

NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY



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Notes from the Underground
By Fyodor Dostoevsky
(Abbé's Library)

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

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Author's Note

The man who wrote this diary—and the diary itself—are fictional. But it's clear that people like him don't just possibly exist in our society; given how our society is built, they almost have to exist. What I've tried to do is shine a clearer light than usual on a certain type of character from our recent past. He represents a generation that's still around today. In the first part, called "Underground," this person introduces himself and his way of thinking. He also tries to explain how and why someone like him came to exist. The second part contains his actual notes about a few events from his life.

—AUTHOR'S NOTE

PART I

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CHAPTER 1

I am a sick man. I am a bitter man. I am an unattractive man. I think my liver is diseased. But honestly, I don't know what exactly is wrong with me. I've never seen a doctor about it—even though I respect doctors and medicine. Actually, I'm superstitious enough to believe in medicine. And yes, I know I'm educated enough to know better, but I still believe in that stuff anyway. I haven't gone to a doctor out of pure spite. You probably won't get that. But I do. Of course, I know I'm not really hurting anyone by refusing to get help. I know I'm only hurting myself. Still, that's the reason—I'm doing it out of spite. My liver's bad? Fine, let it rot.

I've lived like this for a long time—twenty years. I'm forty now. I used to work for the government, but not anymore. I was a nasty employee. I was rude and actually enjoyed being rude. I didn't take bribes, so I had to get something out of the job—and I guess that was it. (What a lousy joke. But I'm not going to erase it. I wrote it trying to be clever, and now that I realize I was just trying to show off in a pathetic way, I'll leave it there on purpose.)

When people came to my desk asking for help, I used to grind my teeth and get a thrill out of making them miserable. I almost succeeded sometimes. Most of them were timid—of course, they were just citizens trying to get something done. But there was one officer I couldn't stand. He wouldn't act humble. He had this way of clanking his sword around like he owned the place. I hated that sword. I spent eighteen months fighting with him over it. Eventually, he stopped clanking it. I won. That was back in my younger days.

But do you want to know the real truth about my bitterness? The painful, humiliating truth? Even when I was at my angriest, I always knew deep down that I wasn't really bitter at all. Not even close. I was just messing around—like scaring pigeons for fun. I'd get all worked up, but if someone handed me a toy or gave me some tea with sugar, I might've calmed down and even felt touched. Then I'd hate myself for it later—lying awake for nights in shame. That's just how I was.

Actually, I lied earlier when I said I was a bitter employee. That was just more spite. I was just toying with people—both the ones asking for help and that officer. The truth is, I never could truly be bitter. Deep down, I was full of all kinds of conflicting feelings—completely opposite emotions fighting to get out. I could feel them swarming around inside me, begging for some way to escape. But I wouldn't let them. I refused to. I held them in on purpose. And they made me miserable. They made me sick. I got so fed up with them—so disgusted with myself.

Maybe you think I'm confessing something or asking for forgiveness. I'm not. And honestly, I don't care what you think.

It wasn't just that I couldn't be bitter—I didn't know how to be *anything*. Not truly bitter, not kind. Not a scoundrel, not a good man. Not a hero, not a bug. Now I just sit in my corner,

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convincing myself that smart people like me can't truly *become* anything in life. Only idiots can become something. That's what I believe. In the 19th century, a smart man is doomed to be unsure of himself, to drift through life with no clear identity. Anyone with a real sense of self is probably just narrow-minded. That's what I believe, and I've believed it for forty years. I'm forty years old now—and forty is practically a whole lifetime. It's ancient. Living past forty is bad manners, even indecent. Who actually lives past forty? I'll tell you—fools and nobodies. And I say that to every old man I meet, straight to their face. I say it to the whole world! And you know what? I'm going to live until sixty. Maybe seventy. Even eighty! ... Wait, let me catch my breath...

You probably think I'm trying to entertain you. Wrong again. I'm not some cheerful, fun guy like you assume. And even though all this rambling might be irritating you right now, and you're probably wondering who I even am—fine, I'll tell you. I'm a “collegiate assessor,” a low-level government clerk. I worked in public service just so I could afford to eat, nothing more. Then last year, a distant relative left me six thousand rubles in his will, so I quit my job and holed up in my little corner of the world. I lived here before, but now it's permanent.

My apartment is a miserable little place on the edge of the city. My servant is an old peasant woman who's cranky because she's dumb. And she always smells bad. People tell me Petersburg's climate is bad for me, and that with my tiny income, it's too expensive to live here. I know all that better than any of those well-meaning know-it-alls. But I'm staying in Petersburg. I'm not going anywhere! Why? Eh, who cares. It doesn't matter whether I go or stay.

So, what does a decent man enjoy talking about most?

Answer: Himself.

So that's what I'll talk about.

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CHAPTER 2

Now I want to tell you—whether you care to hear it or not—why I couldn't even manage to become an insect. I swear to you, I've tried. More than once. But even that was too much for me.

Listen carefully: I truly believe that being too self-aware is a sickness—a real, serious illness. For everyday life, a person only needs a basic level of awareness. Just enough to get by—maybe a quarter or even a fraction of what an educated person in this miserable 19th century usually carries around in their head. Especially if that person lives in Petersburg, the most artificial and overthought city on the planet. (Yes, cities can be either intentional or unintentional.)

People who live more direct, action-driven lives—that level of awareness is probably enough. I bet you think I'm just trying to be clever here, mocking so-called “men of action.” You might think I'm showing off, like my old officer, clanking around with his sword. But really—who brags about their diseases like they're something to be proud of?

Actually... everyone does. People absolutely love to show off their issues. And maybe I do more than most. Fine, let's not argue. That point was stupid. Still, I stand by this: too much awareness—any kind of over-awareness—is a sickness. I truly believe that.

Let me move on for now. Answer this: why is it that in the exact moments when I feel most capable of appreciating the highest, noblest feelings—what people used to call the “sublime and beautiful”—those are the times I end up doing the ugliest, most shameful things? Things I knew were wrong even while I was doing them. Things most people probably do at some point, but I seemed to do them *on purpose*—and exactly when I knew better.

The more aware I was of what's good and noble, the deeper I sank into filth—and the more willing I became to stay there. And the worst part is, it didn't feel like a mistake. It felt like this was just how I was wired. Like this was normal for me—not some kind of breakdown or perversion. And eventually, I stopped even trying to resist it. I started to believe—maybe even really believe—that this was just who I was. But at the beginning, in the early days, I fought it. That fight was torture.

I didn't think other people felt like this, so I kept it hidden for most of my life. I was ashamed—maybe I still am. But even back then, I'd come home on a disgusting Petersburg night, painfully aware that I'd done something awful that day—something I couldn't undo. And I would tear myself apart over it, gnawing at myself, full of regret. And eventually that pain would turn into something twisted, something sweet. A kind of sick pleasure. Real pleasure! Yes, *pleasure*! I'm not exaggerating. I need to know if anyone else has ever felt that kind of enjoyment.

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Let me explain. The pleasure came from being *completely* aware of how far I'd fallen—knowing there was no way out, that this was how I was and would always be. Even if I still had time and faith to change, I wouldn't want to. And even if I wanted to, I wouldn't *do* anything about it. Because honestly, there might be nothing left to change into.

And the root of it all—the core of this mess—is that this is exactly how extreme self-awareness works. You don't just get stuck—you lose the ability to act entirely. You can't change, and you can't do anything. So if you're a scoundrel, you're not even to blame for it. It's just the inevitable result of your consciousness. Not that this makes you feel better once you *know* you're a scoundrel.

But that's enough... Ugh. I've been rambling, and still haven't explained anything. How can you even explain *enjoyment* like that? But I swear I'll try. That's why I picked up the pen in the first place.

Take me, for example. I'm full of pride. I'm touchy—so touchy that I'm like a hunchback or a dwarf, always expecting people to offend me. And I swear to you, there were times when, if someone had slapped me in the face, I might've actually felt *glad*. Honestly. I might've found some weird enjoyment in that too. The kind of enjoyment you get when you're desperate and hopeless. Because there's a kind of twisted intensity in that despair, especially when you're fully aware of how hopeless your life really is.

And when someone slaps you in the face, it hits you all at once—this overwhelming feeling that you've been completely crushed. It's humiliating. But no matter how I look at it, the sad truth is: I've always been the one most at fault. That's the most humiliating thing. And not because of anything I did—but just by nature.

First, I'm to blame because I'm smarter than everyone around me. I've always thought that. And sometimes—can you believe it?—I've been ashamed of it. I've spent my whole life avoiding people's eyes because of it.

And second, even if I had the capacity for greatness, I'd just suffer more because I'd realize how pointless it was. I could never act on that greatness. If someone had slapped me because of “the laws of nature,” what good would it do to forgive him? You can't forgive the laws of nature. And I couldn't forget it either, because even if it's “natural,” it still hurts.

And if I *didn't* want to be noble—if I wanted revenge instead—I couldn't even get that satisfaction. Because I would never actually do anything about it. Even if I could, I wouldn't decide to.

Now why is that? Why wouldn't I do anything, even when I wanted to?

That, right there, is exactly what I want to talk about next.

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CHAPTER 3

Let's talk about the kind of people who know how to stand up for themselves—how do they do it? When someone like that is filled with the urge for revenge, it completely takes over. For a while, that one emotion becomes their entire world. That kind of person charges straight at their goal like a bull with its head down. Nothing will stop them—except maybe a brick wall.

(By the way, when those types *do* hit a wall, they really don't know what to do. For people like them—so-called “men of action”—a wall is a real problem. For people like me, who overthink everything and don't actually *do* anything, the wall becomes an excuse to stop and turn away. We're even kind of relieved to have the excuse, even though we don't fully believe in it. But for them, the wall is a full stop. It's calming. Final. Maybe even mysterious... but more on walls later.)

Anyway, I see that kind of man—the direct, action-first guy—as the truly “normal” person. That's the kind of man nature probably intended when she first came up with the idea of humans. I envy him. Seriously. I'm jealous to the point of being sick over it. Yes, he's stupid. I won't deny that. But maybe that's what it means to be truly human—maybe being stupid is part of the package. And I've started to believe that's actually something beautiful.

Why do I think that? Because when you look at the opposite type—the hyper-aware person like me—we didn't come from nature. We came from a test tube. I know that sounds mystical, but I believe it. This overly conscious person ends up so confused by the “normal” person that, despite all his intelligence, he can't help but feel like a mouse instead of a man. Maybe a very aware, very self-conscious mouse—but still a mouse. The other guy? He's a man, plain and simple. And the worst part is: no one even *tells* him he's a mouse. He comes to that conclusion all on his own. That's important.

Now, let's look at this mouse when he actually *tries* to act. Let's say someone insults him. He wants revenge too. In fact, he probably feels more anger than the direct man does. But here's the difference: the direct guy believes revenge is justice. The mouse? The mouse knows better. He's too self-aware. He knows his revenge won't fix anything. So what happens?

Instead of acting, the mouse just gets stuck. He drowns in his own thoughts—doubts, questions, what-ifs. Everything becomes a complicated mess. And while he's overthinking, all the confident people stand around, laughing at him. He feels humiliated, small, pathetic. So what does he do? He waves it all away with a fake, dismissive smirk—one he doesn't even believe in himself—and disappears into his little hole.

And there, in that gross, miserable hole, he stays. But now he's filled with cold, bitter, lifelong resentment. For *forty years*, he'll obsess over the insult. He'll remember every little detail and invent new humiliating ones, making the whole thing even worse in his imagination. He'll hate

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himself for thinking about it, but he won't stop. He'll keep going over it, again and again. He won't forgive. Maybe he'll try to get revenge in small, petty ways—quietly, secretly, from behind the scenes. But even then, he won't believe he deserves revenge. He won't believe it'll work. And he'll suffer a hundred times more than the person he's trying to hurt—who probably doesn't even remember the insult at all. On his deathbed, he'll remember the whole thing again, with interest.

And *this*—this self-torturing cycle, this half-belief, half-despair—*this* is where that strange kind of enjoyment I mentioned earlier comes from. It's a special kind of pleasure born out of knowing exactly how hopeless your situation is, of feeling every desire inside you shrivel up and twist inward. Of knowing you've buried yourself alive. And yet, you kind of like it. It's a sick kind of indulgence.

It's so subtle, so twisted, that most people—especially people with strong nerves or simple minds—will never get it. They won't understand any of it. You might even joke, “Maybe people like that can only understand it if they've been slapped in the face before,” and you'd be implying that *I* must have been slapped, and that's why I understand this all so well.

Well, don't worry—I've never been slapped. And honestly, I don't care what you think. If anything, I regret *not* slapping more people in my life.

But let's move on. I want to talk more about people with strong nerves—those straightforward, action-first types. Even though they can bellow like bulls, when they're faced with something impossible, they immediately back down. And that impossible thing? It's the stone wall.

What do I mean by “stone wall”? I mean the laws of nature. The unbreakable truths of science. Mathematics. Physics. For example, once someone proves to you that humans descended from monkeys, you just have to accept it. Doesn't matter if you like it or not. If science proves that one drop of your own fat matters more to you than the lives of a hundred thousand other people, then you just have to deal with it. That's the conclusion of science, and you can't argue with it. Two plus two equals four—that's a fact. Go ahead, try to refute it.

