

Kronauer now descended from the hill upon which stood the warehouse of contaminated refuse. He took his time. On one hand, he had no exact idea as to what he was going to do next in the village; on the other hand, his legs were obeying him quite poorly. A long night of sleep in the prison house proved insufficient in getting him back into shape. From one moment to another, his muscles continued to remind him of the grueling trek in the steppe, not to mention the recent arduous passage through the old forest. Naturally, his entire physical being still had some difficulty in adapting to the radionuclides that floated and vibrated throughout the village.

Walking on, he repeated to himself the strange and rash ideas of the president of "Radiant Terminus." They contorted subconsciously, dully within his brainpan and also within the very core of the marrows of his bone. He felt them come and go within the grey areas of his body. Like a the spell of a hypnotist, he thought. They take advantage of your feebleness to numb you. They come into your interiors and leave you with no escape.

He would have loved to sweep Solovieï far away from his thoughts. Yet, when he stepped onto the main road of the Levanidovo, he continued to brew images of a dark eternity and of a world whose own rules for existing were undecipherable. Again he heard the needle crackle, again did the membrane of the phonograph tremble, docile to the sinister bends of Solovieï's voice. Kronauer, not without chagrin, noticed that he, too, was submitting to this voice. It displeased him but he had been listening to it almost respectfully; it now inserted itself into him, lurking and prowling and, if he could not rid himself of it, it was primarily because he accepted its presence. "Don't tell me that now, today, you'll have him in your bones and in your dreams. Don't tell me that, Kronauer!" he grumbled to himself. But no one responded and, continuing to walk, he remained quiet.

He hesitated on the deserted road. He had no urge to return to his room nor to languish in the prison house and he had nothing particular to do in the Levanidovo. Yet, at the same time, he realized that, if he did not find some sort of occupation, he risked coming off as a freeloader, a godless and lawless refugee, or as a non-conformist incapable of playing part in the construction of collective happiness. He slowed down, gaining some time by pausing before the closed door of the communist co-op before continuing his walk as if having changed his mind. There was not a person in sight. No task revealed itself to him. He passed by the House of Pioneers and the People's Library. On his right, the house of Myriam Oumarik and Bargouzine aligned with the small building that housed Samiya Schmidt and the soviet Morgovian. He had arrived to the soviet's building and considered making an about-face when Myriam Oumarik exited her home and came to meet him.

She pranced lightly and flexibly and, without being able to tell if she realized it or not, her entire attitude was one of a seductress. She moved her body, adding a nuance of dance in her step: an invitation to a sort of animalistic, sensual, marital dance; an invitation to a physical bond. Whether she wanted it or not, she gave one the urge to get close to her and touch her. Her hair shone so dark and brilliant that the sun reflected upon the top of her head and along her left cheek, creating a dazzling cascade leading to the emergences of her chest. Her linen blouse

showed no cleavage but one could guess that her her full breasts twitched with the delicateness of each step.

Kronauer's eyes stopped upon her and, immediately – half a second later – they peeled away. She moved lit by the sun; the brightness bothered him but he held on to the appearance of not being attracted to her even if, by male atavism, he was.

He didn't want to think of her silhouette as appetizing, he didn't want to think of her like an object of desire – something consumable – nor let grow within him the salacious images that accompanied the idea of appetite.

He forbade himself from these images. On one hand because at the Orbise he had received a proletariat education that associated all sexual manifestation as immoral misbehavior. On the other hand because, like Samiya Schmidt, he had read several works by Maria Kwooll that stigmatized masculine impulses and painted them in the most odious and revolting of colors. And, ultimately, because he was keeping in mind Grandma Oudgoul's warning about Myriam Oumarik's status as a married woman.

A vague feeling of dizziness persisted within him yet he made an effort to collect some ideas about himself, about what he was living through in the Levanidovo. "Ultimately," Kronauer thought to himself, "you didn't come to the Levanidovo to have an adventure. It's like you established yourself here and forgot that, near the railway, Iliouchenko and Vassilissa Marachvili were waiting. And that \*that\* is the only thing that matters"

Yet already did he have trouble picturing for himself his friends in distress amongst the brush, immobilized by exhaustion, constrained to silence, obligated to remain lying down or crouched in order to go unnoticed by the soldiers. He was already too far away from them. He had to strain to summon their image—and only an abstract image—linked with thin and affective lines. He reminded himself of the railway that traversed the landscape and the ruins of the "Red Star" sovkhos; yet the memory of his two friends trembled with difficulty, as if they belonged to a story whose page he had already turned. This feelings was re-enforced by the fact that Solovieï et Morgovian had set out for them, equipped with what they needed to assist them, to comfort and care for them. Solovieï and Morgovian had taken over and soon, without a doubt, Iliouchenko and Vassilissa Marachvili would finally be welcomed into the Levanidovo. "Of course," he weakly thought to himself. "That'll be it!"

