I... We

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In 1999, the poet was returning to Ukraine from America, where he had spent an entire year earning money for an apartment and gathering real-life material for his future books.

He flew over the ocean to Warsaw in a comfortable, enormous Boeing plane, where they served fine meals and drinks, showed cheerful movies, and charming chocolate-skinned stewardesses glided back and forth.

From Warsaw to Lviv, he had to fly on an old plane reminiscent of a "crop duster."

It was the month of May. The weather was sunny and quite warm.

After the Boeing, the contrast in comfort was striking, but the anticipation of joy from the reunion with his homeland and his family, who were coming to meet their pilgrim from overseas, erased the various mundane inconveniences for the man who, unsophisticated by luxury, had grown up in a Soviet village.

Taking his seat according to his purchased ticket, the poet glanced prosaically and kindly around the cabin, at the neighboring passengers, most of whom were elderly emigrants seemingly flying to the land where the umbilical cords were buried, perhaps for the last time with a farewell-greeting disposition.

The minute hand on the poet’s modern watch bought in America circled an hour, yet the plane hadn’t taken off…

The poet’s seat was on the aisle, allowing him to go to the restroom without bothering his elderly neighbor too often.

Curiously, pressing the pedal to flush the water in the restroom automatically turned off the light there. Taking this as a charming prank, the poet returned to his seat but found that his passenger neighbor was gone.

As it turned out, his elderly neighbor, who had emigrated to the U.S. back in the 1940s, had gone to the crew to find out why they hadn't taken off even though they were supposed to an hour ago…

What he told the crew wasn’t known, but right after him came a young (around twenty) steward with a typically Soviet, worn-out tray on which water swayed in typically Soviet cups, reminiscent of "poor little Kasia’s pee": lukewarm and yellowish – something between tea and mineral water.

"Dear passengers, please don’t worry!" the aeroflot representative declared. "The flight is delayed. There are military maneuvers near Lviv. So we have to wait so that we don’t get shot down by accident..."

Nearly the entire cabin crossed themselves. The neighbor, whom the poet let back to his rightful seat after standing, began quietly praying, shooting inquisitive glances at the poet.

But before the poet could gather his thoughts about what to say, an elderly lady ahead of them, fanning herself with a newspaper, softly asked the steward: "And why, good sir, is it so stuffy?"

"Don’t worry," he answered seamlessly with a Galician accent. "When we fly, there’ll be wind… It’ll be nice!"

No more questions arose in the volcanic silence. The "crop duster" indeed took off…

During the flight, it shook and tossed up and down.

"These are air pockets," the poet surmised and told his pale neighbor, who was fervently crossing himself and praying.

Passengers shuffled to the restroom, emerging with various emotional exclamations or in deep silence.

...They landed. Settled down.

"Praise be to God!" everyone sighed.

Tired yet happy, as if resurrected, passengers left the plane and fell into the arms of those awaiting them.

There was no water in the airport taps. The bathroom was outside about two hundred meters from the airport building.

Some passengers, who hadn't waited for their turn on the plane, hurried to this outdoor restroom.

After kissing his relatives, who had come to meet him, the poet asked them to wait while he "washed his hands" and ran to that street restroom.

In this building, stylized as "Soviet rococo" and about as old as the poet (35 years), a typical "our" woman sat, controlling the process: collecting money for services and issuing toilet paper to those who wished, in the form of tightly rolled cigars.

The poet didn’t take it because he didn’t need it.

The Frenchman standing after him, for whom the poet paid because he didn't have our currency, also didn't take the paper cigars rolled by the woman...

But a few minutes later, the Parisian guest ran out of his cubicle, clutching his European trousers, and began demanding... asking the mistress of the establishment, where even French kings walked on foot, for papier!

The poet didn’t speak French but sensed that since the Battle of Borodino, hardly any representative of this European nation had been so outraged by the natural yet uncivilized state of affairs.

The life-hardened woman didn’t relent, like a partisan in the Moscow suburbs of 1812, pretending she didn’t understand what this newcomer wanted…

Before the poet could explain, the hotheaded Frenchman thrust his hand into the window – grabbing nearly a whole roll of toilet paper from under her nose, and ran back to "his" cubicle, only to find it occupied by a Japanese person...

What happened next, the poet didn't know. He glanced at the woman, and dramatically-tragically realized that it was too late to re-educate her… Easier to build a new airport, which was soon done in Lviv.

The poet smiled and left with his family, who were waiting for him, and some, his money…

The poet returned to his home village, which he hadn’t visited in about ten years.

He invited his childhood friends for a picnic near the forest.

They came eagerly in haste.

They found a pit.

Started a fire.

Poured out shots for all three of them.

Drank once, then twice.

Only the poet followed with an apple.

The others scented their sleeves.

The chatter livelied up.

The Muse came to the poet.

He pulled out his notebook from the pocket by his heart and wrote something down.

They drank a third time.

Everyone scented with their sleeves again, but the poet with the gray thin hair of his favorite cousin-farmer.

He took out the notebook from his chest pocket, where he again recorded an image inspired by the homeland soil.

"Brother, do you want to be, probably, an even greater poet than Shevchenko?" his gray-haired cousin asked the poet. "You write and write…."

"No," the poet thought over, "I don’t want to be greater," he replied loudly, adding quietly, almost to himself: "and I don’t want to be smaller."

The latter part of the phrase the brother didn’t hear and continued:

"So you probably earn a lot of money with your writing?"

"No, I don’t earn anything at all," the poet replied joyously for some reason.

"Then forgive me, but you’re a fool to work so hard," the brother said with a long pause, a note of indulgent pity in his voice.

"Seems so!.." The poet replied without offense. And continued somewhat boastfully: "A fool, a fool, but I brought you whiskey worth one and a half thousand hryvnias! Pouring it now."

Here the pause extended longer.

The men exchanged glances.

One of them picked up the poet's notebook with a pen from the grass, wrote something in it intently – and exclaimed:

"You could have gotten a fifty-liter barrel of booze from Zoska at the 'spot' for that money! Your dear…"

The notebook fell from his trembling hands.

"Screw it all..." the men waved their hands – and trudged away, continuing to gesticulate. One of them didn’t even wave his hands as he walked.

The poet didn’t catch up with them.

He continued writing a poem in his notebook under the accounting calculations (scribbles) of his childhood friend, slowly climbing out of the pit…