People will shout at you, “You can't fight nature! Two plus two is four, and that's all there is to it!” They act like the wall—those facts—is some kind of comfort, some final answer that should give you peace.

But I don't care about that. What does it matter to me if two plus two equals four, when I hate the whole idea of it? Sure, I can't break the wall—I don't have the strength to smash it—but that doesn't mean I have to *accept* it just because it exists.

As if the wall itself should be comforting just because it's unchangeable. Just because it's logical. What nonsense. No, I'd rather understand everything about the wall, admit that it's impossible to

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break through, and *still* refuse to make peace with it. I'd rather follow all the logic to its most disgusting conclusion—accept that the wall is there, accept that I can't break it—and *still* grind my teeth in helpless rage.

And the worst part? You don't even have anyone to blame for the wall. You can't get revenge on it. You can't even hate it properly. You sit there, aching, furious, with nowhere to direct it. And the more confused and helpless you feel, the deeper that ache grows.

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CHAPTER 4

“Ha, ha, ha! So what, are you going to tell us you enjoy having a toothache next?” — I can hear you laughing already.

Well... yeah. Even a toothache has a kind of strange pleasure in it. I've had one that lasted an entire month, so I know what I'm talking about. Sure, people don't suffer in silence when they have one—they moan. But those moans? They're not innocent. They're *spiteful*. And that's the key. The pain itself becomes enjoyable through that spite. If you didn't get some kind of pleasure from it, you wouldn't make a sound.

Let me explain, because this is a perfect example.

Those moans are a way of expressing just how pointless the pain is. And that meaninglessness—that lack of justice—is incredibly humiliating to someone who's aware of it. Your body is being punished by nature, and even though you intellectually reject it all—you still suffer. Nature doesn't care, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Your moaning says: “I'm in pain, and I have no one to blame. I can't take revenge. My own tooth has me totally enslaved.” And you realize that even if some unseen force *wanted* to make the pain stop, it would stop—but if not, it could just keep going for three more months. And if you try to fight it, if you resist, the only power you have left is to beat your own fist against the wall—or thrash yourself. That's all you've got. It's pathetic.

And yet... somehow, in all this humiliation, you feel a strange kind of pleasure. A kind of twisted satisfaction that can become almost overwhelming.

If you've never noticed this before, then just pay attention to how a modern, educated man moans from a toothache. Not on the first day—then, the moaning is still honest. But listen on the second or third day. By then, he's not just moaning from pain—he's doing it *with style*. It's not like a peasant's moan. It's refined, drawn out, and full of attitude. This is a man of progress, of European sophistication, as people say now—someone totally removed from the “natural way of life.”

His moans get nasty. Spiteful. He moans all night and all day. And he *knows* it's doing no good. He knows it's just making things worse—for himself and for everyone around him. He knows his family, the people listening to him, are totally sick of it. He knows they can see right through him—that he could moan more simply, more sincerely, without the dramatic flair. He knows he's just doing it to be difficult, to lash out.

But that's *exactly* where the pleasure lies.

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It's like he's saying to them: "Yeah, I'm annoying you. I'm making you feel bad. I'm keeping everyone awake. Good! I want you to know every minute that I'm in pain. I'm not a hero like I tried to be before—I'm just a miserable, nasty person. And you see that now? Good. I'm glad you see it. You hate hearing my disgusting moans? Fine—get ready, here comes an even worse one."

Still don't get it? That's okay. Maybe we need to evolve a little more to understand this kind of twisted enjoyment. Maybe we haven't developed far enough to truly grasp how deep and strange it gets.

Are you laughing? Good. That means I've hit a nerve.

Yes, my jokes are awkward, clumsy, insecure. They're poorly delivered, and I stumble over them. But that's only because I don't respect myself. And tell me—can someone who's actually self-aware *ever* truly respect himself?

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CHAPTER 5

Tell me—can a man who tries to find *pleasure* in feeling ashamed of himself really have any self-respect left?

I'm not saying this out of guilt or because I'm trying to confess anything. No, I've never been the kind of person who goes around saying, "I'm sorry, Dad, I won't do it again." Not because I *can't* say that, but actually because I've been too good at saying it. I've said it even when I wasn't at fault—and that's what makes it disgusting.

Even when I wasn't guilty of anything, I'd still get myself into trouble, and I'd feel genuinely emotional about it. I'd cry. I'd feel sorry. I'd really believe I meant it in the moment. And it wasn't fake—my heart hurt. But I *was* lying to myself. Because just a minute later, I'd get angry at how fake and pathetic it all was. I'd realize that my feelings, my tears, my promises to change—they were all just a performance, and a nauseating one at that.

So why did I do it?

Because I was bored. That's the truth. Sitting around doing nothing was unbearable. So I stirred things up—made trouble on purpose just to feel *something*. I invented little dramas for myself, made up a life to make it feel like I had one. Pay attention to yourselves, gentlemen—you'll see this in your own lives, too.

I've gotten offended on purpose—more than once. I *knew* there was nothing to be offended about. I knew I was pretending. But I'd get myself so worked up that I'd actually *become* offended. It was all fake... and yet, it started to feel real. That's how deep this goes.

Another time—twice, actually—I tried hard to fall in love. I suffered! I swear to you, I suffered. But somewhere deep down, I could feel I didn't really believe in the pain. There was always this little voice mocking me. Still, I went through all the classic stages of heartbreak—I was jealous, obsessed, lost control... but it was all driven by boredom, by inertia. That's the real reason.

You see, the natural result of being so self-aware is this paralysis. Inertia. The more you think, the more you just... sit there with your hands in your lap, doing nothing. I've said this already, but let me say it again, loudly: people who act, who really do things, are only able to because they're dumb and limited.

How do I explain that?

Easy. Because they're limited, they mistake small, superficial causes for deeper truths. That lets them quickly convince themselves they've found a solid reason to act. And once their minds are at peace, they charge ahead without hesitation.

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And that's the key—if you want to act, you have to be completely convinced, no doubts allowed.

But me? How am I supposed to calm my mind? Where's my solid ground? What can I build my actions on?

The moment I try to find a foundation, my brain immediately digs deeper and deeper. For every reason I find, I find another reason *behind* that, and another one behind *that*. It never ends. That's what overthinking does. That's what extreme self-awareness is. And I guess, once again, it's all because of those cursed "laws of nature."

So what happens in the end? Nothing. Just like I said earlier when I talked about revenge (which I doubt you even noticed). A man takes revenge because he believes he's doing something *just*. That belief gives him confidence, it gives him a reason—and he acts with certainty. But me? I don't believe in justice. I don't see any real virtue in revenge. So if I try to take revenge, it's not because I believe in it—it's out of sheer spite.

And maybe that spite could actually push me to act. Maybe spite could replace logic. Maybe I could use it as my foundation, *precisely because it isn't one*. But what if I don't even have spite?

That's where I started, remember?

Because of this damn consciousness—this nonstop overthinking—even my anger falls apart. It breaks down into little pieces. It dissolves. I try to be angry, and suddenly I can't even remember who I'm mad at, or why. The whole reason disappears. The wrongdoing turns into a blur. Like a toothache—it hurts, but you can't blame anyone for it. So what can I do?

The only thing left is to punch the wall. And even that doesn't help. Because I still haven't found a real cause—something solid to act on.

Try this: let yourself be carried away by emotion. Just *go* with it. Don't think. Fall in love, hate someone—anything, just don't sit there frozen. But even if you do that, the very next day you'll wake up, see through your own performance, and hate yourself for pretending. You'll realize you tricked yourself on purpose just to feel something.

What's the result? A bubble. Nothing. More inertia.

Oh, gentlemen... maybe I only *think* I'm intelligent because I've never been able to start or finish anything in my whole life. Fine, I babble. I talk and talk. I'm harmless and annoying, like everyone else. But what choice do I have?

Maybe the only true purpose of a thinking person is to babble. Just endlessly pour water through a sieve—and call that living.

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CHAPTER 6

Oh, if only I had done nothing purely out of laziness! God, how much more I would've respected myself then. At least laziness is something solid. Something you can point to. I could've believed in that part of myself.

Imagine the question: "What kind of person is he?"

Answer: "A lazy man."

What a relief that would've been! At least then I'd be defined. I'd *be* something. "Lazy"—now that's practically a profession. A calling. Don't laugh—I'm serious. If that were true, I'd belong to a whole club of people like me. I'd spend my life proudly respecting myself.

I once knew a guy who spent his whole life boasting that he was a wine expert—especially with Lafitte. That was his identity. He treated it like a virtue. He had no doubts about himself. When he died, it wasn't just peaceful—it was like he went out *triumphant*. And honestly, he was probably right to feel that way.

If I'd had a path like that, I'd have chosen to be a glutton and a sluggard—not just an ordinary one, but one who had a passion for everything "sublime and beautiful." What do you think of that? I've fantasized about this for years. The "sublime and beautiful" really weighs on me now that I'm forty—but if I had chosen that path earlier, it would've been different. I would've made a whole lifestyle out of it.

Here's what that might've looked like:

I'd drink to everything "sublime and beautiful."

Every time something moved me—even the tiniest thing—I'd raise a glass. I'd cry into my drink, then drain it in honor of beauty and truth.

I'd see the sublime and beautiful even in the most pathetic, trashy nonsense. I'd be weeping constantly, like a sponge that's always soaked.

Let's say some artist paints a picture worthy of Gay—I'd toast the artist's health! Because I love all that's "sublime and beautiful."

Let's say an author writes *As You Will*—doesn't matter who wrote it, I'd toast *anyone at all*, because again: I love all that's "sublime and beautiful."

And I'd demand respect for that. If someone didn't respect me, I'd come after them for it.

I'd live in comfort, and die with dignity. Honestly, it sounds delightful.

I'd grow a huge, proud belly. I'd develop a glorious triple chin. I'd give myself a rosy, wine-soaked nose. People would look at me and say:

"Now that's a man of substance! That's someone real!"

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And in this day and age, when everything feels empty and hollow, I have to say—it would be *very* nice to hear something like that about yourself.

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CHAPTER 7

But these are all just golden fantasies.

Tell me—who was it that first came up with the idea that people only do bad things because they don't understand what's truly good for them? That if people were just *enlightened*, if their eyes were opened to what was really in their best interest, they'd instantly become good and noble? Because, after all, once they understood their real benefit, they'd see that the good is what's *useful* to them, and that no one, when fully aware, would ever act against their own best interests.

Whoever said that—what a sweet, naive soul. Like a baby.

Seriously—when in all of human history has mankind ever acted purely in his own best interest? What do you do with all the evidence—the *millions* of examples—where people knew exactly what was best for them and chose the *opposite* anyway? Not because they had to. Not because someone forced them. Just because they *wanted* to go another way. Because the normal, obvious path bored them or insulted them. So they went crashing down some dark, messy road instead, with no clear outcome in sight.

Maybe that stubbornness, that refusal to take the obvious road, felt better to them than any supposed "advantage."

But then... what even is "advantage"? Can you tell me—exactly—what a person's true advantage is? And what if it turns out that sometimes a person's advantage might actually lie in doing something *harmful* to himself, something irrational or painful?

If that's possible—if even one such case exists—then the whole theory falls apart.

You're laughing? Fine. Go ahead. But answer this honestly: are you *completely sure* we've figured out all of humanity's real advantages? Isn't it likely that some of them haven't been accounted for—maybe can't be accounted for at all?

Let's be real. You and your experts have built your entire understanding of human "advantages" from statistics and economics. You define advantage as prosperity, wealth, freedom, peace—things like that. So naturally, anyone who acts in *opposition* to those things is labeled crazy or destructive. I'd agree with you... on paper.

But there's one thing none of you ever include in your lists—something that changes *everything*. You just leave it out. Maybe because it doesn't fit neatly into a system.

I have a friend (well, you know him too—everyone does). When he's planning something, he'll sit you down and logically explain exactly how he *should* act, according to reason and

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self-interest. He'll passionately talk about what's good for people, mock anyone who doesn't understand their own interests, preach about morality and virtue...

Then fifteen minutes later, with no warning, no outside pressure, nothing but something inside him, he'll do the *opposite* of everything he just said. He'll act against logic, against self-interest, against everything.

Why? Because something matters more to him than advantage.

Now, to be fair, my friend is kind of a symbolic person—he represents a lot of people, not just one guy. But still, the fact remains: people will throw away reason, peace, honor, and prosperity to chase something else. Something deeper. Something more important than all the rest. Something they'll risk *everything* for.

You might say, "But that's still a kind of advantage!"

Sure—but it's a weird one. One that breaks every system. One that refuses to be measured or predicted. It destroys every neat theory people have built about human progress.

And before I name what this mystery "advantage" is, let me admit something: I think all these beautiful theories—the ones that say people will become good and noble once they understand what's best for them—are just games in logic. That's all they are.

It's like saying, as some philosophers do, that as civilization grows, people become softer, less violent, more peaceful. It sounds logical, sure. But people are so obsessed with theory, so desperate for systems, that they'll twist the truth just to make reality match their logic.

Look around. Blood is being spilled all over the place, and people are enjoying it. Cheerfully, even. Like it's a party.