The sharp pain in his hand at the site of the prick reminded him repeatedly with effusive regularity that he had slipped into a world where the presence of Myriam Oumarik mattered more than the absence of Vassilissa Marachvili.

Suddenly something awoke and emerged within him. "You know, Kronauer, you're not here to play Romeo. Tomorrow or the day after, you will once again set out. If Solovieï brings Vassilissa Marachvili and Iliouchenko both to the kolkhoz, you three will leave together. 'Radiant Terminus' is not your people. And, above all, there is that jealous father who's hostile towards you and has placed you under surveillance; no one even understands his relationship with his daughters. That Myriam Oumarik has nothing for you. Don't even bother watching her come while stamping your hoof like a bull in heat."

"I need you, Kronauer," said Myriam Oumarik. "Can I call you Kronauer?"

She had a service to ask of him. Just before her was a fire hydrant that had started to drip. Her husband, the engineer Bargouzine, had brought outside the necessary tools and was going to take it upon himself to execute the repair but, after entering the house once more and uttering some heavy sentence, he collapsed. His loss of consciousness was not yet comparable to death and, up to that point, she had not called upon Grandma Oudgoul to resuscitate him with her three waters: the very-heavy water, the very-dead water, and the very-alive water.

"Do you want me to let Grandma Oudgoul know?" Kronauer offered

Myriam Oumarik beamed and refused with a gesture that stirred her hips and entire bust all the way up to her shoulders.

There was no pressing worry about Bargouzine. It was just a small problem. Indeed, the task Myriam Oumarik asked of him was the one of putting the hydrant back into working condition. He should certainly be capable of repairing it, even if he had limited knowledge of plumbing.

"Of course," remarked Kronauer, "I just need to retighten the gate; clear out two or three nuts and retighten them"

He intuited that Myriam Oumarik was putting him to a test. Perhaps to know if he could be integrated into the economy of the kolkhoz of "Radiant Terminus" as a handyman, cleaner, or water technician.

He went towards the hydrant and crouched to unpack the materials brought out by the engineer Bargouzine—a spanner, a pipe wrench, a screwdriver, a hammer, and black rubber joints of imposing size, all loosely wrapped in a rag. While handling the tools he noticed that the miniscule wound on his finger had reopened and that the blood had once again begun to pearl along his index finger. Beneath his flesh, the sharp pains had intensified.

"You're bleeding?" Myriam Oumarik inquired as she leaned towards him.

"It's nothing," he explained. "Just a prick from a phonograph."

Myriam Oumarik grimaced. She was quite close to Kronauer. She smelled clean, like a laborer's soap, and like the saliva of Bargouzine, who had drooled on her skirt when she dragged him to his bed.

"Solovieï's phonograph?" she asked.

"Yes"

"Don't play around with that," she said, gesticulating. "What got a hold of you? You couldn't help yourself? I thought you were less of an idiot than that. You should have known to not touch things that belong to my father."

She seemed sincerely distressed.

"I barely touched it," Kronauer explained. "I just moved my hand towards the membrane. Then it bit me like a wild animal."

"Those aren't normal objects," says Myriam Oumarik. "Don't handle them lightly. It's too dangerous. They are part of Solovieï. When he realizes that you want to get a hold on one he becomes incensed and he becomes a part of you for a thousand years."

"Pft, a thousand years," Kronauer said contemptuously.

"One thousand one hundred and twenty-six years or more" specified Myriam Oumarik.

He made a slight movement signaling his impatience. Solovieï's omnipresence irritated him with these constant mentions of magical threats, coded and monstrous. He stood up quickly, wanting to curse the president of the kolkhoz before his very daughter. He let go of the spanner he had in-hand. The change in stance gave rise to a strong bout of dizziness. Flashing dots fluttered in front of him. He staggered, supporting himself on the fire hydrant. The red paint of its bonnet crumbled under his hand. He turned towards Myriam Oumarik and stared at her, this time longer than the minute prior when she approached him, but he was no longer able to see distinctly. He tried to fight against the dizziness, the nausea. The sun now lit Myriam Oumarik's face. Amongst a shower of stars he saw that she was smiling; he saw her big and white teeth, her crowded mouth, her incisors slightly too big and, at the same time, he saw the colors begin to dull and felt the world give way below his feet.

"Hey! Kronauer! what's wrong?" yelled Myriam Oumarik.

He moved his hand in response. He had opened his mouth but was unable to speak.

"Are you going to collapse on us like Bargouzine?" asked Myriam Oumarik.

"What do you mean?" Kronauer stuttered.

"Bargouzine," he thought briefly. The husband of Myriam Oumarik. She is not a widow. Grandma Oudgoul warned me: whatever you do, do not dote about her. whatever you do, do not anger Solovieï. whatever you do, do not harm his daughters.

"A thousand years," he thought "One thousand one hundred and twenty-six years or more."

The darkness invaded him and, from his point of view, he disappeared.