemed
That all these 66 years,
He lived in the same regime.

Every morning my alarm clock
Opened the door to the entrance,
Turned on the light on the stairs
Mounted the door on a hook
And started all over again.

Fifth floor, door on the right.
Vegetable bags, or to be precise,
Mainly bags of potatoes
Manually dragged to that same floor
So that in a couple of hours
Find themselves dragged down again.

Screaming Egyptian often said
He remembered that wonderful time
When his neighbor had a wife,
And everyone else had a healthy sleep.

'Where is your wife?'
'Why do you need so many vegetables?'
'Where are you always dragging them?'
'Why do you do this every single day?'
Only occasionally giving the person asked a glance, he,
possessed by his actions, never answered these
questions.



There was almost no money left from the ring. The refrigerator began to smell like mold, and there wasn't enough money for a new dose.

He takes his phone out of his pocket.

'Vito, it's Toke. I need money. And I know you had some people run around the area doing errands. How can I earn some?

'After the police situation, we no longer work in that area. But we do transport some stuff to another one. You can help pick it up and transfer it to a neighboring one, and you'll get money for one dose. I'll text you the contact and address, I need to be there in 2 hours.'

After 2 hours, for some reason dressed in all black, Toke found himself in the park. It was easy to spot an only car at 11 PM among the lonely pines. After getting in and looking around, Toke recognized a friend of the 'scar guy' in one of the passenger's neighbors.

The place looked a lot like where he grew up. Dysfunctional, poor and dirty. Dark, strangely noisy and dim. With a nasty smell and a cracked appearance.

He entered the building and climbed the stairs to the noisy floor, following the rest of the people out of the car. To a room where everyone calmly divides everything into bags. They explained to Toka almost with gestures what to do, and having attached himself to this conveyor, he began to work on the boxes.

Opposite him sat a businessman with a calculator and hand scales, simultaneously sniffing the line.

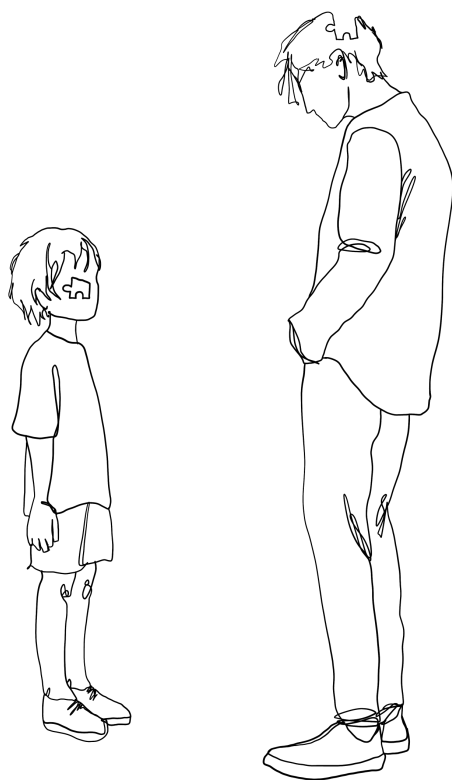
'Fucking hell.' - he shook his hand to the side, rubbing the red liquid over his nose. 'Someone, bring me a towel quickly!' - the glance darted to Toke and was followed by a nod towards the next room.

Toke walked into the open door next door and froze.

A child was sitting on a bench in front of the table. Sports uniform. Misty look. It's as if he was plucked from being in the middle of something and brought here. He doesn't understand what's happening. Or he becomes numb with the horror of realizing what is really happening.

With his mouth open, Toke walks back into the room, where no one notices him and before saying anything, his gaze falls on the TV.

'Eight-year-old Theo Glykas went missing. Today, at 5 PM, he was at the park with his older sister, Nyssa Glykas when he disappeared during the moment of inattention of her. If you have any information about the location of the boy, please call the number placed in the upper right corner.'



Toke's palms went numb.

He slowly closed his mouth and walked back into the room.

Taking the towel in his hands, he stared at the boy. There are about 20 people in the building, all of whom have been walking around the apartments and rooms doing business for several hours, according to the guy who gave him a ride. If all these people find the boy on the bench a normal occurrence, then announcing this fact will only shorten the lifespan of both of them. The 'little man' rule. Toke took his phone out of his pocket and dialed a number.