Take all of the 19th century. Take Napoleon the Great—and Napoleon the Second. Take the United States and all its civil conflicts. Take the absurdity of Schleswig-Holstein. What exactly has civilization done to us?

All it's really done is increase the range of our emotions. That's it. And that emotional range has made us *worse*, not better. It's made us capable of enjoying violence in more creative, disgusting ways.

Have you noticed? The most civilized people are the ones who commit the most refined, calculated acts of cruelty. They make Attila the Hun look like an amateur. You don't notice it as much because now they're everywhere—so ordinary, so familiar.

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If civilization hasn't made us less violent, it's at least made us more *vilely* violent. In the past, people killed with a clear conscience. They thought they were doing the right thing. Now we kill while knowing it's wrong—and somehow we enjoy it even more.

Which is worse? You tell me.

Cleopatra, for instance (pardon the historical example), used to stick gold pins into her slave girls just to hear them scream. And yes, you'll say those were barbaric times. But things haven't changed as much as you'd like to think. Sure, we see things more clearly now—but we still *act* the same way.

You believe that people will change when they get rid of old habits. That once reason and science take full control, human nature will be "re-educated." You think that people will stop making mistakes on purpose, that they'll stop choosing against their own interests.

You even believe science will eventually prove that humans have *no* free will at all. That we're just piano keys being pressed by the laws of nature. That every decision we make is just physics. If we could just figure out the equations, everything would be predictable.

You dream of the day when every human action will be mapped out—like a giant spreadsheet, or a massive encyclopedia. When every problem will have a perfect solution. No more mysteries. No more surprises.

Then, you say, we'll build the "Crystal Palace"—a perfect, rational society. Everything will be peaceful, efficient, and explained.

But here's the thing (and this is *my* point): it will also be unbearably boring.

Because when *everything* is calculated, when life is all systems and logic, people will get so bored they'll do something crazy just to feel alive. That's when they'll start sticking gold pins into one another again. But now, they'll be *grateful* for the pins—just for the distraction.

Because people are stupid. No, not even stupid—*ungrateful*. There's no one more ungrateful in all creation than man.

I wouldn't be surprised if, in the middle of all this rational paradise, some ridiculous man suddenly stood up and said, "Hey everyone, let's smash the whole thing to bits! Let's tear it all down, just for fun. Just to prove we're not bound by all this reason and logic!"

And here's the worst part—people would *follow* him. Because that's how humans are.

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And they'd do it for one ridiculous reason: because people will always want to act on their *own will*, not based on what's logical or in their best interest. In fact, sometimes they'll go *against* their own interests on purpose. Sometimes they *should*.

Why?

Because the one thing people want more than reason, more than peace or logic or progress—is *freedom*. The freedom to choose. Even if the choice is stupid, self-destructive, or completely irrational. Even if it leads them straight into hell.

That, right there, is the mysterious “most advantageous advantage.”
And the truth is... not even the devil knows what people will choose.

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CHAPTER 8

“Ha, ha, ha! But come on—there’s no such thing as free will,” you’re probably laughing.

“Science has already figured out that what we call choice or freedom is nothing but—”

Hold on. I was actually about to bring that up myself. I admit, I hesitated. I was going to say, “The devil only knows what choice is really based on—and maybe that’s a good thing.” But then I remembered what science says and caught myself.

And now you’re saying it for me.

Yes, if someday science manages to crack the code—if it truly finds the formula for how our desires work, what triggers them, what patterns they follow, what they’re aiming for in different situations—then sure, it might all get reduced to math. A precise formula.

But if that happens, I think people will stop *wanting* things altogether. Why? Because who wants to desire something according to a formula?

At that point, man won’t even be a human being anymore—he’ll be a machine. A pipe organ, a piano key, a switch to be flipped. What is a person without desire, without freedom, without the ability to choose—even irrationally?

So tell me—do you think that could actually happen?

“Hm,” you might reply, “our so-called choices are usually just mistakes. People think they’re choosing freely, but really they’re just confused about what’s best for them. Once we figure that out—once everything is explained on paper, based on natural laws—then desire will disappear. Because no one can knowingly act against their own best interest, right?”

And yes, you’ll say it’s only a matter of time until we create a chart of human desires and motives—something like a spreadsheet. And when that happens, people will finally know what they really want. Every decision will be perfectly logical. You’ll know why you insulted someone, why you fell in love, why you lashed out. It’ll all be predetermined. And you’ll say: “Where’s the freedom in that?”

What’ll be left to do, then? Nothing, really. Just understand and accept it. You’ll tell me that nature doesn’t ask for our permission. That we have to take her as she is. And if we really want formulas, if we’re aiming to reduce life to a chemistry experiment, then we have to accept the test tube too—or else it’ll be accepted for us.

And *this* is where I have to stop.

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Forgive me for sounding overly philosophical—it's just the result of forty years spent underground. Let me speak freely for a moment.

Yes, reason is a great thing—no doubt about that. But reason is *only* reason. It satisfies only one part of our lives. Will—desire—is something bigger. It's the whole human being. Reason is just a piece. And even if our desires often lead us the wrong way, they are still *life*. They are still *us*. Not just the dry business of solving equations.

Me? I want to live—not just to reason. I want to experience all of life, not just one-twentieth of it. Because reason only knows what it's already learned. It doesn't know what it hasn't learned—and maybe never *can* learn. Meanwhile, the rest of human nature keeps living, making choices, stumbling through the world.

I can tell you're looking at me with pity again. You're probably thinking, "But once man is fully developed, he'll stop choosing what's bad for him. He'll be logical. Rational. It's inevitable." You'll even tell me it can be *proven*—mathematically!

Fine, I agree. It *can* be proven.

But even so, I say this: there is one situation—just one—where a person will deliberately choose something that's harmful, stupid, or ridiculous. And why? Just to prove that he *can*. Just to prove he's not a machine. That he still has the right to want something dumb and self-destructive.

And sometimes, that stupid thing might actually be better than all the logical options—*because* it protects our sense of self. It preserves our individuality, our human freedom. That, to some people, is more precious than any "advantage" you can calculate.

Sure, a person's choice might line up with reason once in a while. Sometimes it's smart. Sometimes it's even admirable. But just as often, it completely opposes reason—and sometimes, *that's* admirable too.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that man isn't an idiot. (We kind of have to believe that, right? Because if man is stupid, then who's left to be wise?) But even if he's not stupid, he is *deeply ungrateful*. Outrageously so. You won't find another creature like him.

Honestly, I think the best definition of man is: *the ungrateful biped*.

But even that's not his worst trait. His worst trait is his never-ending *crookedness*—his moral weirdness. That's why he lacks good sense—because his values are always tilted, off-center.

Just look at history. What do you see?

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Is it noble? Sure, maybe. Look at the Colossus of Rhodes. That's something. One writer even argued it was built by nature itself, not humans. Is history colorful? Definitely. Just consider all the uniforms—military, civilian, formal, casual—across all ages. That alone would take centuries to catalog.

But is it rational? Never.

That word doesn't even fit.

Again and again, you see wise people—rational, moral people—dedicate their lives to showing the world that you *can* live according to virtue and reason. They try to be examples, to shine as beacons for humanity.

And then—without fail—they mess up. They do something bizarre, something deeply unseemly. Every time.

So what can we expect from the average person, when even our best are so unpredictable?

You could give a man every possible pleasure. Give him endless comfort. Let him live in total luxury, with nothing to do but sleep, eat dessert, and make love. Give him the kind of economic security that philosophers dream about.

And you know what he'd do?

He'd destroy it all.

Out of *spite*.

Out of *boredom*.

He'd light the whole thing on fire just to prove he wasn't beholden to it. Just to stick a finger in the eye of all your "rationality." Just to remind himself that he's still *human*, not some piano key being played by nature.

And even if you *proved* to him—scientifically, mathematically—that he *is* just a piano key, he'd still rebel. He'd deliberately mess everything up just to assert himself.

And if he had no way to rebel, he'd invent new forms of chaos and pain—just so he could prove that he *can* still *choose*. Even if it kills him.

He'd curse the world just to remind himself that only *he* can curse it. That's the one thing animals can't do—curse. That's his human privilege.

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And maybe, by cursing, by rebelling, by choosing something irrational and destructive—he'd finally prove to himself that he's not a machine.

And if you say, "Even chaos and rebellion can be predicted and measured," then man would go *insane* just to escape that system. Just to break the formula.

I truly believe this. I stake everything on it. The entire history of human behavior is one long, desperate attempt to prove that we're not just variables in some equation. That we are alive. That we are *men*, not keys on an organ.

Even if we prove it by hurting ourselves.

So yes, maybe it's a good thing that human desire still depends on something no one understands.

You'll shout at me (if you even bother), "No one's trying to *take away* your free will—we're just trying to help you align it with your true interests!"

But come on. What kind of free will is that?

Once everything is reduced to rules and arithmetic—once "twice two makes four" becomes the basis for all human decisions—where's the freedom in that?

"Two plus two equals four" whether I like it or not. That's not freedom.

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CHAPTER 9

Gentlemen, I'm joking—and yes, I know my jokes aren't very clever. But you know, you can turn anything into a joke. Maybe I'm joking even though I don't want to. Maybe I'm forcing it.

But the truth is, I'm tormented by questions. Answer them for me.

You want to “fix” people. You want to reform human nature, free us from our old bad habits, and train our will to obey science and reason. But how do you even know it's possible? More importantly—how do you know it's *good*? Who says people even *need* to be reformed? What makes you so sure that living according to logic and arithmetic will always be best for us?

That's your assumption. Maybe it's a law of logic, sure—but it's not a law of human nature. Not yet.

You probably think I'm crazy. But let me explain myself.

I agree—humans are naturally creative. They're made to chase goals. We're built to build—literally, to construct things, create roads, plan ahead. That's who we are. But maybe the reason we sometimes go completely off track is because we *are* built to make roads. Maybe we wander just to make something new. Maybe that's the whole point.

And maybe even the simplest, most practical man, the guy who just wants to get from A to B, still has this thought creep into his head: that what really matters *isn't* the destination—it's the building of the road itself. It's the process. Maybe we only *pretend* to care about where we're going, but what we really care about is the journey, the struggle, the act of shaping our world.

If we don't feel that, if we lose that love for building, we get bored. And when we get bored, everything falls apart. Boredom is the mother of all vices, after all.

We *do* love to create. That much is clear. But then tell me this: Why do we also love to destroy? Why is chaos so tempting?

Let me take a stab at answering that one myself.

Maybe we love destruction and chaos *because* we're afraid of finishing anything. Maybe deep down, we don't *want* to reach our goals. Maybe the perfect building, once completed, is suddenly boring. It's dead. Maybe we love the idea of the perfect world more than the world itself.

Maybe we build for the sake of building, and when it's done, we leave. We abandon it to the ants.

Ants, you see, are different. They like that kind of thing. They built their ant hills long ago and have been living in them ever since. That's the ant dream—efficiency, order, routine. They started with the ant hill, and they'll end with it. That's their idea of success.

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But humans? We're strange. We're unpredictable. Maybe we're like chess players—we enjoy the moves, not the checkmate. Maybe our real goal on Earth isn't "achievement," but the constant *striving* toward it. The chase. The uncertainty. The becoming—not the being.

Because once everything is complete, all goals met, what's left? Death. That kind of finality isn't life—it's the end of life.

Even now, people fear that kind of perfect, mathematical certainty. They chase it, yes—they search for it across oceans, risk their lives for it—but if they ever truly found it? They'd be terrified.

Because when the work is done, then what?

A laborer finishes his job, gets paid, celebrates, maybe ends up drunk, maybe even arrested. But at least he still has something to *do*. Where would *man* go, once everything is finished?

We're awkward that way. We like chasing things—but once we've caught them, we don't quite know what to do. It's absurd, I know. But it's true.

We're ridiculous.

And that's why I say: mathematical certainty—this idea that everything can be explained, predicted, calculated—is *intolerable*. "Two plus two equals four"? It's not just a fact—it's a *thug*. It stands there in your way with its arms crossed, smirking, daring you to argue.

Sure, I agree—two plus two equals four is a wonderful thing. But you know what? Sometimes, two plus two equals *five* is even more beautiful.

And again, I ask—why are you so sure that only what is logical and useful is best for us? Why do you think reason always leads to what's good? Maybe people love something *else*. Maybe they love suffering. Maybe suffering is just as important to us as happiness.

That sounds strange? Look at yourself. Be honest. People *do* love to suffer sometimes. It's a fact. You don't need history books to prove it—just live a little.

Personally, I think living only for comfort and well-being is actually kind of vulgar. Maybe it's fine to be comfortable, but it's also kind of thrilling to break something once in a while.

Look—I'm not saying suffering is good. And I'm not saying comfort is bad. What I *am* saying is this: I want the *freedom* to choose. Even if it's foolish. Even if it's destructive. Even if it's against my own interests.

Sure, suffering wouldn't belong in a comedy or a feel-good fantasy. It definitely wouldn't fit in your "Crystal Palace" of the future—a perfect utopia where everything is calculated and

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controlled. Because suffering means uncertainty. Doubt. Darkness. And you can't have that in a place built on pure light and reason.

But here's the thing: I don't believe people will ever give up suffering. Real suffering. Real chaos. Because that's where *consciousness* begins. That's where self-awareness comes from.

