

*An extract from the novel*

At the hospital, Pepin stood at the door of his father's ward, trying to regain his breath. He was bent with hands on his knees, gulping air, and another drop of blood fell from his nose on the floor, he licked blood from his upper lip, snorted it back into his throat and swallowed the slightly salty liquid, then clutched the door handle with his sweaty palm, pressed a bit downwards and instantly released it, stood back, tensed his white knuckles to knock just to unclench them again and looked back searching for Sophie.

She came after a longish moment in a firm gait of a taut businesswoman who is late for an important meeting.

'How could you leave me like that down there?' she asked, angrily waving her purse. 'I almost lost you.'

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'I chased you like a blood hound,' she said, 'it's good you left a bloody trace, otherwise I'd be lost forever in this goddamn maze. Why do they put so many beds in the corridors?' She looked around. 'Not downstairs, but here, they're like sardines in the can. One of them pinched my ass when I went by, another one groped my thighs. It's insane! Do they really have no other place for maniacs?'

'I understand them, but let's talk about it later, Sophie.' Pepin firmly took her hand and knocked briefly on the door.

He tried the handle, but the door was locked.

'What's the matter?' he said softly.

'Pepin's daddy, are you there?' Sophie put her eye to the keyhole. 'We came to see you!' she intoned tenderly.

'Stop it.' Pepin pulled the girl off the door.

'There's nobody there,' she said, standing up. 'Have a look.'

'I don't peep through keyholes,' he said.

'So, you are here, very nice, but the ward is closed.' A doctor had come up with the head nurse behind him. 'The room had been disinfected, we got rid of the

cockroaches, too. Patients are sometimes brought food with cockroaches in the parcels. Many of them are from disadvantaged families.'

'Our family is not disadvantaged.' Pepin unconsciously tried the door again, then released the handle and looked up at the doctor.

'Of course, not,' said the doctor.

'You didn't poison Pepin's dad, did you?' Sophie timidly ventured to flirt with the doc.

'Shut up, Sophie,' Pepin said. 'Where is my father?'

'I don't even know how to explain it better to you,' the doctor said, looking at the nurse who nodded encouragingly with her white, stiff cap. 'He was taken to Switzerland.'

'A nurse told me on the phone he wanted to talk to me,' Pepin said.

'I was the one who called you,' the head nurse said, stepping closer, and Pepin stepped back as if she could infect him with something.

'Yes, he did want to talk, but then changed his mind,' the doctor said. His fingers groped the stethoscope on his breast. He looked up tiredly at Pepin. 'He asked me to explain it to you.'

'Will he be cured in Switzerland?'

'I'm afraid not,' the doctor shook his head. 'Here we did everything possible.'

'So why he was taken there?' Pepin asked.

'Well, how to explain it better...' the doctor shot a glance at the nurse again. 'I'm just a doctor.'

'In Switzerland, if one can say so, he will be prepared,' the head nurse came to rescue. Her voice was piercingly metallic, her body was massive with huge breasts squeezed into a brightly white uniform dress. She was much taller than the doctor and stood in the middle of the corridor like a traffic warden. She emanated a smell of power, sterilized stainless steel instruments, camphor spirit and weak rosewater.

'Prepared for what?' Pepin asked. He had a face of a man about to sit down in the dentist's chair.

'For a trip around the world.' The doctor smiled sadly. 'I'm sorry but that's exactly what he wanted me to say... That he was going to take a trip around the world.'

'Around the globe.' The nurse raised her hand as if she were holding a baton and drew a circle with it.

‘Will he send Pepin postcards?’ Sophie asked.

‘I don’t think so.’ The doctor was grim.

‘What a pity,’ Sophie said. ‘I used to collect them as a child. I glued them into a notebook, a full notebook of them.’

‘My dad is too frail for such a trip, he can hardly lift his hands above the blanket.’ Pepin looked around. ‘He has lived all his life in Riga, right next to Brasa prison, that’s where we live. Across the river in Riga is the furthest he has ever been.’

‘Who wouldn’t wish to get out of prison?’ Sophie clapped her hands, and the noise shamelessly echoed in the silent corridor. ‘Pepin, isn’t that nice? Smile for once! Your dad is taking a trip around the world. What could be more exciting? Everything’s been settled just wonderfully, much better than we thought.’

‘Nothing has been settled.’ Pepin suspiciously glanced around. ‘I don’t believe it.’

‘Why on earth are you always so sceptical? Why?’ Sophie tugged Pepin’s sleeve as if he was going to cross the street against a red light. ‘You are like that even when everything is fine. When the sun finally comes out from the clouds, you just frown. You’re such a gloomer!’

‘What’s that for a trip? Who pays for it?’ Pepin asked. ‘Around the world on his pension of the disabled? Don’t laugh at me.’

‘You see, your dad... well, it will sound a bit strange, of course...’ The doctor struggled to find the right words. ‘He won a beauty contest.’

‘He was the favourite of all the nurses, including me,’ the head nurse added.

‘Your vote, Helga, was the decisive one,’ the doctor said, and the nurse gratefully smiled.

‘What is this beauty contest?’ Sophie moved her hips as if she had stepped onto the catwalk, right into its spotlights. ‘Can I participate?’

‘It’s too early for you.’ The doctor gave her a wry smile.

‘A beauty contest?’ Pepin started laughing, loudly, and could not stop. He bent barking hoarsely like a dog with a cold, till he lost his breath, slid down onto the floor and continued to shake in a fit of soundless laughter.

‘Nurse, fetch water, please,’ the doctor told the nurse on duty who was sitting some distance away in the corridor at a white metallic table and reading *Cosmopolitan*. ‘The young man here has hysteria.’

The nurse on duty jumped up and shoved the magazine into a table drawer.