'Riga, listen to me, please. I'm now in a brothel, drug house, crime scene or whatever it's called. Those cars that used to be parked in the block are transporting packaged goods and preparing for sale in this new place. Riga, there's a child involved. I'm not asking you to save me. Help him please.'

The pause cut the air in half.

'Make sure he can hold out on his own until the police arrive. Leave the building through another door or window after about 10 minutes and hide somewhere

close to the premises. When they sort it out and take everyone away, you can leave calmly.'

Toke poured a glass of water and placed it in front of the boy. He periodically spat and vomited, staining both their clothes, skin and hair.

'You're Theo, right? You understand me?'

It was as if he was looking not at him, but through him. Neither fear nor pain was visible in his eyes. Just lostness and fog.

He took the towel to the guy and for the next 10 minutes did what he did best in his life — rearranged the boxes. Having deliberately inhaled all the dust from the corner shelf, he began to cough, gruntingly asking where the toilet was.

Climbing over the window frame, Toke's gaze fell on the garbage mountains next to the trees, where he found himself a few seconds later.

Watching through the trash gap as the cursing addicts were seated in cars, Toke blinked quickly and looked for a boy in the crowd.

A couple of minutes later he heard a scream:

'Call an ambulance, quickly! He's getting worse.'

Toke saw how several police officers found something like a mattress with a blanket and carried the boy out of the building in their arms, laying him horizontally, sitting down next to them and leaning his head against their knees.

They dragged their fucking mattress so close to the garbage mountains that Toke froze and covered his mouth with his hand so that, God forbid, he would not reveal the place of his hide-and-seek.

The female police officer muttered something soothing to him, while others tried to give him water, which he continued to vomit onto the mattress.

Suddenly the boy looked up at the girl and began to speak. Everyone around froze and fell silent.

'I ran to look at the kitten, Mom. I heard him meowing nearby. Nyssa wouldn't let me, but it seemed to me that he was crying. I didn't want to make her angry so I didn't tell her I was leaving. I'm sorry, I won't disobey Nissa anymore. Can we all go for a walk together on Friday?' - he patiently looked into her eyes and waited for an answer.

The woman, swallowing the lump in her throat, answered him:

'Of course, we'll go. We just need to take you home and get some sleep first. Nyssa must be sad. They are looking for you like you did to that kitten.'

'I just wanted to help him, but there was no one there. I never found the kitten, Mom.' - he barely managed to finish his sentence and began coughing mucus onto the mattress again.

The man turned away and, gritting his teeth, asked another policeman to call an ambulance again.

When the ambulance was heard at the end of the street, the boy began to twitch in convulsions and everyone started running around like ants in an anthill.

Open doors, beeping machines and focused doctors seemed to play in unison a special symphony for the little boy.

A few minutes later, the doctor approached the police officers and said quietly:

'I am sorry, but he was already yellow when we arrived.'

He didn't remember how he got home.

All he saw in front of him were the eyes of this child.

The smell of vomit and garbage was exaggerated threefold after what happened.

It seemed to him that he was covered in dirt, especially that it was sinking inside him.

After the shower, nothing changed. Then he picked up the shaving machine and went to the mirror.

The whirring blades cut away the dark locks of his short hair faster than today's memories flashed before his eyes.

For a second he thought that the easiest way would be to just put the machine to his throat.

'Drugs are like a point of no return. That Toke who didn't know them and didn't try them will never exist again.'

'I never found the kitten, Mom.'

'Now I'm definitely not the same anymore.'

11

10 tiny secrets

8 months later



'There are so many different types of drugs in the world, but somehow they haven't yet come up with the ones that finally cure the soul, improve life and bring happiness.'

Toke opened his eyes and pressed the phone screen. 4:03 AM.

The nightmare of withdrawal ended 3 months ago, but he still hasn't adjusted his sleep patterns. Just like the work of all other organs in his body.

After what happened, he no longer asked himself any questions. He realized that if he started having rational conversations about this in his head, he would either go crazy or find himself stoned on the floor again. Therefore, no doubts, explanations or questions.

~~Should I or should I not?~~

You have to shy away from them like the devil from incense.

Throwing off a cliff.

Plunging into the deep end.

Picturing that boy in front of his eyes, he did not touch drugs anymore.

A knock on the door interrupted his important process of zoning out and staring at the wall.