Yes—I said earlier that consciousness is a curse. I stand by that. But I also believe people value it more than anything else. They'd rather suffer *consciously* than live in comfort *unaware*.

Consciousness is *greater* than “two plus two equals four.”

Because once you have everything figured out, once everything is solved, what's left? You put your senses in a jar and just sit there, staring into space. But if you're still conscious—if you're *aware*—then at least you can still feel something. Even if it's just self-inflicted pain. Even if all you can do is whip yourself.

Yes, even that is better than *nothing*.

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CHAPTER 10

You believe in a crystal palace—a perfect, indestructible paradise. A place so pure, so flawless, that no one would dare stick their tongue out at it or make a face behind its back.

And *that*—that's exactly what terrifies me.

It's the fact that the place is made of crystal, that it's invincible, that there's no way to rebel against it—not even quietly, not even secretly—that's what makes me uneasy.

See, if it were just a hen-house, I might crawl into it to get out of the rain. Sure. But I wouldn't suddenly call it a *palace* just because it keeps me dry. That would be ridiculous.

You laugh and say, "Well, if it keeps the rain off, who cares if it's a hen-house or a palace?" Yes—if the only purpose of life is to stay dry.

But what if I believe—deep in my bones—that that's *not* the only point of living? What if I believe that if we're going to live, we should *really live*—in a place that's truly grand, not just functional?

That's my choice. That's my desire. And unless you change what I desire, you won't change *me*. So go ahead—try to change it. Entice me with something better. Show me a higher dream. Until then, I'm not going to pretend your hen-house is my dream home.

The crystal palace may be a fantasy. It might go against the laws of nature. Maybe I invented it out of nostalgia or stupidity—outdated hopes passed down from generations before mine. But so what? I *want* it. I desire it. And if it lives in my desires, then it exists—as long as I exist.

Are you laughing again? Go ahead. I'd rather be mocked than lie to myself and say I'm full when I'm starving. I won't accept some compromise—a life that amounts to zero—just because it fits "reality" or the "laws of nature."

I won't pretend that a sterile block of housing units, with a dentist's sign hanging out front and a thousand-year lease, is the peak of my dreams.

No—if that's all you can offer, then tear down my desires. Kill my ideals. Replace them with something better. Then I'll listen. Then I'll follow.

You might say, "It's not worth the effort."

Then I'll say the same to you. If you won't take this seriously, I won't keep your company. I'll go back into my hole—my underground.

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But so long as I'm alive—and so long as I have the power to want—I'd rather lose my hand than lay a single brick for your so-called paradise.

Don't accuse me of rejecting your crystal palace just because I want to stick my tongue out at it. That's not what this is about. It's not that I *love* rebellion. It's that your entire system doesn't *allow* for it. There hasn't been a single utopia, a single dream world yet, that hasn't made room for someone like me to rebel.

And if your paradise were truly perfect—so perfect that I'd never *want* to rebel against it—then yes, I'd be so grateful I'd gladly lose my tongue for good.

But that's not the world we live in. That's not how we're made. And I didn't ask to be made with these desires—with dreams I can never fulfill. Why give me a heart that longs for something, only to tell me that the longing itself is foolish?

Is that really the point of all this? That I was created only to discover that my own nature is a lie? I don't believe that. I *won't* believe that.

And one last thing: I'm convinced people like me—the underground types—ought to be kept on a tight leash. We might stay buried for forty years without saying a word. But the second we come back up into the light?

We don't stop talking.

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CHAPTER 11

So here's the bottom line, gentlemen: it's better to do *nothing*. Better to choose conscious inaction! So—hurrah for the underground!

Yes, I've said that I envy the normal man down to the last drop of bitterness in me. But still, I wouldn't actually want to be him—not really. I'll go on envying him, sure. But I still wouldn't trade places with him.

No, no. Life underground is better. At least there you can...

Ah, but even now I'm lying.

I'm lying because I *know* it's not the underground that's better—but something else. Something different. Something I long for but can't seem to find.

Damn the underground.

And here's something else that would be better: if I actually believed a single word I just wrote. But I don't. Not really. I swear to you, gentlemen—not one sentence I've written is something I truly believe. Or maybe I do believe it, but at the same time, I know I'm lying. Like a shoemaker lying through his teeth.

"So why did you write all this, then?" you'll ask.

"I ought to bury you in a hole for forty years with nothing to do," you'll say, "then come back and see what's left of you. Who could survive with nothing to do for forty years?"

"Isn't it pathetic?" you'll probably say, shaking your heads. "You thirst for life, but try to make sense of it with a tangle of theories. You ramble on, full of arrogance, but you're clearly terrified. You say nonsense and enjoy it. You act bold, but you're always trying to win our approval. You gnash your teeth and still try to be funny to entertain us. You know your jokes aren't funny, but you act proud of them like they're literary masterpieces. Maybe you've even really suffered—but you show no respect for your own suffering. You're sincere, sure—but you flaunt it out of vanity. You expose your soul for attention, not for truth. You probably have something real to say, but you're too scared to say it out loud. You hint at it, you circle it, but never speak it fully. Your courage is fake. You claim to be conscious, aware—but your heart is rotten, and without a clean heart, there's no real consciousness. And besides, you're annoying. You insist, you repeat yourself, you act like a fool. Lies! All of it, lies!"

Yes. I wrote all that, too. I imagined every word you'd say. That's also part of the underground. I've been listening to people like you from beneath the floorboards for forty years. I've

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memorized every insult, every line of criticism. There's nothing else to do down here but imagine and rehearse how the world might judge me. No surprise I've turned it into literature...

But really—do you honestly think I'll *publish* all this and let you read it?

Here's another question: why do I keep calling you “gentlemen”? Why do I pretend you're actually my readers?

These kinds of confessions aren't meant to be published or shared. I'm not bold enough for that. And I don't see why I should be. But I've had this strange urge lately. I feel like I have to write this down—no matter what.

Let me explain.

Every person has memories they'd only share with close friends. And then there are things they'd never share with anyone—only with themselves, in secret. But there are also things a person won't even admit to *themselves*—memories so uncomfortable that even the most decent person keeps them locked up in their mind. And the more decent a person is, the more of those kinds of things they're likely to have.

For a long time, I avoided thinking about certain memories—uneasy, ashamed. But now, not only am I remembering them, I've decided to write them down. I want to try something: to see whether I can be *completely* honest with myself—brutally honest—and not run from the truth.

By the way, Heine once said a real autobiography is nearly impossible. People always lie about themselves. He believed Rousseau lied in his confessions—on purpose, out of vanity. And you know what? I think Heine was right. I can totally understand the kind of vanity that would lead someone to exaggerate even their sins—just to feel interesting.

But Heine was talking about people who publish their confessions. I'm writing only for myself. And if I'm writing *as if* I'm talking to readers, that's just a trick to help me keep going. It's just a style. A device. I know perfectly well I'll never have real readers. I've already made that clear...

I don't want to follow any rules while I write this. No structure, no system. I'll just write things down as I remember them.

Now, you might ask: if I don't expect readers, why am I bothering to explain myself? Why all this effort to be organized—or to say I *won't* be organized? Why do I even bother writing any of this?

Good question. Honestly—I don't really know. Maybe it's cowardice. Or maybe it's because pretending I have an audience makes me feel more dignified. Maybe I need the illusion of readers just to stay focused. There could be a thousand reasons.

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And here's another: if I'm not writing this for anyone else, why not just keep it all in my head? Why not think through these memories privately?

Well, writing it down feels more real. More official. It forces me to look at myself clearly. It gives me something to do, something to critique. And maybe, just maybe, it'll give me some relief. Right now, I'm being haunted by one memory in particular—a moment from years ago. It came back recently and won't leave me alone, like a bad song stuck in my head.

I have hundreds of memories like this—but every so often, one stands out, stronger than the rest. And it won't stop bothering me. So I've decided to write it down. Maybe that'll help. Why not try?

Besides, I'm bored. I have nothing else to do. Maybe writing will count as *work*. They say work makes people better—kinder, more honest.

Well, here's my chance.

Today the snow is falling—wet and dirty, yellowish. It was falling yesterday, too. And the day before. I think it's this wet snow that stirred up the memory I can't get rid of.

So let this next part be a story—a *story inspired by the falling snow*.

PART II

À Propos of the Wet Snow

When from the grip of dark confusion
My urgent, heartfelt words had freed you—
And your faint spirit, torn and broken,
Shook off the chains that sin had cast;
When, crushed beneath your past's affliction,
You cursed the vice that held you fast;

And when your conscience, long kept sleeping,
Awoke, aflame with sharp regret,
You laid your soul bare, bitter, weeping—
Confessing all you'd tried to forget:

When suddenly I saw you shudder,
Your face in trembling hands concealed,
Consumed by horror, tears, and anguish—
Ashamed of what your past revealed.

— Nekrasov

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CHAPTER 1

I was only twenty-four at the time. My life was already dark, chaotic, and as isolated as a wild animal's. I had no friends and purposely avoided talking to anyone. I withdrew deeper and deeper into my hole. At work, I never looked anyone in the eye. I was certain—almost paranoid—that my coworkers didn't just think I was odd, but that they were actually repulsed by me. I always believed this, though no one ever said it aloud.

I used to wonder—why was I the only one who felt this way? There was this one clerk whose face was covered in pockmarks, making him look almost criminal. I couldn't imagine facing the world with a face like his. Another wore such a filthy, tattered uniform that he gave off an actual odor. But neither of them seemed self-conscious about it. It didn't seem to occur to them that people might find them unpleasant. Or if it did, they didn't care—so long as their bosses didn't think less of them. And that, I realized later, was the difference between us.

I judged myself by a ridiculously high standard. I was so vain, I saw my flaws as magnified, and I assumed others did too. I hated my face—I thought it was hideous. I suspected it had some kind of weak, pathetic expression, and so I did everything I could to look serious, proud, or at least intelligent. "Maybe I'm ugly," I'd think, "but I'll carry myself with dignity. Let people see a sharp, clever face." But deep down, I was sure I couldn't pull it off. In fact, I thought my face looked stupid—and I would've gladly traded in that stupidity for something even villainous, if it at least looked intelligent.

Naturally, I hated all my coworkers. I thought I was better than them—but at the same time, I feared them. I would swing wildly between feeling superior to them and feeling inferior. That's how it works: anyone with a sensitive, intelligent nature will always despise themselves at times. It's part of being "a decent man" in this day and age. And I really mean that. Every decent man today is both a coward and a slave. That's how we're built. It's not just a passing trend—it's a rule of nature. And if a decent man does show some courage, don't be impressed—it just means he hasn't been pushed into a corner yet. The moment he is, he'll back down. Only mules and fools are consistently brave—and even they fold eventually.

There was another thing that haunted me: the sense that no one else was like me. "I'm alone, and they are all together," I'd think. It consumed me. That's how you know I was still young.

There were days I couldn't even bear going to work. I'd feel so sick and miserable I'd go straight home. But then—completely at random—I'd swing into a phase of indifference. I'd mock myself for being so sensitive, call myself a romantic. Some days I avoided people like the plague; other days I almost wanted to make friends. It's as if I had no real convictions—maybe my disdain for them was fake, just something I read in a book. I still haven't figured that out.

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Once, I even started hanging out with them—visiting their homes, playing cards, drinking vodka, talking about promotions. But let me make a quick side note here.

We Russians aren't like those over-the-top romantics you find in Germany or France—those fools who stay emotionally frozen even during earthquakes or revolutions. We don't have people like that. That's what sets us apart. Critics have mistaken our "romantics" for the same sort of sentimental fools, but they're completely different.

A true Russian romantic sees everything—often more clearly than the realists. They understand the world, but they refuse to take it seriously. They don't admire anyone or anything—but they don't hate anyone either. They play along for practical reasons. They chase things like pensions, perks, and prestige—but all the while, they keep their love for "the sublime and the beautiful" tucked away inside, like a precious jewel hidden in cotton. Our romantic is broad-minded—and usually the biggest scoundrel of them all (and I say that with love). But he's always clever. And if he's not, then he stopped being Russian long ago and moved to Germany.

I, for instance, truly hated my government job—but I never said a word against it. Why? Because I was part of the system and drawing a paycheck. That's how our romantics operate. They'd rather lose their minds than openly criticize something they depend on. And even then, they usually go mad quietly, like someone claiming to be the King of Spain.

And the older they get, the higher they rise in rank. That's the crazy thing—they're capable of everything, even while doing nothing. They might be liars, crooks, hypocrites—but deep down they'll weep over their childhood ideals and swear they're honest at heart.

Yes, only in Russia can the worst scoundrel sincerely believe he's a noble soul—and maybe even be right. That's why I hold out some hope for our future. We have such a range of potential—who knows where it'll lead? Don't think I'm just being patriotic. Laugh at me if you like—I'll take it as a compliment.

Anyway, as you'd expect, I fell out with my coworkers and cut ties. I even stopped saying hello to them. That only happened once, though. Most of the time, I kept to myself.

I stayed home and read constantly. Reading was my only escape from everything boiling inside me. Sometimes it helped—it stirred up emotions, gave me something to think about. But other times it bored me to death. Despite myself, I longed for action. And that's when I fell into the worst kind of petty, disgusting habits.

