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While reading Serhii Zhadan's "Voroshylivhrad", my interpretation and understanding of the soccer part in the fifth chapter did change a few times as I had more information to work with. At first, the way the episode is perceived is trivial and pretty basic: soccer is a team game and team games are considered to be very bonding, especially, if the team consists of friends, just like in the novel. But as the match progresses, it becomes clear that things are not going the way they were supposed to: all players (surprisingly, both teams) suddenly are not feeling any kind of a "team spirit"; the three brothers manage to fight, switching some of the players does not change the situation either. The narrator, Gera, seems to be very distant, even though the whole game is described from his point of view. He is still unattached even when he accidentally scores a goal with his head. The only person, who seems to be genuinely invested in the game, is Travmovanyi. In fact, he is the one who scores all the goals as he does take part in scoring the last one too.

At this point, this whole situation with all the fights and drama felt like a middle school PE class, when classmates are ready to scream each other down and even humiliate the ones that fail to play successfully. The post-game scene, when both teams decide to solve the time inconvenience physically, does not seem too mature either.

Having read everything up to the end of the fifth chapter, I genuinely thought that it was just a very symbolic representation of the society back then: how it is indeed supposed to be supportive and united, full of that "team spirit", but in reality, when an obstacle is in the way, all the expectations are suddenly shattered and whatever was being done becomes a complete mess. One character that seemed to be significantly different was not Gera, but Travmovanyi. As it was mentioned before, he was the one paying attention to the game and the one, who actually had the

drive to score. He did come across as an image of a much smaller percentage of people in any society that is actually the reason changes and progress happen.

As I was reading more, my interpretation of the chapter changed. Not too long into the book, it becomes obvious that the episode is not as trivial as it seems – the friend group that pretty much made a team with Gera is dead. Gera gets to know this when he gets lost in the cemetery and finds their graves by accident. And it seems like he is just as confused as the reader.

It gets more clear by the very end of the book though. Throughout the whole story, Serhii Zhadan keeps sliding in small remarks about the concept of the past and memories. In fact, he does this even during the soccer match part in chapter 5:

“Я тиснув правиці своїм друзям, тішачись усій цій пригоді, яка завершилась так добре, дивуючись, що минуло стільки років, а все знову поверталось на свої місця, все було, як і раніше, рухалось за своїми законами. Це заспокоювало і заводило водночас, адже ось вона — радість пізнання і радість повернення, те, чого бракувало мені останні роки, фактично — від часу останнього матчу.”(p. 93, S. Zhadan “Voroshylivhrad”).

The subtle memories of German’s brother that does not show up even once in the novel, his thoughts about how nothing changed since he had left the town (presumably, Starobil’s’k) for Kharkiv, the “flashback” letter at the very end from Katia, the episodes with old postcards and a few mentions on how everything is kind of the same, except for the fact that there is no Voroshylivhrad anymore; Voroshylivhrad itself, as the city is still there, but the name is different – those are all the small hints given by the author that the whole novel is centered around the concept of memories.

It still is very confusing: what exactly that scene and chapter in general was. Was it a memory? A dream? Or thoughts? But now that it is known that the whole friend group is dead – interestingly enough, Travmovanyi is the only one alive at the time of the soccer game (except for German), but even he dies later on – the whole atmosphere of the match seems completely different. Now, there is much more sense to the “background noise” of the episode: how, for some reason, the match is played at night and the lights; and how there are dogs out of nowhere that eventually are kicked out. Usually, dogs are perceived as a symbol of loyalty and stable, reliable friendship. But there is also a different interpretation of the image of dogs: dogs often symbolize the journey from the land of the living to the abode of the dead. And both of those explanations seem to make sense as a group of now-dead friends is being discussed.

I feel like there is still so much to unfold and Serhii Zhadan’s “Voroshylovhrad” would definitely need a second reread as it will obviously show a new, deeper meaning and a completely different perspective on the “soccer match with the dead”.