'Toke, it's me. At work today they handed out a pie, one of my colleagues quits. Open it already, my hands are not made out of steel to hold it all, are they?'

'Coming!'

Rubbing his eyes, he opened the door and cold air with dust blew into his face, forcing him to cough.

'God, Amissa, did you rob this poor and already unemployed woman?' - Toke laughed.

A girl from apartment №5 stood on the threshold and held in her hands a huge plastic box and a bottle of milk with a small bag of sweets. She was barely visible behind this mountain of things.

'You'll laugh when you go to the store again and look at the prices. Now, sit down and eat.' - the girl smiled slyly.

Every time Toke imagined a children's fairy tale in a colorful book when he looked at her.

Once upon a time, there lived a girl, Amissa. Amissa grew up in an orphanage. Immediately after she turned 18, she, with only a bag and microscopic savings, left this wonderful institution to get a job. This naive young girl was first deceived about her job and then robbed on the street when she had nowhere to sleep. Then Amissa began to use her only means of survival— she was very beautiful by nature. While she was trying to get a job, she, like a fishing rod, caught guys on Tinder every day, ensuring herself a place to sleep every night. After she was hired, she began to sleep in the closet. When the gas station where she worked began forcing her to take night shifts, she had to rent an apartment and resume dating, reducing their plot to a free lunch. 'Well, when I was laid off, I got drunk out of grief and went to the club. There I ran into a group of drunk, tanned foreigners who were working as volunteers in our city. That's how I found out about Aiesec and Worldpackers, applied in the morning with a hangover and a week later I was flying to

Indonesia, where I had 3 months to find a job here and potentially not die of hunger.'

7 months ago, after returning from Indonesia, she knocked on Toke's door with old hopes of a free dinner after the plane, however, she found the door open and Toke lying on the floor. Having brought him to consciousness, she found out exactly what had happened to him. Since then, they lived according to a mutual deal: she helped him physically function so that he could earn some money, and he, in turn, scraped together enough for them to eat. They became close because they both needed something to temporarily plug the gaping hole in their souls. The end.

(the end of a fictional fairy tale is meant)

As they stuffed their mouths with pie, they took turns sipping from the bottle and using exactly 17 napkins to wipe the milk that dripped from their lips onto the table.

'Amissa, we need to discuss something.'

'Gosh, how official. You and I, let me remind you, are not in the right relationship for you to formulate such proposals in dialogue with me.'

Toke grinned.

'Remember, you helped me change my phone number after we met for the second time?'

She nodded.

'I thought it would help. Drug dealers and addicts won't get to me, the police does not know anything - it seemed to me that after I quit, it would become easier for me to let go of this situation. But I can't wake up in this apartment anymore, knowing how close everything is. Knowing what I was like here. This entire lair is already adapted to *using all the time*. But I can't do this, I've been clean for 8 months already. I can't lose my temper. But how can I not think about resumption when everything around me inclines me towards it? Every time I close my eyes, I see this boy.' - Toke fell silent and abruptly went into his thoughts.

Amissa swallowed and calmly continued to sit in her chair. They never discussed this after *that* day.

'Let's agree. I slowly started working. I will find a way to keep my financial situation in order and will send you money regularly.' - he looked into her eyes as if asking.

'Send it from where?'

'I called the rehab yesterday. It's in another city, but there is some kind of program for the poor.'

Amissa's face relaxed and she hugged him meekly. 'Then it's decided.'

Toke exhaled and stood up to put the plates in the sink.

'Please promise me something. Every morning, when you wake up from our neighbor's potatoes, please call me. Or, at worst, send me a dictaphone recording.'

18 months later

Toke compared leaving rehab with leaving an orphanage — you take nothing with you except bad memories, no one believes in you, everyone thinks that you will become a drug addict and end up dead under the bridge. And they usually don't believe anybody would hire you.

The last point was crossed out after Toke was finally able to concentrate and start cranking out something creative and marketable. A friend of one of those treated at the rehab noticed him doing some sketches in the corner of the room and arranged an interview right in the reception ward. As a result, he was burdened with the responsibility of going to office 5/2 to develop design projects and advertising posters. And how he wanted that instead of his *past* he would dream of these projects.

Toke pulled the phone out of his pocket.

'Good morning.'

'I guess I haven't woken up yet.'

Toke chuckled: 'Amissa, men have never complimented you because of sarcasm.'