My passions weren't just bad—they were sick and wild. I was always on edge, overly emotional, prone to breakdowns. I had nothing in my life that I could look up to or admire. I was drowning in boredom and depression. I wanted chaos, contradiction. So I turned to vice.

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I'm not trying to justify any of this. Actually—no, that's a lie. I *am* trying to justify myself. And I'll admit that. I promised I'd be honest.

So yes, I gave in to disgusting habits. Always in secret, always ashamed. Even at the worst of it, shame never left me. I cursed myself, hated what I was doing—and still, I kept doing it. I was already living underground in my soul. I was terrified of being seen, recognized. I went to places no one would ever associate with someone like me.

One night, I walked past a tavern and saw a brawl through the window—men smashing each other with billiard cues. One of them was thrown out into the street. Normally, I would've been disgusted. But that night, I *envied* him. I wanted to be thrown out like that, to feel something. I went inside, hoping for a fight. Nothing happened. I wasn't even worth getting kicked out.

There was one officer who humiliated me—just moved me out of his way like I was furniture. Didn't say a word. Just picked me up by the shoulders and placed me somewhere else.

I could've forgiven a punch. But not being treated like I didn't exist.

I dreamed of revenge. I obsessed over it for *years*. I wrote a story exposing him as a villain and sent it to a magazine. It was rejected. I considered challenging him to a duel. I even wrote the letter—but thank God I didn't send it.

Eventually, I got my revenge—if you can call it that.

You see, we used to cross paths on the Nevsky Prospect. He never made way for anyone. Just walked straight ahead like everyone else was invisible. Meanwhile, I'd always step aside. One day, I decided: *no more*. I would *not* move.

I planned everything. Bought a new coat collar. Got gloves. Practiced walking straight.

I failed—again and again. But one day—I did it. I walked straight into him. We hit shoulders. He pretended not to notice, but I know he did. And even though I got the worst of it, I was triumphant. I hadn't backed down.

For three days I was ecstatic. Then I crashed.

He was transferred after that. I haven't seen him in fourteen years. I wonder sometimes—what's he doing now? Who's he walking over?

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CHAPTER 2

But eventually my phase of debauchery would end, and I always felt awful afterwards. The guilt would set in—I tried to fight it off, but I just felt too sick. Little by little, though, I got used to that too. I got used to everything—or rather, I willingly surrendered myself to enduring it. But I had one escape that made everything bearable: I'd retreat into "the sublime and the beautiful"—in other words, I'd dive into my dreams. I was a terrible dreamer. I could spend three months straight holed up in my corner, lost in fantasies—and believe me, in those moments I was nothing like the guy who, in a panic, bought a German beaver collar for his coat. I suddenly became a hero. I wouldn't have let that six-foot lieutenant into my room, even if he begged. I couldn't even picture him anymore. What exactly I dreamed about and how those dreams were enough to satisfy me—it's hard to explain now, but they did satisfy me at the time. Honestly, they still sort of do.

Dreams were especially vivid and sweet after a binge. They came with guilt, with tears, with curses, with bursts of joy. There were moments of such ecstatic happiness that I felt no trace of irony at all—on my honor. I believed in love, in hope, in faith. I truly believed that by some miracle, some outside force, everything would suddenly open up and become clear. I imagined that a path of meaningful, good, and most importantly—already-prepared—action would appear before me. (What kind of action? I had no clue. But the important part was that it would all be set and waiting for me.) I'd come into the world like some chosen one—riding a white horse, crowned with laurels.

Anything less than center stage? I couldn't even picture it. And for that very reason, I was perfectly content being at the very bottom in real life. It was either be a hero or wallow in filth—there was no in-between. That was my downfall: when I was groveling in the dirt, I comforted myself by remembering that I was a hero in my dreams. The hero image masked the filth. For a normal man, disgrace would be shameful. But a hero? He's too exalted to really be tarnished—he's allowed to be dirty.

And you know what's interesting? These bursts of "the sublime and beautiful" happened even during my lowest points. They came in spurts, as if to remind me they were still there. But they didn't pull me out of the filth—in fact, they made it more vivid by contrast. They were like a rich sauce that gave everything flavor. That sauce was made of contradictions, of inner torment, of obsessive analysis. These sharp little stabs of insight added a kind of drama, even meaning, to my self-destruction. In other words, they justified it. Without them, I never could've tolerated the crude, dirty lifestyle of an office clerk. What would've drawn me into the streets at night otherwise? No—my debauchery had to have a noble flair to it.

And oh, what love I felt in those dreams! What overwhelming, radiant love! Even though it was imaginary, even though it had no application to real human beings, there was so much of it, so much tenderness, that I didn't even feel the urge to apply it in the real world. That would've been

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redundant. Instead, it all slid smoothly into the realm of art—into beautiful images and scenarios, stolen half from the poets and half from the novelists, tailored to suit whatever emotion I wanted to feel.

In those dreams, I triumphed over everyone. Of course, they all lay in ruins before me, crushed by the weight of my superiority, which they admitted with tears—and I, in turn, forgave them. I was a poet. A nobleman. I fell in love. I inherited millions and gave it all away to the people. I publicly confessed my sins, which were not just shameful but had a tragic, Manfred-like grandeur to them. People kissed me, wept over me (as well they should), and I walked barefoot, hungry, preaching truth and challenging the forces of ignorance in a glorious, Austerlitz-like victory.

Then the band would strike up a march. An amnesty would be announced. The Pope would retire from Rome to Brazil. Italy would throw a grand ball at the Villa Borghese on the shores of Lake Como (which, for convenience, had been moved next to Rome). There'd be a romantic scene in the bushes—and so on, and so on. Don't tell me you don't know what I mean?

You'll say all this is vulgar and ridiculous after all those heartfelt tears and revelations. But why? Do you really think I'm ashamed of it? That it's any dumber than what's gone on in your own heads, gentlemen? Let me assure you, some of those fantasies were quite beautifully crafted. It didn't all happen at Lake Como, you know.

Still, yes—you're right. It is vulgar and ridiculous. And most ridiculous of all is that I'm trying to defend it. And even more ridiculous is that I'm now commenting on my own defense.

But enough of that. Otherwise, every next word will only be more ridiculous than the last.

I couldn't dream for more than three months without feeling an overwhelming urge to return to human society. And for me, "returning to society" meant visiting my supervisor at the office, Anton Antonitch Syetotchkin. He was the only permanent acquaintance I've ever had—and even that still surprises me. But I only ever visited him when I was in that blissful, dreamy phase—when my soul was so full of love for all humanity that I had to see at least one real person. He had "visiting hours" on Tuesdays, so I had to time my burst of universal love to land on a Tuesday.

Anton Antonitch lived on the fourth floor in Five Corners, in four gloomy little rooms that seemed to get smaller the farther in you went. The place had a frugal, yellowish look to it. He had two daughters and their aunt, who poured the tea. One girl was thirteen, the other fourteen—both with stubby noses—and I was mortified around them because they always whispered and giggled to each other. Their father usually sat on a leather sofa in his study, chatting with some grey-haired gentleman—usually a fellow office worker or someone from

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another department. I never saw more than two or three guests there, and they were always the same two or three.

They talked about taxes, or Senate business, or salaries, or promotions, or about His Excellency and how best to impress him. And I had the patience to sit there like an idiot for four hours at a time, listening silently, not knowing what to say, too scared to even open my mouth. I'd grow numb, break into a sweat, feel paralyzed. And somehow, that was good for me. When I went home afterward, I'd lose interest in embracing all of mankind for a while.

I did have one other sort-of-acquaintance: Simonov, an old schoolmate. I had several old schoolmates in Petersburg, but I didn't keep in touch with them. I even stopped nodding to them in the street. In fact, I think I transferred into my current department just to get away from all of them and sever every tie with those miserable childhood years. Damn that school and those awful, prison-like days. I cut them out of my life as soon as I got out.

Only two or three remained, and even then we just nodded to each other from time to time. One of those was Simonov. He wasn't remarkable back in school—quiet, even-tempered—but I'd noticed he had some backbone, maybe even a little honesty. I don't think he was stupid, either. We'd shared a few emotional moments once, but it hadn't lasted. Something between us got cloudy, awkward. I think he was uncomfortable with the memory of those conversations, and probably always worried I'd bring it all back up. I suspected he disliked me. But I kept going to see him anyway—because I wasn't totally sure.

So one day, when I couldn't take the solitude anymore—and when I remembered that it was Thursday, and Anton Antonitch wouldn't be home—I thought of Simonov. As I climbed to the fourth floor, I was already thinking, "He doesn't like me. This is going to be awkward." But, as always, those thoughts only made me push myself harder into the uncomfortable situation. So I went in. I hadn't seen Simonov in almost a year.

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CHAPTER 3

After every period of indulgence, I would end up feeling sick. Then came the guilt—I tried to fight it off, but I was too sick inside. Eventually, I got used to it. Or rather, I resigned myself to enduring it. But I had an escape—a way to make it all bearable: I escaped into dreams, into fantasies of “the sublime and the beautiful.” I was a hopeless dreamer. I could go on dreaming for months at a time, shut up in my room. And you can believe me when I say that in those moments, I was nothing like the trembling little man who added a cheap beaver collar to his coat just to feel important. No, in my dreams, I became a hero. Even if that tall lieutenant himself had come to see me, I wouldn’t have let him in. I couldn’t even imagine him then.

What exactly did I dream about? How did I find satisfaction in it? Hard to explain now—but at the time, I was satisfied. Honestly, even now, part of me still is. The dreams were especially vivid and sweet after one of those spells of indulgence. They came soaked in guilt, tears, curses, and rapture. There were moments of almost ecstatic happiness, free of any hint of irony—on my honor. I had faith, hope, love. I genuinely believed that some miracle, some external change, would suddenly open up my life; that the perfect opportunity—noble, meaningful, and most importantly, already prepared—would present itself, and I’d rise into the light, laurel crown on my head, riding a white horse. I never imagined anything less than first place for myself—and precisely because of that, I tolerated being in last. Either a hero or scum—nothing in between. That was my downfall. When I was groveling in the dirt, I comforted myself with the thought that I was a hero in some other context. Heroes, I thought, were allowed to be covered in filth—they stood above it all. For regular men it was shameful, but a hero could afford it.

These surges of “the sublime and the beautiful” came even during the worst of my self-destruction. They didn’t stop the debauchery—they just added flavor. They made it more exciting by contrast, like seasoning. That seasoning was made of contradiction, suffering, and endless self-examination. The pain and shame gave my vices a kind of meaning. I could never have endured just being a common degenerate clerk. What could possibly draw me into the street night after night? It had to be elevated. It had to mean something.

And oh, the compassion I felt in those dreams! What love! Even though it was fake—pure fantasy, never once touching real people—it overflowed from me in such quantity that I didn’t even feel the need to use it in real life. That would’ve been unnecessary. Everything was resolved in this slow, dreamy shift into the world of art—into beautiful lives, perfect scenes, often plagiarized from poets and novels, customized to fit whatever I wanted. In these dreams, I triumphed over everyone. They were all groveling in the dirt, forced to recognize my brilliance—and I forgave them. I was a nobleman and a poet. I fell in love. I inherited millions and gave it all to humanity. And then I would confess my sins to the world—not just shameful things, but poetic, dramatic, Manfred-style sins. They’d all kiss me, cry over me (and how stupid they’d be not to!), while I went barefoot and hungry preaching the new truth, conquering all

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ignorance like Napoleon at Austerlitz. Then there'd be a parade, an amnesty, the Pope would step down and move to Brazil, and there'd be a national ball at the Villa Borghese on the shores of Lake Como—which I relocated to Rome for the occasion. Then a mysterious encounter in the bushes, and on and on—you know the type.

You might say it's vulgar, dragging all this out after baring my soul with such serious emotion. But why is it vulgar? Do you think I'm ashamed of it? That it's any more ridiculous than your own fantasies? I assure you, some of mine were very well thought out. They didn't all happen at Lake Como, you know. Still, you're right—it's ridiculous. And worst of all, I'm sitting here justifying it. And even worse than that? I'm now admitting that I'm justifying it. So let's stop. There's no end to this kind of thing—every step gets more pathetic than the last.

Anyway, I could never keep dreaming for more than three months without feeling an overwhelming need to be around people. Which meant, in my case, visiting Anton Antonitch Syetotchkin, my boss at the office. He was my only real acquaintance—has been my only one for years—and I still can't figure out why. But I only went when I was in this phase, when my dreams reached such a blissful peak that I just had to embrace all of mankind. And for that, I needed at least one actual person. Anton Antonitch had visiting hours every Tuesday, so I always had to time my desire to love humanity so it landed on a Tuesday.

He lived on the fourth floor in Five Corners, in four cramped, gloomy rooms that looked as if they'd been drained of color and joy. He had two teenage daughters and an aunt who poured the tea. The girls had little turned-up noses and always whispered and giggled, which made me uncomfortable. Anton Antonitch usually sat in his study on a leather couch, talking with some gray-haired gentleman, usually another office worker. I never saw more than two or three visitors there—and always the same people. They'd talk about taxes, Senate business, salary scales, promotions, and how to stay in the good graces of His Excellency. And I would sit there like an idiot, saying nothing, sweating, nearly paralyzed. But it was good for me. It helped. Afterward, I would go home and put off my desire to embrace all mankind—for a while, at least.

