

The Borscht is always empty at this hour. Ernest is standing behind the bar, wiping the glasses and holding them up to the light. This is an amazing thing, by the way: anytime you come in, these barmen are always wiping glasses, as if their salvation depended on it. He'll stand here all day – pick up a glass, squint at it, hold it up to the light, breathe on it, and get wiping; he'll do that for a bit, take another look, this time through the bottom of the glass, and start wiping again . . .

"Hey, Ernie!" I say. "Leave that thing alone, you'll wipe a hole through it!"

He looks at me through the glass, grumbles something indistinct, and without saying a word pours me a shot of vodka. I clamber up onto the stool, take a sip, grimace, shake my head, and take another sip. The fridge is humming, the jukebox is playing something quiet, Ernest is puffing into another glass – it's nice and peaceful. I finish my drink, putting my glass on the bar. Ernest immediately pours me another one. "Feeling better?" he mutters. "Thawing a bit, stalker?"

"You just keep wiping," I say. "You know, one guy wiped for a while, and he finally summoned an evil spirit. He had a great life after that."

"Who was this?" asks Ernest suspiciously.

"He was a barman here," I answer. "Before your time."

"So what happened?"

"Oh, nothing. Why do you think we got a Visit? He just wouldn't stop wiping. Who do you figure visited us, huh?"

"You're full of it today," says Ernie with approval.

He goes to the kitchen and comes back with a plate of fried sausages. He puts the plate in front of me, passes me the ketchup, and returns to his glasses. Ernest knows his stuff. He's got an eye for these things, can instantly tell when a stalker's fresh from the Zone, when he's got swag, and Ernie knows what

a stalker needs. Ernie's a good guy. Our benefactor.

After I finish the sausages, I light a cigarette and try to estimate how much money Ernest is making on us. I don't know the going prices in Europe, but I've heard rumors that an empty sells for almost two and a half thousand, while Ernie only gives us four hundred. The batteries go for at least a hundred, and we're lucky to get twenty. That's probably how it is for everything. Of course, getting the swag to Europe must cost a bundle. You gotta grease a lot of palms—even the stationmaster is probably paid off. Anyway, if you think about it, Ernest doesn't pocket that much—fifteen to twenty percent at the most—and if he gets caught, that's ten years of hard labor, guaranteed.

Here my generous meditations are interrupted by some polite type. I don't even hear him come in, but there he is at my right elbow, asking, "May I sit down?"

"Of course!" I reply. "Go right ahead."

It's a skinny little guy with a pointy nose, wearing a bow tie. He looks familiar, I've seen him somewhere before, but I can't remember where. He climbs onto a nearby stool and says to Ernie, "Bourbon, please!" And immediately to me, "Excuse me, I think we've met. You work at the International Institute, right?"

"Yes," I say. "And you?"

He promptly pulls a business card out of his pocket and puts it in front of me. I read "Aloysius Macnaught, Immigration Agent." Right, of course I know him. He pesters people to leave town. Someone must really want us all to leave Harmont. Almost half the population is already gone, but no, they have to get rid of everyone. I push his card away with one finger and tell him, "No, thanks. I'm not interested. I dream of living my entire life in my hometown."

“But why?” he asks eagerly. “I mean no offense, but what’s keeping you here?”

Right, like I’ll tell him what it really is. “What a question!” I say. “Sweet childhood memories. My first kiss in the park. My mommy and daddy. The first time I got drunk, in this very bar. Our police station, so dear to my heart.” I take a heavily used handkerchief out of my pocket and put it to my eyes. “No,” I say. “No way!”

He laughs, takes a small sip of bourbon, and says thoughtfully, “I can’t understand you people. Life in Harmont is hard. The city is under military control. The provisions are mediocre. The Zone is so close, it’s like living on top of a volcano. An epidemic could break out at any moment, or something even worse. I understand the old folks. They’re used to this place, they don’t want to leave. But someone like you . . . How old are you? Can’t be more than twenty-two, twenty-three . . . You have to understand, our agency is a nonprofit, there’s no one paying us to do this. We just want people to leave this hellhole, to return to normal life. Look, we even cover the costs of relocation, we find you work after the move . . . For somebody young, like you, we’d pay for your education. No, I don’t get it!”

“What,” I say, “no one wants to leave?”

“No, not exactly no one. Some do agree, especially people with families. But not the young or the old. What is it about this place? It’s just a hole, a provincial town . . .”

And here I give it to him. “Mr. Aloysius Macnaught!” I say. “You are absolutely right. Our little town is a hole. Always was and always will be. Except right now,” I say, “it’s a hole into the future. And the stuff we fish out of this hole will change your whole stinking world. Life will be different, the way it should be, and no one will want for anything. That’s our hole for you.

There's knowledge pouring through this hole. And when we figure it out, we'll make everyone rich, and we'll fly to the stars, and we'll go wherever we want. That's the kind of hole we have here . . ."

At this point I trail off, because I notice that Ernie is looking at me in astonishment, and I feel embarrassed. In general, I don't like using other people's words, even if I do happen to like them. Especially since they come out kind of funny. When Kirill's talking, you can't stop listening, you almost forget to close your mouth. And here I'm saying the same stuff, but something seems off. Maybe that's because Kirill never slipped Ernest swag under the counter. Oh well . . .

Here my Ernie comes to and hurriedly pours me a large shot: *Snap out of it, man, what's wrong with you today?* Meanwhile, the pointy-nosed Mr. Macnaught takes another sip of bourbon and says, "Yes, of course. The perpetual batteries, the blue panacea . . . But do you actually think it'll be like you said?"

"What I actually think is none of your business," I say. "I was talking about the town. Now, speaking for myself, I'll say: What's so great about your Europe? The eternal boredom? You work all day, watch TV all night; when that's done, you're off to bed with some bitch, breeding delinquents. The strikes, the demonstrations, the never-ending politics . . . To hell with your Europe!"

"Really, why does it have to be Europe?"

"Oh," I say, "it's the same story all over, and in the Antarctic it's cold, too." And you know the amazing thing: I'm telling him this, and I completely believe in what I'm saying. And our Zone, the evil bitch, the murderess, is at that moment a hundred times dearer to me than all their Europes and Africas. And I'm not even drunk yet, I simply imagine for a moment how I'd come home strung out after work in a herd of like-minded drones,

how I'd get squashed on all sides in their subway, how I'd become jaded and weary of life.

"What do you say?" he asks Ernie.

"I'm a businessman," Ernie replies with authority. "I'm not some young punk! I've invested money in this business. The commandant comes in here sometimes, a general, nothing to sneeze at. Why would I leave?"

Mr. Aloysius Macnaught starts telling him something with numbers, but I'm no longer listening. I take a good swig from my glass, get some change from my pocket, climb down from the stool, and go over to the jukebox to get things going. They have this one song here called "Don't Come Back Unless You're Ready." It does wonders for me after the Zone . . . All right, the jukebox is screeching away, so I pick up my glass and go into the corner to settle scores with the one-armed bandit. And time begins to fly.