'And thank God. How will I live if men start complimenting me on my cognitive skills and not my appearance? I'll die of hunger tomorrow.'

Toke couldn't help but smile. Although all this time they were still living under the money-dictaphone agreement, they could always talk as easily as if they saw each other every day for these one and a half years.

'If I compliment you after I knock on the door, will you let me in?'

'I won't let you in, my whole apartment smells like smoke. We will go to the roof with a coffee pot.'

'Agreed.'

They told each other about these 550 days as if throwing bags of thoughts down from the roof.

'Why is your apartment smoky?'

'I arrived the day before yesterday. Smoking was not allowed on the plane or buses, and we traveled for almost a day. I compensated.'

Toke raised his eyebrows in surprise: 'Flew from where?'

'I went to volunteer again. This time to Hungary.'

'What about the recording I received every morning?? How long were you gone? How's that even?' - Toke cackled like an old grandfather and Amissa laughed without holding back.

'My lord, I have been sending you an old recording with a changed title for a month now. I didn't want to ruin your peace of mind and my promise.'

Toke chuckled.

'Tell me about Hungary?'

Amissa put down her cigarette and looked at the city.

'You know, I went with the same attitude as last time. Work, communicate with good people, eat delicious food and sleep in a warm place. It's all very mundane, making me question every day what I'm doing wrong by taking the places of other real volunteers for the idea of free food. And then I met *this* girl in Budapest. I helped lead a tour for a group from a nursing home and met her on a

smoke break. Toke, she traveled alone, not out of grief — out of happiness and a sense of freedom. So young, kind and everything in her head is in place. I almost got fired, we talked for an hour and a half. But suddenly I felt so much better and *lighter* inside.' - she looked into his eyes. 'I understood everything for myself, but you still need to figure it out,' she said, handing Toke the bracelet. 'It's just a bracelet that she gave, but people love to make things into talismans and keep peace of mind. Maybe you can use this feeling as a “settle down tool” soon.

'Thank you, Amissa. I'm very pleased.' - he smiled softly and put it in his pocket. 'I wanted to go to my place today if the landlord allows it. How are things going at home in general?'

Amissah's eyes lit up. 'I don't think you can come in. Another person already lives there, Toke. A lot happened while you were away.'

'What do you mean?'

'There is another reason besides lack of money why I left for a month.'

Toke looked questioningly at Amissa.

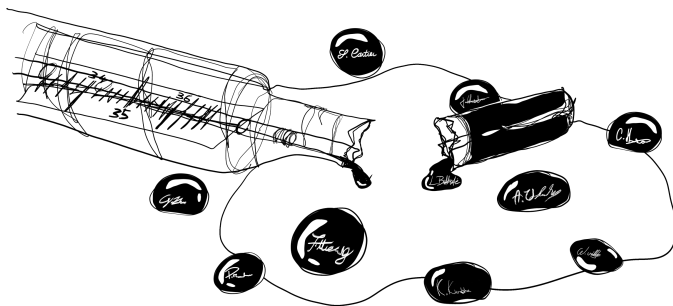
'About six months ago the police came to our house. Everyone was interviewed. Doctors, rescue services and gas workers arrived. There were a lot of people. It turned out that not only I felt bad and dizzy throughout the week, but the whole house. Especially the potato old man and his helpful window cleaner. Everyone was taken to the hospital and mercury poisoning was confirmed in the morning. The interrogations continued until the evening.

The old man from apartment N°10 lived in the house with his wife 7 years ago. He had a cast on his leg for a long time and she had to work a lot to provide for them. She dreamed of opening a small vegetable business in the city and on weekends she even planted something in our garden. A month before the cast was removed and she quit, she was hit by a car. To death. The drunk brother of that helpful guy from apartment N°9 was driving in this car. He also did not live to see the next day. After this, the old man went crazy with grief and began to do what kept him alive — every morning he dragged potatoes and other vegetables to his apartment to support his wife's last wish. And his neighbor helped him, paying for his brother.

When the Egyptian moved in, it became even louder. He was always screaming and cursing at this old man, and then his prints were found on the front door, which he left open every night, knowing that if the vegetable suppliers couldn't come in, the old man wouldn't survive it.

The women from apartment N°8, however, never complained.

And then the police found out that they were poisoning him and, as a consequence, the whole house, with mercury for a month.'