I did have one other acquaintance of sorts—Simonov, a former schoolmate. I had several classmates around Petersburg, but I didn't keep in touch and had even stopped nodding hello when I passed them. I think I transferred into my current department specifically to escape them—to cut off all connection to those miserable school years. God, what a prison that school was. The moment I graduated, I severed every tie with it. A few remained whom I still greeted on the street. One of them was Simonov. He hadn't stood out in school, was quiet and steady, but I had once seen signs of independent thinking in him, maybe even integrity. I doubt he was especially clever. We had a few intense conversations at one point, but those didn't last. After that, he clearly felt awkward around me, probably worried I'd try to get sentimental again. I had a hunch he didn't like me—but I still went to visit, never sure.

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One Thursday, worn down by loneliness and knowing that Anton Antonitch wouldn't be receiving guests, I thought of Simonov. As I climbed up to his apartment, I kept thinking: "He doesn't like me. This is a mistake." But that only made me want to go more, as if I were deliberately setting myself up for humiliation. So I went.

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CHAPTER 4

I was sure the day before that I'd be the first to arrive. But it wasn't just about showing up first. Not only were they not there yet—I had trouble even finding our room. The table hadn't even been set. What the hell? After a round of awkward questioning, the waiters informed me the dinner was actually set for six o'clock, not five. The guy behind the buffet confirmed it too. I was embarrassed just asking them. It was only 5:25. If they changed the time, they could have let me know. That's what the postal system is for—for avoiding moments like this where I'm left humiliated, alone, and... judged, even by the waiters. I sat down. A servant started setting the table. Somehow that made it worse.

Around six they brought in candles—even though the room already had lamps burning. It hadn't even occurred to them to bring the candles in when I first arrived. In the room next to mine, two grumpy men were eating in total silence. Farther down the hall, I could hear a crowd yelling, laughing, women shrieking in French. A real party. The whole place made me feel sick. I rarely remember feeling worse—so much so that when the group finally walked in at exactly six, I was genuinely relieved to see them. I even forgot I was supposed to be mad.

Zverkov came in first, clearly the leader. They were all laughing. But when he saw me, Zverkov straightened up a little, walked over, and gave me this polite but chilly handshake—like a general who's humoring some low-ranking officer. It wasn't rude, but the distance in it was unmistakable. I had expected his usual high-pitched cackle and his idiotic little jokes. I'd been bracing for them all day. But instead, he greeted me with that superior formality. So he really does see himself as light-years above me? If this was meant to insult me, fine—I could work with that. But what if this fool actually believed in all seriousness that he was above me and that this was just the natural order of things? The thought made my blood boil.

"I was surprised to hear you wanted to join us," he said, dragging out his words with that lazy, aristocratic lisp he'd picked up somewhere. "You don't usually associate with us. You really should. We're not as terrifying as you seem to think. But anyway, I'm glad we're reconnecting."

He turned away to put his hat down, casual as anything.

"Have you been waiting long?" Trudolyubov asked.

"I got here at five o'clock, like you said yesterday," I answered sharply, my voice already on edge, like a lit fuse.

"You didn't tell him we changed it?" Trudolyubov said, turning to Simonov.

"No, I forgot," Simonov replied, totally unapologetic. He didn't even look at me. Then he walked off to deal with the hors d'oeuvres.

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"So you've been sitting here for a whole hour? Oh, you poor guy!" Zverkov smirked. For him, that kind of thing was hilarious. That little weasel Ferfitchkin burst into a snorting laugh. Even he couldn't miss the joke.

"There's nothing funny about it!" I snapped at Ferfitchkin, losing what little composure I had left. "It wasn't my mistake. It was theirs. They didn't tell me. It's just... absurd."

"It's more than absurd," muttered Trudolyubov. "It was rude—probably unintentional, of course. But still. How could Simonov have... hm."

"If that had happened to me," Ferfitchkin interrupted, puffing himself up, "I would've—"

"You could've just ordered something," Zverkov cut in, "or asked for dinner without us."

"I didn't need your permission," I shot back. "If I waited, it was because..."

"Let's sit down, gentlemen," Simonov interrupted, walking back in. "Everything's ready. The champagne is perfect. You see, I didn't know your address," he said suddenly, turning to me. But again, he avoided eye contact. It was like he had something against me—probably because of what happened yesterday.

Everyone sat down. I did too. It was a round table. Trudolyubov sat to my left, Simonov to my right, Zverkov across from me, and Ferfitchkin between him and Trudolyubov.

"So, do you work in government?" Zverkov asked, directing his fake friendliness at me. He saw I was uneasy, so now he was trying to be gracious—"cheering me up," in his mind.

"Does this idiot want me to throw a wine bottle at his face?" I thought, fuming. The whole scene was surreal.

"Yeah, I'm in the N— office," I said flatly, staring at my plate.

"And is it a decent job? Say, what made you leave your original post?"

"I left because I wanted to," I said, dragging out the words like he did, just to spite him. Ferfitchkin snorted with laughter. Simonov looked at me with smug irony. Trudolyubov put down his fork and started watching me with curious disapproval.

Zverkov flinched a bit, but pretended not to notice.

"And the pay?"

"What?"

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"I mean, what's your salary?"

"Why are you interrogating me?" But I told him anyway, in a low, jerky voice, my face burning.

"That's... not very much," Zverkov said with this air of mild pity.

"Yeah, not enough for café dinners," Ferfitchkin chimed in, trying to score points.

"It's not much," Trudolyubov agreed, deadpan.

"And how thin you've gotten. How much you've changed," added Zverkov, his voice tinged with mock concern as he scanned my clothes with open contempt.

"Don't make him blush," Ferfitchkin squealed.

"Let me make this clear," I snapped, "I'm not blushing. I'm paying for this dinner myself—my own money, not someone else's. Remember that, Mr. Ferfitchkin."

"What? You think we aren't all paying for ourselves?" Ferfitchkin fired back, turning red and puffing up like a toad.

"That's not what I meant," I said, realizing I'd gone too far. "Let's talk about something intelligent for once."

"Oh, I see. Now you're here to show off your intelligence?"

"No. But this isn't the place for anything else either."

"What are you babbling about, man? Are you drunk?" Ferfitchkin barked.

"Enough, gentlemen, enough!" Zverkov broke in, playing the reasonable leader.

"This is stupid," Simonov muttered.

"We came to enjoy a farewell dinner with a friend," Trudolyubov said sternly, turning only to me. "You invited yourself, so don't ruin it."

"Enough!" Zverkov shouted. "Let me tell you about how I almost got married the other day..."

What followed was some ridiculous story about how he almost married someone two days ago. There was no marriage in it, of course. Just Zverkov bragging about generals and colonels, and how he was the center of attention. Everyone laughed like idiots. Ferfitchkin practically squealed.

No one looked at me. I sat there, crushed, humiliated.

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“My God, these are not my people,” I thought. “And what a pathetic fool I’ve made of myself in front of them. I even let Ferfitchkin talk to me like that. They think they’re doing me a favor by letting me sit here. They don’t get it’s an honor for them, not me. I’ve gotten thinner, huh? Damn these trousers. Zverkov saw that yellow stain the second he walked in.... I should leave. Right now. Pick up my hat, walk out without a word, maybe challenge one of them tomorrow.... Damn it, I don’t even care about the seven roubles. Let them think what they want...”

Of course I didn’t leave. I stayed. I drank sherry and wine just to deal with the embarrassment. I don’t usually drink—it hit me fast. And the more drunk I got, the angrier I became. I wanted, more than anything, to insult them all, dramatically, then storm out. Make them say, “He may be ridiculous, but he’s sharp.” I imagined them turning on Zverkov, siding with me. Maybe Zverkov and I would reconcile, drink to our brotherhood.

But the worst part? I knew—deep down—I didn’t care at all about winning their approval. I didn’t want to impress them. I didn’t even want their friendship.

I just wanted the day to end.

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CHAPTER 5

So this is it—real life, finally, I thought, rushing down the stairs. This wasn't some fantasy where the Pope moves to Brazil or there's a ball on Lake Como.

"You're a bastard," I suddenly thought. "If you laugh at this now, you're a bastard."

"No matter!" I shouted to myself. "Everything's ruined now anyway!"

I didn't see any sign of them, but that didn't matter. I knew exactly where they'd gone.

Outside, a lone cabby stood at the curb, covered in the wet, warm snow still falling. It was hot and humid. His scruffy little horse was also covered in snow and coughing—I remember that clearly. I lunged for the rickety sleigh, but the moment I lifted my foot, I remembered Simonov throwing me those six rubles—and I crumpled into the sleigh like a sack of potatoes.

"No. I have to make this right. I'll make it right or die trying—tonight," I muttered. "Let's go!"

We took off. My head was spinning.

"They're not going to beg me for forgiveness. That was just another cheap fantasy, another ball at Lake Como. So fine—I'm going to slap Zverkov. That's my duty now. Settled. I'm going to slap him. Drive!"

The driver snapped the reins.

"I'll walk in and do it. No speeches, just slap him. They'll all be there, lounging in the drawing room, Zverkov with Olympia on the sofa. That damn Olympia—she once laughed at how I looked and turned me down. I'll yank her hair, grab Zverkov by the ear and drag him around the room. Maybe they'll beat me up and throw me out. Let them. Doesn't matter. As long as I land the slap first. That'll brand him forever—he'll have to challenge me. He won't be able to ignore it. Let them beat me after. Trudolyubov'll probably punch hardest. Ferfitchkin'll pull my hair. Fine. It's worth it. They'll finally see the tragedy of it all. I'll scream as they drag me out: 'You're not worth the dirt under my boots!' Drive, damn you!"

The cabby flicked his whip again.

"We'll fight at dawn. I'm done with my job, with the office. Ferfitchkin joked about it earlier. Where will I get pistols? Who cares! I'll get an advance on my pay. Powder, bullets—that's the second's problem. I have no second? Who cares. I'll ask the first guy I see on the street. Even my boss, Anton Antonitch—out of sheer chivalry, he'll agree to keep my secret. Yes... Anton Antonitch..."

The absurdity of it all was crystal clear to me, even then. But—

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"Go, driver! Faster, you idiot, go!"

"Oof, sir," the cabby muttered.

A cold shiver passed through me. Should I just... go home? My God—why did I crash their dinner last night? But it's too late. What about those three hours pacing from the table to the stove? No—they owe me for that. They will pay. Drive!

What if they report me? They won't dare—too afraid of scandal. But what if Zverkov won't fight me, thinks it beneath him? Then I'll show them! I'll catch him at the coach station tomorrow, pull him out of the carriage by the leg. I'll bite his hand. I'll yell, "Look what you've done to a desperate man!" Maybe they'll beat me senseless. I'll scream to the crowd: "This smug jerk is off to woo Circassian girls after spitting in my face!"

After that, it's all over. Job gone. Arrest. Trial. Siberia. But no matter! Fifteen years later, I'll come crawling out of prison in rags and track him down in some backwater town. He'll be rich, married, with a daughter. And I'll say, "Look what you did to me. I lost everything—my future, my love, my art, my mind—because of you." Then I'll pull out two pistols and say, "Let's settle this." I'll fire into the air and vanish from his life forever...

I was nearly crying, even though I knew I'd just ripped the whole thing off from Pushkin's *Silvio* or Lermontov's *Masquerade*. Suddenly I felt sick with shame. I stopped the cab, got out, stood in the snowy street. The cabby looked at me, confused and shivering.

What the hell was I doing? I couldn't go to that place—it was ridiculous. But I couldn't just leave things either. Not after that humiliation. No way! I leapt back into the sleigh.

"It's fate!" I shouted. "Drive, dammit, drive!"

I punched the cabby in the neck.

"What are you doing? What are you hitting me for?" he shouted, but whipped the horse hard. It started bucking.

The wet snow fell in clumps. I unbuttoned my coat, not caring that it was soaking through. I forgot everything but the slap. It was going to happen—soon, nothing could stop it. The streetlamps glowed faintly through the blizzard like funeral torches. Snow crept into my coat, my shirt, my collar, and melted on my skin. I didn't close up. What's the point? Everything's ruined anyway.

Finally, we arrived. I jumped out like I was in a daze, sprinted up the steps, and started pounding and kicking the door. I felt weak, especially in the knees. The door flew open like they'd been waiting. Simonov had tipped them off that someone else might come.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

This wasn't a typical place. By day it was a real dress shop. But if you had connections, you could get in at night. The cops shut places like this down later.

I rushed through the dark shop into a dim room where a single candle burned. I stopped short. No one was there.

"Where are they?" I asked someone nearby. But of course—they'd all gone by now. The party was over.

A stupidly smiling woman stood in front of me—"madam" herself, who had seen me before. A moment later, another door opened and a young woman walked in.

I ignored everything and started pacing. I think I was muttering to myself. I felt like I'd just dodged death—and I was filled with joy. I would've done it. I really would've slapped him. But now... they were gone. Everything was different.

Then I looked at the girl who'd just entered: young, pale, with dark eyebrows and serious eyes. They pulled me in right away. I would've hated her if she'd been smiling.