‘Add the usual drops,’ the doctor added. Then he gave Pepin a long, appraising look and turned to the head nurse. ‘It seems we’ll need a small injection, too.’

The nurse nodded, took a pre-prepared syringe from her uniform pocket, removed the plastic tip, tried a tiny squirt upwards which arched in the air and landed shining droplets on Sophie’s face, then bent down and predatorily pricked the short needle into Pepin’s shoulder.

‘What did you inject me?’

‘Nothing special.’ The head nurse rubbed the pricked spot with an alcohol cotton ball. ‘You’ll get better in a moment.’

At the other end of the corridor, three totally scraggy patients in faded robes took over the laughing for some reason of their own. One of them was waving a pack of cigarettes. The doctor turned his head to them, and the three fell silent. The red *Marlboro* was promptly hidden, the men looked at each other and slowly went back to their wards, dragging their slippers on the floor.

The nurse on duty rushed up with a plastic glass she had filled with water from a sadly gurgling container in the nurses’ station. Pepin reached for the glass and almost squeezed the thin thing in two, spilling some water on himself, then he drank slowly, struggling to swallow. Both nurses stood by and watched smiling at his getting better. The doctor looked out the window at the distant alley of linden-trees along which a trolleybus was moving away at a snail’s pace. On this hour, normal people were coming home from work while he had a whole night on duty ahead. He hoped his wife would not forget to walk the dog before it was too late.

‘Pepin, what is it?’ Sophie wiped her forehead and squatted next to him.

‘I brought him some apples.’ Pepin returned the glass to the nurse on duty and crawled to get the cloth bag he had dropped. The nurses and Sophie helped him to pick up the apples.

‘Your father signed a contract with the Swiss company *Exhibition of Bodies*,’ the doctor explained in a distant voice feeling a bit uncomfortable. ‘Upon his death, his body will be embalmed and put on general display. It is something like a travelling wax museum, the exhibits being dead bodies. Your father’s body fitted all parameters and he was taken on the troupe. After a stiff competition,’ he added and looked out the

window again. The trolleybus was gone. 'In return he received rights to euthanasia in one of the best Swiss hospitals.'

'Will he be killed in Switzerland?' Pepin asked.

'Yes,' the doctor responded dryly. 'This is why he wanted you to come.'

'I have come,' Pepin said.

'You should stand up.' The doctor took a big silver watch from his robe pocket and looked at the scratched, yellowed glass. 'In two minutes you father will be given a lethal injection. You are right on time. He wanted you to be with him on the moment of his death.'

'Family should keep together,' the head nurse said.

'In two minutes?' With the help of Sophie, Pepin got to his feet.

'Now it's one and a half,' the doctor said. 'It will be painless, he won't feel anything.'

'Just a small prick,' the head nurse said. 'It didn't hurt you, did it?'

'Doctor...' Pepin said. His mouth was suddenly dry.

'Yes?' the doctor said.

'Could you call and tell them not to do it?' Pepin asked.

'No,' the doctor said, steadily gazing at the dial. 'But you can wave him, mentally.'

'I brought him apples.' Pepin raised the bag up with a trembling hand.

'We should rather be silent now,' the doctor said and lowered his head.

Pepin slid down along the wall, put the bag on his knees, rested his chin on the bag and dumbly stared at the floor where a completely dazed cockroach struggled out from under the ward door and started to turn slowly around its axis as a lethargic second hand on the clock.

The head nurse slid forward with ease and grace uncharacteristic for her huge body. She guiltily looked back at the bald and tanned top of doctor's lowered head, lifted her shoe and squashed the fat cockroach with a barely audible pop which reverberated in Pepin's head like a deafening blast of a petard, and sparks danced inside his eyes. To be sure, the head nurse rubbed the wet remains with the heel of her black shoe, folded hands on her big breasts and contentedly, slowly and respectfully stepped back, a resigned smile on her face.

Doors opened all around, patients came out of the wards, they trudged and traipsed, dragging their feet, one resembled a cabbage white's caterpillar, another had an old wooden crutch under his arm, polished by innumerable users' hands, yet another one was completely blind, he was pushed in a wheelchair, and his gaze was stiff and unmoving like that of a boiled fish, the corridor was suddenly full of exhausted and haggard men who looked at Pepin and through Pepin with deep-set eyes, burning with mysterious fever, gazing more inwards than out, the way one regards old, yellowed, pompously solemn black-and-white photographs accidentally found in the attic, nobody being able to tell anything of their origin. One man shivered in his thick robe, spasmodically clutching his shoulders as if voluntarily wearing a straitjacket, he threw around mad, feverish glances like expecting all lights to go out and, in the pitch dark, to be hit by a bus full of ghosts; another one held an aluminium walking-stick with his swollen, sweaty and trembling fingers, his breath was struggled and wheezing, and his only hope remained to breathe in just once more; still another soundlessly moved his dry lips, he was resigned to everything and did not think of anything except the dinner that the food nurse would deliver in a squeaking trolley; but one of the men, lean and wiry, with a military bearing, shaven head, and eagle's nose, thin as a paper, and a sunken smoker's chest, had steadfast hope in his gaze, and he crossed himself with a bony hand. When everybody had come, a man with a swollen, pimply face and yellowish eyes tapped the glass of his watch with a nail and directed a martyr's glance at the ceiling. The patients drew closer around Pepin as if he was a campfire, still burning despite storm and rain, and they lowered their heads. A fragile silence ensued, and just after several moments you could hear the shrill and cheerful voices of swallows; the noise came through an open window at the end of the corridor, and the evening clouds behind it were rosy and almost transparent. One man, taller than the others, looked around and was about to say something, but the next one poked him with his elbow, and the one opposite put a finger to his lips.

Pepin opened his eyes.