Toke listened to everything with his mouth open: 'Why didn't you tell me??'

'Our agreement is money and an alarm clock. I was saving this for a personal meeting.'

'Judging by your face, that's certainly not all.' - said Toke. Amissa sighed. 'Actually, I didn't want to tell you all this. I assumed that you were starting to get better, and stories like this, especially those that happened in our house, definitely will not help personal progress, if not vice versa.' - she looked at him seriously.

'I thought I had already graduated from rehab, where overprotective women loomed over me.' - Toke smiled slyly.

'Okay, let it be your way. Let's go.' - she pulled his hand and a minute later they found themselves in her apartment. Amissa took paper, scissors and 2 pens from the nightstand.

'If you're going to make origami out of the local news, then my boss missed an important employee.'

'Since you're so smart, we'll now check *how* smart you are.' - she handed him cards cut into rectangles and a pen. 'I tell you the apartment, the residents, you write

what could potentially happen to each of them, and I write the truth. After a minute, we unfold it and show it to each other.'

'Maybe you should go counseling a children's camp instead of Hungary?'

Amissa hit him on the head with her pen and sat down on the sofa.

'Apartment 3. Guy and girl.'

Both lowered their eyes to the pieces of paper and began to write.

'Time!'

Toke:

Got sick with rabies

They were denied access to the laundry

They became bankrupt and moved out

Amissa:

Previously did charity work

So they dragged the animals home

They opened their shelter last year

Stopped dragging animals home

And stopped borrowing washing machines

'Wow. Well, at least someone has a happy future.'

Amissa smiled. 'They deserve it.'

'Apartment №4. Parents and child.'

They broke eye contact again.

'Time!'

Toke:

The boy won the Mathematics Olympiad
They visited a family psychologist
The boy started smoking
(Because he saw me smoking too often)

Amissa:

The boy was adopted
They took him in because of child support money
He ran away last spring
Social services came soon
And after that
They moved
He was never found

Toke frowned. 'So that's why he looked at them like that.'

'Toughen up, we have one more round here.'

'Apartment №6. Old man and old lady.'

They narrowed their eyes competitively.

'Time!'

Toke:

The husband was eaten by a crocodile
The wife finally planted all the flowers

Amissa:

It turned out they got married for convenience
Many years ago
She needed money and a roof over her head
He needed to get away from his family
Who wanted to marry him off to a girl,
Who loved him unreciprocally
They lived in this arrangement for 47 years
He died 4 months ago
She moved into your apartment
And finally finished the painting
About their story

Toke looked up at Amissa: 'I think it's time to visit the other part of the house.'

Toke walks down the stairs, remembering that he had left his bag in the car. As he takes her out of the back seat, he suddenly notices a woman looking at him from the first-floor window. The same woman from apartment №1 seemed to be patiently waiting for him to come back to the entrance. After 10 seconds, Toke found himself in front of her window.

'Excuse me, did you want something?'

'I saw you 2 hours ago when you were parking. I couldn't miss the chance to talk to you, I haven't seen you for 2 years.'

Toke, in surprise, put his bag on the asphalt and moved closer to the window.

'What exactly did you want to talk to me about?'

'I wanted to thank you, of course.' - the woman answered as if Toke should have known exactly why. 'It's thanks to you that my son is alive, healthy and happy.'

Toke began to frown in surprise.

'Sorry, I don't understand what you mean.'

'You know, my husband lost his job a couple of years ago. He was very depressed. He drank a lot. Sometimes he drank so much that he beat me and my son. Sometimes so much that I became afraid for my little boy. He didn't let us go anywhere, not even to school, and he bought groceries himself, so I couldn't hide my son somewhere securely. And then one day I figured out how to fix everything: I recorded on a voice recorder how a boy was crying—he twisted his leg on the playground and resisted while his mother tried to smear iodine on his knee. I put my son to bed with headphones on, and I started screaming and throwing chairs at the wall, banging my head myself to make everything believable. I screamed and prayed that someone would hear. You were the one who called the police. I know others were afraid of my husband and did not intervene. And you helped, you called the police. And my plan worked - the police arrived and they took my boy away, he was no longer in pain. The guardianship authorities put him in good hands; they allow us to see him sometimes and talk on the phone every 2

days. I'm so glad the plan worked, otherwise God forbid he would have been poisoned by mercury. A scary story with these girls. I think you already know.