I stared at her, trying to get a better look. My thoughts were scrambled. There was something honest, even kind in her face, but also a seriousness that didn't belong here. No doubt, the others had overlooked her. She wasn't a great beauty, though she was tall, strong, and well built. Her clothes were plain.

Something vile stirred inside me. I walked toward her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught my reflection in a mirror. My face—tired, pale, miserable, hair a mess—looked disgusting. Good, I thought. I'm glad I look like this. I hope she sees it too.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

CHAPTER 6

...Somewhere behind a screen, a clock began to wheeze, like it was struggling for breath, like someone was choking it. The wheezing dragged on unnaturally long, then suddenly broke into a sharp, ugly, almost startled chime—like someone had suddenly jumped up. It struck two. I came to, though I hadn't really been asleep—just lying there, half-conscious.

The room was nearly pitch black—narrow, cramped, with a low ceiling, cluttered with a giant wardrobe, stacks of cardboard boxes, and all kinds of random junk. The candle stub on the table was sputtering out, flickering weakly now and then. In a few minutes, it'd be total darkness.

It didn't take long for everything to come back to me. My memory snapped into focus instantly, like it had just been waiting to pounce. Even while I was dazed, there had been one thought lingering in the background, around which my dreams shuffled lifelessly. Strangely enough, everything that had happened that day now felt like ancient history—like I had already lived it down years ago.

My head was foggy. Something hung in the air, stirring me up, keeping me restless. A sense of bitterness and spite began rising again, looking for a way out. Then suddenly, I saw a pair of eyes watching me closely—wide open, fixed, and curious. There was something detached in her gaze. Cold. Sullen. Like she was looking at me from far away. It weighed on me.

A horrible thought slithered through me like the feeling you get walking into a moldy basement. There was something unnatural in the fact that those eyes had only just now started looking at me. I realized I hadn't said a single word to this woman in two hours, and it hadn't even occurred to me to say anything. In fact, the silence had pleased me for some reason. But now I was hit with the awful realization—the grotesque spider-like truth—of lust without love, beginning with the very thing love should end with. We stared at each other like that for a long time, and she didn't look away. Her expression didn't change. Eventually, I felt uneasy.

“What's your name?” I asked abruptly, just to break the tension.

“Liza,” she whispered, not very warmly, then looked away.

I stayed quiet.

“This weather is awful... the snow... it's disgusting,” I muttered, more to myself than to her, resting my arm under my head and staring up at the ceiling.

She didn't answer. The silence was unbearable.

“Have you always lived in Petersburg?” I asked, this time almost irritated, turning my head slightly toward her.

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"No."

"Where are you from?"

"Riga," she answered reluctantly.

"You German?"

"No. Russian."

"How long have you been here?"

"Where?"

"In this house?"

"Two weeks."

Her voice got shorter and more clipped. The candle died out. I couldn't see her face anymore.

"Do you have parents?"

"Yes... no... I do."

"Where are they?"

"There. In Riga."

"What do they do?"

"Oh... nothing."

"Nothing? What kind of people are they?"

"Tradespeople."

"Did you live with them before?"

"Yes."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"Why did you leave them?"

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

"Oh, no reason."

That answer meant: Leave me alone. I feel sick and sad.

We were both quiet.

God knows why I didn't just get up and go. I only felt more drained and miserable by the second. The memories of the day came drifting back, out of order, scattered. I suddenly remembered something I'd seen that morning when I was hurrying to work, full of anxious thoughts.

"I saw them carrying out a coffin yesterday—and they almost dropped it," I said out loud, without meaning to start a conversation. It just slipped out.

"A coffin?"

"Yeah, in the Haymarket. They were bringing it up from a basement."

"A basement?"

"Well, not a basement exactly. Just down a few steps. You know, one of those brothel-type places. Trash all over, eggshells, filth, reeked of something rotten. It was disgusting."

Silence.

"Terrible day to be buried," I added, just to avoid sitting in silence again.

"Terrible how?"

"The snow. All that wet." (I yawned.)

"Doesn't matter," she said suddenly, after a pause.

"No, it's miserable." (I yawned again.) "The gravediggers must've been cursing, soaked through by the snow. The grave must've been full of water."

"Why water?"

"Why? Because there's always water at the bottom. You can't dig a dry grave in Volkovo Cemetery."

"Why?"

"Because it's basically a swamp. The graves fill with water. I've seen it myself... plenty of times."

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

(I hadn't. I'd never been to Volkovo. Just heard things.)

"So you don't care how you die?"

"Why should I die?" she said defensively.

"Well, someday you will. And you'll die just like that other girl. She was... like you. Died of consumption."

"A wench like that dies in a hospital..."

(She knew the deal—called her a "wench," not a "girl.")

"She owed money to her madam," I snapped, feeling more and more provoked, "and kept earning until she dropped dead from tuberculosis. The cabbies were talking about her. Laughing. Said they'd meet up and drink to her memory at a bar."

(That was mostly made up. Total invention.)

Silence again. She didn't move.

"So, is dying in a hospital any better?"

"Isn't it the same? Besides, why should I die?" she added angrily.

"If not now, then soon."

"Why soon?"

"Why? Because right now you're young, good-looking, fresh—you're worth something. But after another year of this? You'll start to wear down."

"In a year?"

"Or less," I said harshly. "You'll go from this place to a worse one, and then to another even lower. In seven years, you'll end up in a basement in the Haymarket. If you're lucky. But maybe you'll get sick before that. TB, the flu, anything. You won't recover. People in your line of work don't get better. Then you die."

"Well then, I'll die," she said bitterly and shifted in the bed.

"But it's a shame."

"A shame for who?"

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

"A shame for life." Silence.

"Were you ever engaged?"

"What's it to you?"

"I'm not prying. Just wondering. Maybe you've had your own troubles. What's it to me? I just felt sorry."

"Sorry for who?"

"Sorry for you."

"No need," she whispered faintly, and shifted again.

That stung. I'd been gentle with her, and now this?

"You think this is the right road for you?"

"I don't think about it."

"That's the problem. You don't think. Think while you still can. There's still time. You're young. You could still love, get married, be happy..."

"Not every married woman's happy," she shot back, in that same sharp tone she'd had before.

"No, not all. But it's still better than this. A thousand times better. And even if you don't find happiness, with love you can endure anything. Life is still good. But here? What is there here? Just filth. Disgusting."

I turned away. I wasn't pretending anymore. I was starting to mean what I said. These weren't theories anymore—they were beliefs. I wanted to say more. Something had lit up inside me. I'd found something to hold on to.

"Forget that I came here. I'm no role model. Maybe I'm even worse than you. I came here drunk, anyway," I added, like I needed to justify myself. "Besides, it's different for a man. I can defile myself, sure, but I'm still free. I can leave. Shake it off and start again. But you? You give up everything—your freedom, your future. You're stuck. And once you're stuck, it's harder and harder to get out. It's a trap. I know what I'm talking about. I won't even get into the rest, you might not understand. But you're in debt to your madam, right?"

She said nothing. But she was still listening.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

“There it is. That’s slavery. You’ll never buy yourself out. They won’t let you. It’s like selling your soul to the devil... And maybe I’m just as messed up, you know? Maybe I’m in the mud on purpose, out of despair. People drink because they’re miserable. Maybe that’s why I’m here. Come on, tell me—what’s so good about this? You and me, we just... happened. Didn’t say a word to each other. Then stared. Is that love? Is that how people are supposed to connect? It’s awful. It’s inhuman.”

“Yes,” she said sharply, quickly.

That “yes” stunned me. Maybe she had been thinking the same thing while she stared at me earlier. Maybe she was capable of deeper thoughts. Damn. That was something. I almost felt proud—like I’d made contact.

And I was drawn to the power I had over her.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

CHAPTER 7

“Come on, Liza, stop that. How can you talk about me sounding like a book when what I just said makes even *me* feel sick—and I’m just a stranger. And it *should* make you sick, too. Don’t tell me it doesn’t. I mean, how could you not feel disgusted living like this? I guess habit really can do anything. Who knows what people can get used to. Do you honestly believe you’ll never get old, that you’ll always be pretty, and that they’ll want to keep you here forever?”

“I’m not even talking about the filth and the humiliation of this place—though let me tell you, I could. Even now, you’re still young, attractive, kind-hearted, sensitive... and still, the moment I sobered up just now, I was *disgusted* being here with you. The only way anyone can come here is if they’re drunk. But if I had met you somewhere else—anywhere decent, where good people live—I might have fallen in love with you. Seriously. I’d be thrilled just to get a smile from you, let alone a word. I’d hang around your door, worship the ground you walked on. I’d never even dare to have an impure thought about you.

“But here? Here, all I have to do is whistle and you’re mine. It doesn’t matter what you want—only what *I* want. Even a poor laborer, when he hires himself out, doesn’t sell himself completely. He knows he’ll be free again. But you? When are *you* ever free? Think about it—what are you giving away here? You’re not just giving your body. You’re giving your *soul*. And that’s not something you even have the right to sell.

“Your love, Liza—real love—is the most precious thing in the world. People give their lives for it. It’s like a priceless diamond. But here, what’s it worth? Nothing. Nobody has to earn it, or even ask for it. That’s the worst insult to a woman. And I’ve heard they let you have ‘lovers’ here—to make you feel better. But come on, you don’t really believe they love you, do you?”

“Would a man who truly loves you let you live like this? No. He’s lying to you. Laughing at you. Taking from you. He’s probably hitting you, too. And if you ask him to marry you? He’ll laugh in your face—if he doesn’t spit in it or hit you again. And what have you ruined your life for? For coffee and food? But think about *why* they’re feeding you. It’s not out of kindness. It’s to keep you looking good for the customers.

“And you’re in debt to them, aren’t you? You’ll *always* be in debt. That’s part of the trap. And once the customers start to get bored with you—and trust me, that won’t take long—they’ll kick you out. Not just kick you out—they’ll start yelling at you, blaming you, like you ruined *their* life somehow. They’ll say you’ve let yourself go, that you’re ungrateful, that you’re costing them money. And your fellow girls? They’ll turn on you too—because they’re slaves just like you, and they’ll do anything to stay in favor.

“You’re giving up everything here—your youth, your health, your beauty, your hope. And at twenty-two, you’ll look thirty-five. That’s if you don’t catch something first. God help you if you

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do. And you won't even *dare* to say a word when they throw you out. You'll leave like it's *your* fault. Then you'll go to a worse place, and then worse again, until you end up in the Haymarket, getting hit by drunk men and laughed at.

"Don't believe me? Go see for yourself. One New Year's morning I saw a girl on the steps of a brothel—drunk, half-naked, covered in bruises. Someone had thrown her out into the snow as a joke. She had a piece of fish in her hand, and she was crying, hitting the steps with it. A bunch of cabbies and drunk soldiers were standing there laughing at her. You think she started out like that? You think she wasn't like you once—young, proud, dreaming about being loved?

"Maybe when she was little, some neighbor's boy told her he'd love her forever, that they'd get married when they grew up. And now? That's what's left of her.

"No, Liza. The best thing that could happen to you now is to get sick and die—quietly, in some hospital corner. You say you'll be lucky to even get into a hospital? Yeah. Because if you're still worth something to the woman running this place, she'll keep using you. And consumption doesn't kill quickly—it lets you pretend you're fine, and that's perfect for her. She'll drain every last bit of use out of you.

"And when you're finally dying, they'll all walk away. They won't care. They'll blame you for dying too slowly, for making noise, for bothering the customers. They'll throw you in a damp, dark corner and forget you. No one will come visit. No one will say a prayer. They'll bury you like trash, in sleet and mud. And that's the end. No children to visit your grave. No husband to mourn you. You'll vanish—like you never existed. And even if the dead were to rise from their graves, and you cried out, 'Let me live again, I wasted my life!'—no one would hear. No one would care."

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CHAPTER 8

I didn't turn around for a long time. I was so ashamed that I felt like I was dying. At that moment, something shattered inside me—some sort of barrier fell away. It was as if I was suddenly freed from the chains that had been choking me for so long, dragging me down, suffocating me. I had been lying to myself all my life, and suddenly I knew it. I stood facing the wall, still, hands clenched in my hair, unable to breathe from the humiliation.

Liza stood silently behind me. I knew she was looking at me. There was something quiet, hesitant, in the air—like she was waiting, like she understood everything. My clock struck seven with its miserable, raspy wheeze, and I suddenly heard her step closer, very softly. My whole body tensed.

When she laid her hand gently on my shoulder, I flinched as if I'd been struck. But then—I turned around.

She was looking at me, and there was no disgust in her face, no sarcasm, no fear. She just looked at me, with something like sadness—no, more than sadness. Pity. Compassion. Something pure. That same look she had last night—only clearer now, stronger.

I couldn't take it.

"Go away," I said hoarsely, barely able to speak. "Go... just go. Please."

She didn't move.

I turned away from her again and leaned on the wall with both hands.

"I am a coward, Liza," I muttered. "A liar. A fraud. I've lied to you and to myself. I told you things yesterday... noble things... and I believed them. But I'm not that man. I'm nothing. I'm a wretch, I'm weak, I hate myself... and I wanted to drag you down with me. I wanted to ruin you completely. Don't you see? That's what I do. That's all I know how to do."

Still, she said nothing.