My husband was angry at first, he thought they would give us some kind of fines. He beat me badly. When it stopped, I started noticing hair on his clothes. Long, dark hair. But I'm naturally fair-haired.

A couple of days later I went out to take out the trash and heard my husband's voice from apartment №2. I walked in, and he was there with this girl, a journalist. It turns out she didn't leave for any internship.

I cried for a week.

And then everything got better.

My husband has almost stopped drinking and hardly ever raises his hands anymore. He found a job.

And this girl moved out 2 days after I found out. She seemed to have disappeared, evaporated so invisibly that sometimes I have the feeling that she was never here.

Now everything is fine, we live calmly. I know that my husband is hot-tempered and sometimes loses control. But I know how to calm

him down and preserve peace in our home. I've forgiven him for everything.'

Toke stood silently, not knowing what to say.

'Your name is Toke, right?'

'Yes.'

'Very good, at least now I'll know who to pray for.'

Toke began to shake his head, but the woman stopped him.

'I feel calmer this way.' - she smiled suppressed. 'That's it, I won't detain you, otherwise, the girl is waiting for you.'

Toke, confused, began to walk towards the entrance door, but before entering the house, he turned to her:

'What about you?'

She smiled softly and lowered her eyes.

'I won't be able to leave him, I don't know what I will do or how I will live. I love him very much. Love is not always the same, ours is like this. I'm anyway used to it. And who will love me like this besides him?' - she

looked at him in such a way that everything sank inside him.

'It's okay, Toke. Go.'

He hesitated and finally opened the door: 'All the best to you.'

Toke got out of the car and leaned on the door. The glowing sign of his old restaurant has faded. Toke looked at the display window and a feeling awoke within him that he was late for something.

He walked around the other side of the building and pulled out a cigarette in the exact place where he and Elif had once stood. Toke remembered what he told him about the wedding that his parents wanted to arrange. He threw the butt in the trash and went to the entrance.

As soon as he opened the door, the smell of fresh warm dough immediately awakened all his receptors. His thoughts were interrupted by a young waiter who almost knocked him off his feet.

'Table for one?'

'No, no, thanks. I would like to talk to the manager, can you call him, please?'

The guy nodded and after 3 minutes Toke saw a whirlwind rushing between the tables and the bar counter. The boss hasn't changed at all. It seemed like he

was going to run up and say: 'WeLl, LeT's QuIcKIY sTaTe ThE pRoBlEm, I hAvE cLiEnTs.'

Toke waved at him and the man scurried up to him, shaking his hand.

'Haven't seen you for a long time, how are you?'

'Everything is fine, thank you. I see your business is thriving here too, so there's nothing to worry about.' -

Toke smiled. 'Listen, I wanted to ask you to give me Elif's phone number. I dropped my old phone in the water and all contacts were erased. I need to talk to him.'

'I wish we could all talk to him.' - the boss sighed.

Toke raised his eyebrows in surprise.

'What do you mean?'

'Toke, no one has seen Elif for almost a year and a half. One day he simply didn't come to work without telling anyone anything, and when we tried to call him, we only heard "this phone number is out of service".' Neither his colleagues, nor his friends, nor his landlord have any idea where he went. His family filed a missing person report 2 weeks later, but it was quickly withdrawn. And no one knows *why*. But the way he disappeared gradually leaves the impression that he was never there.'

Toke knew perfectly well *why*.

He fastened his seat belt and quickly found the address he needed on his phone. He could only hope that Riga never moved anywhere.

Thump of potatoes

The creaky door opened with a whistle. Outwardly, she looked the same as the day Toke met her. The cigarette in her hand completed her outfit so well. 'You up for a smoke?' - she looked at him as if nothing had happened. He smiled and nodded.

'Well, tell me. You didn't just come like that.'

'I've been clean for over two years now. I work in a company and do pseudo-art. I can't say anything supernatural. I came because I hadn't seen my friend for a long time.'

'Well, I guessed about work and the rest. Otherwise, you wouldn't have come. And you do not look pale as well. How does it feel?'

Toke averted his eyes and stared into space. Twirling the cigarette in his hand, he answered thoughtfully but confidently: 'The same as it was before I started using. Only now I have one more nightmare.' He looked into her eyes. 'You were right. I can't bring myself to feel *bright*. One gray, insipid, ground-up sense of normalcy. I tried different adrenaline swings, in the form of roller

coasters, dangerous behavior with people from rehab, extreme sex and so on. But none of this I can compare with the rare color memories in my soul. I've never been happy, and I'm afraid I never will be.'

She nodded understandingly.

'How are you feeling?'

'I feel fine. Not the normal 'fine' that covers up the pain, but the average one, where I haven't been for a long time. The goal is to move towards 'good'. After you called then, I also didn't go to the *area* anymore, but even before that I only showed up once or twice. Because my observational hobby was not possible anymore, I needed to compensate for all of this somewhere. I decided to get at least some benefit from it. Now I am a member of the Narcotics Anonymous help group. More precisely, not so anonymous anymore, because I also do personal mentoring. I got a job in an office where a big part of the help is finding work for them, helping with children and restoring their health. I'm not saying it will save you, but I suggest you try it. Sometimes, instead of adrenaline-pumping roller coasters, kindness and love can help. Not necessarily

love for people or children, but also for tranquility, peace, silence, for well-being. Maybe you have something hidden inside you too.'

Toke agreed.

They spent almost the whole day as if they were on a school trip. He had attended these groups before, had mentors, and knew how this *side* worked. That's why it suddenly felt so strange. When you're on the other side, you're expected to relapse. You are so close to failure that accepting again doesn't seem like something scary. But he suddenly felt something between freedom and responsibility in the pit of his stomach, looking at them. As if this right of leniency had been taken away from him.

After a day of back-and-forth, dating, and round-table meetings, they both crashed onto the chairs of a local restaurant.

'How is your hamster, by the way?'

'You can't imagine, he died 2 months ago. Surprisingly, he lived longer than 2 years. It felt like half of my hair turned gray during his existence. Of course, he was nice and all that, but I woke up in a cold sweat for the first three months, thinking that he was dying. He is not a human, you know, he cannot just talk about his feelings. So how do I know what he wants? I can show you a phot...'

Her voice was interrupted by the ringing.

Riga's face became serious.

'I'll go to her house now, don't worry.' - she turned to Toke. 'I need your physical help. The door there doesn't open well.' - Riga said and hurried to the exit.

'Where?' - he asked while jogging after her.

Riga pulled the handbrake in the car and quickly flew out of the parking lot: 'I have been monitoring 2 girls for 4 months, they are sisters. At school, they started hanging out with a bad company and it did not end well. One started taking drugs, and the second gave birth. Due to postpartum depression, the second sister also started using. Her child was taken away from her and now she

has been clean for almost a year, together with her sister.

They hold up well.'

'What's the problem then?'

'She hasn't answered calls for almost a day.'

Toke broke out in a cold sweat.

They opened the door and Riga began shouting her name.

Silence in response.

Riga went to the kitchen.

Toke turned on the light in the living room and felt lightning pass through it.

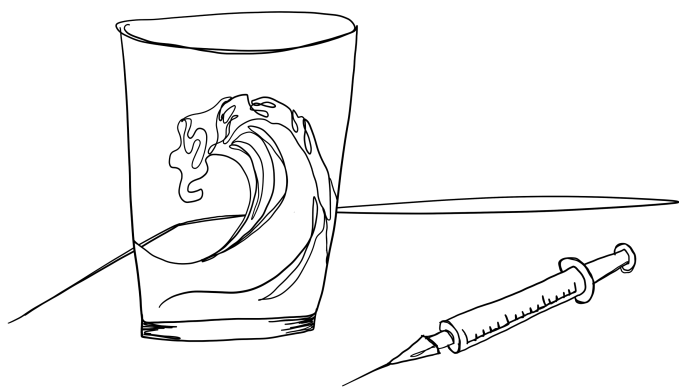
In the middle of the room, near the sofa, a young fair-haired girl was lying slumping.

Her skin was pale and clammy, her lips slightly blue. Traces of foam from the mouth were visible at the corner of her mouth and on the wet red carpet, and her hands laid in an unnatural position. The eyes, once alive, were now dull and empty, staring at nothing. A gloomy silence hung in the air above the girl, sucking the last signs of life from her cold body.

Heaviness hung in his soul and began to pull all his organs down, like a burning cheese pull.

Suddenly Toke saw a small table behind the sofa.