"I'm not worth your pity," I said through clenched teeth. "I should have spit in your face last night, not tried to save you. Because I don't believe in saving anyone. I don't believe in love. I don't even believe in kindness. I don't believe in anything. I was just drunk on words, that's all. Words and illusions. I disgust myself."

She stepped forward again and placed her hand on mine.

That was too much.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

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I turned around, grabbed her hand, and pressed it to my forehead.

“Forgive me,” I whispered. “Forgive me... I don’t know why I said those things to you yesterday. I had no right.”

She still didn’t say anything, but her lips trembled.

I sat down heavily on the edge of the bed and covered my face.

She came and sat beside me.

And we sat like that for a long time, without speaking, in silence.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

CHAPTER 9

"Come into my home freely and boldly—it's your place now, your rightful place."

I stood there in front of her, crushed, ashamed, horribly awkward—and I think I even smiled, trying desperately to pull my torn, padded dressing gown around me. Just like I had pictured it, a few days ago, during a moment of despair. Apollon stood over us for a few moments, watching, then left. But that didn't help me feel any less humiliated. What made it worse was that she seemed just as embarrassed as I was—more, even. Probably because of how I looked.

"Sit down," I said automatically, pulling out a chair. I sat on the sofa. She quietly obeyed, sitting and staring at me, wide-eyed, clearly waiting for me to say something. That simple, expectant look made me furious—but I held it in.

She should've pretended nothing was out of the ordinary, as though this were just a regular visit. But instead, she just sat there... and I knew, somehow, that I would make her pay for this.

"You've caught me at a strange moment, Liza," I began awkwardly, knowing it was a terrible way to start. "No, no, don't think anything bad," I rushed to say, noticing her blush. "I'm not ashamed of being poor. Actually, I'm proud of it. I'm poor, but I have honor... A man can be poor and still have honor," I muttered. "Anyway... would you like some tea?"

"No," she began.

"Wait a minute."

I jumped up and rushed to Apollon. I had to get out of that room, somehow.

"Apollon," I whispered, frantic, shoving the seven rubles into his hand—the money I'd been clutching this whole time—"Here's your pay. Take it. But please, I'm begging you, help me out. Go bring tea and a dozen rusks from the restaurant. If you don't go, I swear you'll ruin me! You don't understand who this woman is. She's... she's everything! You might think something else, but you don't get it!"

Apollon had already sat down at his work and put on his glasses again. At first, he glanced at the money without saying anything and went back to threading his needle. I stood in front of him for three full minutes, sweating, my arms crossed like Napoleon. I could feel how pale I was. But thank God, something must have softened in him. He finally got up slowly, pushed back his chair, took off his glasses, counted the money, and, without looking at me, asked, "Shall I bring a full portion?" Then, calmly, he walked out.

On my way back to Liza, it actually occurred to me—should I just run? Just bolt out the door in my dressing gown and let the whole thing collapse?

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I sat down again. She was still watching me with concern. We were silent for a while.

"I'm going to kill him," I suddenly blurted out, slamming my fist on the table hard enough to make the ink fly out of the inkwell.

"What are you talking about?" she cried out, startled.

"I'm going to kill him! Kill him!" I shouted, slamming the table again like a madman, even though I knew how stupid it all sounded. "You don't understand, Liza—he's my tormentor! My executioner! And now he's gone off to fetch rusk; he's..."

And suddenly, I broke down in tears. It was a full-blown hysterical breakdown. I was overwhelmed with shame, but I couldn't stop myself.

She was terrified.

"What is it? What's wrong?" she asked, rushing around me.

"Water—get me water, there!" I mumbled weakly, though I knew perfectly well I didn't need water and wasn't really faint. But I was playing it up—trying to salvage my dignity, even in collapse, though the sobbing was real.

She handed me the water, watching me, confused. Right then Apollon came back in with the tea. The sudden appearance of that ordinary, everyday tea struck me as painfully out of place. I turned crimson. Liza looked at Apollon like she was afraid of him. He left the room without a glance at either of us.

"Liza, do you despise me?" I asked, staring at her desperately, needing to know what she thought.

She looked lost, unsure what to say.

"Drink your tea," I snapped. I was really angry at myself, but it was easier to take it out on her. A wave of spite surged inside me. I felt like I could have killed her. I swore to myself not to speak another word. She'd have to bear my silence too. "She caused all of this," I thought bitterly.

We sat in silence for five minutes. Neither of us touched the tea. I was punishing her by not talking, and making myself miserable in the process. But I couldn't stop.

"I want to leave that place... completely," she finally said, trying to break the silence. But that was exactly the wrong thing to say, at exactly the wrong moment, and I hated her for her clumsy honesty.

Another five minutes passed.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

"Maybe I'm in the way?" she said quietly, almost rising from her chair.

The moment she showed even the faintest sign of dignity, I exploded.

"Why did you come here?" I shouted, out of breath and not even trying to make sense. "Tell me—why? I'll tell you why. You came because I talked a bunch of sentimental nonsense to you the other night. And now you're soft, looking for more emotional speeches. Well, listen—I was laughing at you. That's right. I was laughing at you then, and I'm laughing at you now. Why are you flinching? Yes—I was laughing!"

I told her everything. I raged. I confessed. I insulted. I said I only visited her because I needed to humiliate someone after being humiliated myself. That it was all just a power trip. That I was never there to "save" her.

And she just sat there, white as a sheet, lips trembling. As I ranted, her eyes widened, full of shock and terror—but also something else. She got it. She actually got it.

She didn't run. She didn't scream. She saw what was really going on—that I was miserable.

And all of a sudden, she stood up, looked at me with a kind of sorrowful understanding... and then rushed to me, threw her arms around me, and broke down in tears.

And I... I couldn't help it. I cried too. I cried harder than I ever had in my life.

"I can't... they won't let me be good," I choked out.

I collapsed face-first onto the sofa and sobbed like a child. She sat beside me, put her arms around me, and didn't move.

But hysteria can't last forever.

And then something terrible happened—I started to feel ashamed again. Not of the crying, not of her. I felt ashamed because now I couldn't look her in the eye. She had become the strong one, the good one—and I was back to being small and pathetic. She was the one comforting *me* now.

And I hated that.

I hated that I wasn't the hero anymore. I was just a mess in a dressing gown, face in a greasy pillow. I began to feel something twisted—envy. Yes, envy.

Eventually, I lifted my head. I had to. And then something else happened—something even uglier. That old hunger returned. Control. Possession. I looked at her with blazing eyes, gripped her hands, and something took over me.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

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How I hated her at that moment—and how I wanted her.

It was like revenge. And though she looked shocked at first, even afraid, it only lasted a moment. Then she embraced me, fully and warmly.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

CHAPTER 10

Fifteen minutes later, I was pacing back and forth around the room in a frenzy of impatience. Every few seconds I'd go up to the screen and peek through the crack at Liza. She was sitting on the floor with her head resting against the bed. She had clearly been crying. But she didn't leave—and that annoyed me.

She understood everything this time. I had insulted her, truly insulted her. But there's no need to spell it all out again. She saw that what I'd done—my sudden passion—wasn't love. It was revenge. It was another way to humiliate her. And now, on top of the cold, impersonal hatred I already carried, I'd added something worse: a personal hatred, born from envy.

I'm not saying she figured all that out clearly and consciously. But she definitely realized this much: I was a small, pathetic man. And worse, I was incapable of love.

You might say this seems impossible—that no one could be that cruel or twisted. Or that it's unbelievable I didn't love her, or at least value her love. But why is that strange?

By then, I was already incapable of love. For me, love had always meant control. Dominance. Superiority. That was the only form of love I could imagine. Even in my fantasy world, in my dreams underground, love always began with hatred and ended with the other person's submission. But once I got that submission, I never knew what to do next.

And why should that be surprising? I had twisted myself so thoroughly—had been so cut off from real life—that I even blamed her, in my head, for coming to me with all that hope. I scorned her for expecting “noble sentiments.” I never realized that she hadn't come for my ideas or my speeches. She'd come because she loved me. Because for a woman, love is the path to salvation. It's how she reforms, renews herself, escapes her ruin. That's what she came for.

But as I paced and peeked at her, I didn't hate her—at least not as much. I just felt smothered by her presence. I wanted her gone. I needed “peace,” to retreat back into my underground life. Real life, with all its warmth and unpredictability, was so foreign and suffocating to me that I could hardly breathe.

She kept sitting there, motionless, as if in a daze. I actually had the nerve to tap softly on the screen, like a reminder. She jolted, jumped up, and began rushing to grab her scarf, hat, coat—fleeing from me.

Two minutes later, she emerged from behind the screen and looked at me with tired, empty eyes. I gave her a forced, ugly smile and turned away.

“Goodbye,” she said, walking toward the door.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

I jumped up, ran to her, grabbed her hand, shoved something into it, closed her fingers over it, and turned away, heading straight for the opposite corner of the room so I wouldn't have to see what happened next.

Just now, I almost wrote that I didn't know what I was doing—that I had acted in a daze, out of confusion. But I'm not going to lie. I knew exactly what I was doing. I put that money in her hand out of spite. I'd thought of doing it earlier while she was still behind the screen.

But I can tell you this much: it didn't come from my heart—it came from my sick mind. From all those books. It was a calculated cruelty, something I thought up just to be clever and hurtful. But I couldn't even follow through with it—I ran to the corner to avoid seeing her reaction, and then, filled with shame, I ran after her.

I opened the door and stood in the hallway, listening.

"Liza! Liza!" I called down the stairwell, but I spoke softly, not daring to raise my voice.

No answer. But I thought I heard her footsteps echoing faintly below.

"Liza!" I called again, louder.

Still nothing. Then I heard the heavy glass front door downstairs creak open, then slam shut. It echoed all the way up.

She was gone.

I walked back inside, unsure what to do. I was filled with a suffocating despair. I stood next to the table, beside the chair where she'd been sitting, staring blankly.

A minute passed. Then I noticed something on the table.

There, in the middle of the table, was a crumpled blue five-rouble note—the one I had stuffed in her hand. It was the same bill. It had to be. There wasn't another one in the whole apartment.

She had thrown it back—somehow managing to fling it on the table as I ran away.

Well! I should have expected that. But did I? No. I was such a self-centered, arrogant fool that I never imagined she'd do it. I couldn't handle it.

A minute later, I was throwing on my clothes and bolting out the door, not caring what I looked like. I ran down the snowy street, knowing she couldn't have gotten far.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

It was a still, silent night. Snow fell in heavy, soft flakes, covering everything like a blanket. The street was empty. The only light came from the streetlamps—weak, useless glimmers in the gloom. I ran to the intersection, about two hundred paces, and stopped.

Where had she gone? Why was I chasing her?

Why? To throw myself at her feet. To beg. To cry. To kiss the ground she walked on. I wanted to. I needed to. My chest was splitting apart. And even now, I can't think back to that moment without real pain.

But—what then? What would I do tomorrow? Start hating her again? Torture her? Destroy her? Could I give her happiness?

I stood in the snow, staring into the darkness, thinking.

“Maybe it's better this way,” I told myself later, at home, trying to smother the pain with fantasies. “Maybe her resentment will save her. Resentment purifies. It's painful, but it gives clarity. Tomorrow, I would have ruined her. Broken her spirit. But now, her anger might protect her. It might even lead to forgiveness. And that might purify her too.”

But would that really help her?

And here's the question I asked myself—an idle, pointless question: what's better—simple, cheap happiness, or noble, exalted suffering?

So I sat and dreamed all evening. My soul hurt so much I thought I'd die from it. I'd never felt anything like it before. And yet—even as I was in agony—I still admired my clever phrase about purification through hatred. Even though I was almost physically sick from shame.

Even now, after all these years, this remains one of the darkest memories I carry. I have a lot of bad memories—but maybe I should stop these “Notes” here.

Maybe I was wrong to start writing them at all. Honestly, it's not literature—it's punishment. A sort of self-imposed sentence. Who wants to read long monologues about how I ruined my life by sitting alone in a corner, festering in resentment and self-loathing? A real story needs a hero. And I'm no hero. I'm the opposite. And the whole thing just leaves a bad taste.

We're all cut off from real life, every one of us. That's the real truth. We're so isolated we can't even stand the idea of real life anymore. We find it exhausting—almost like work. And we all quietly agree it's better in books.

Why do we whine and complain then? Why do we always want something else—something different? We don't even know what we want.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

And even if we got it—freedom, independence, power—we'd just beg to be chained up again. I know that makes you angry. You'll say, "Speak for yourself! Don't lump the rest of us in with you!"

But I'm not justifying myself by saying "all of us." I've only taken to the extreme what you've never dared to admit. You've wrapped your cowardice in self-righteousness and called it wisdom. But maybe—just maybe—there's more life in me than in you.

The truth is, we don't even know what it means to live anymore. Without books, we'd be lost. We wouldn't know what to believe in, what to value, what to despise, what to love, or what to hate. We're ashamed of being human. We hate our own bodies. We wish we could be some sort of "ideal man"—clean, polished, perfect. We're stillborn. For generations, we've been born not from real people, but from theories. And we like it that way. We've developed a taste for it.

Someday we'll be born entirely from an idea.

But that's enough. I don't want to write anymore from underground.

[The notes of this paradoxalist do not end here, however. He could not refrain from going on with them, but it seems to us that we may stop here.]