On it, there laid everything that could potentially be mixed.



Something *twitched* inside him.

'Damn, Julia.' - Riga sat down on a chair and wiped her face with her hand. 'Look, Toke.' - she pointed to the table next to the sofa. 'She wasn't going to get high. Everything is mixed here, this cocktail takes you straight to heaven. Well, or who believes in what.'

Toke remained silent.

'I'll call an ambulance now.' - Riga rose from her chair.

Toke was still looking at the girl without taking his eyes off.

'Why do you think she committed suicide?'

'She had another hearing to regain custody of the child a week ago. Rejected.'

They rode back, surprisingly, calmly. Friendly silence and a certain relief lurked in Riga's soul. Toke, unlike her, behaved subversively. Nervously tapping his fingers on the door handle, he periodically changed grimaces as if he could not control his tired facial muscles. From time to time, exchanging glances, they played the staring game as long as the traffic allowed. Without noticing it themselves, they quickly arrived at the house. Sitting in the car in front of Amissa's window, who, judging by the lack of light in the apartment, had already left for the night shift, they finally looked at each other properly.

'Thank you for the ride. It was really nice to see you again.'

'See you.' - Riga smiled kindly. 'And you, come on, don't imagine too much there, you already look like a ghost. This is not the first time you have seen this. The only difference here is that nowhere here is your fault.' - she looked at him explanatorily.

'Good night.'

Toke slammed the door behind him and went to the mirror.

'I recognize myself more now.'

Toke pulled out Julia's hidden pill from his pocket.

Even after so many years of abstinence, the hunger preserved itself deep inside, under his skin.

Without hesitation, as if jumping off a cliff, he swallowed it.

30 minutes later

Toke suddenly begins to tremble and his breathing becomes ragged. He tries to get up, but loses his balance and falls to the floor.

Pictures of Julia's apartment switch fast in his head.

Toke suddenly begins to tremble and his breathing becomes ragged. He tries to get up, but loses his balance and falls to the floor.

Pictures of Julia's apartment switch fast in his head.

Table,

Powdered pills on the left,

Glass and syringe in the middle

And the bags with the remains on the right.

Lifeless body

The lingering smell

No message

And irrevocability.

'*What* did I take?'

'And what was the *dose*?'

Forced pictures of memories from Julia's apartment were replaced by others that came to him on their own.

Childhood

Escape

Alcohol

Sex

Loneliness

Isolation

Drugs

Riga

Bullpen

Disruption

Boy

Amissa

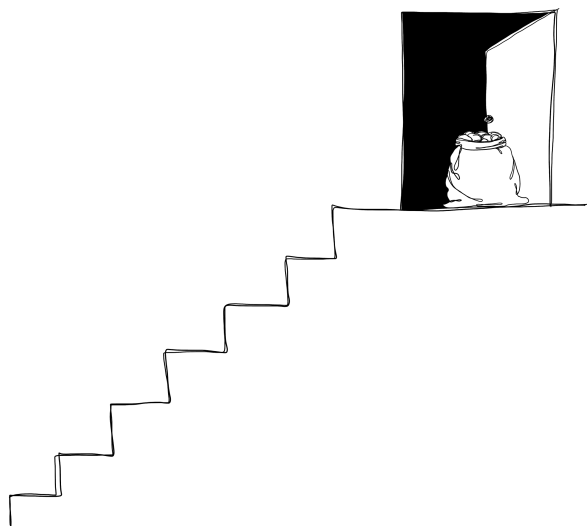
Withdrawal

Rehab

Truth

Today.

Blowing white foam through his mouth, he suddenly realized that he would never again hear the sound of potatoes hitting the parquet at 6 in the morning.



The End.

P.S.

Due to the fact that a lot of pain, suffering, sadness and so on were imprinted into the pages you read, it would be very poetic if at the end of reading this book was burned. But this cover alone cost more than 17 hours of suffering and several euros per copy, so, if you do burn it, don't forget the receipt too. Please.

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Hope you enjoyed reading this piece.

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My name is Jekaterina Brenner. Coming from an Estonian multinational family, I am currently a 21-year-old Physiotherapy student in the Netherlands, as well as a writer. My writing journey started in January 2022, and my first book is self-published on Amazon KDP. My goal is to have my book series translated into multiple languages and see it on the shelves in various bookstores around the world one day.

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