

## Part 1. Denys

It happened at the end of August 1977. . . . I had just turned eighteen then. I was dreaming about fame. And I knew it would come. It wasn't about some kind of temporary ascent onto a pedestal in the small space where I lived then. It wasn't about the applause of the audience that forgets you the next day. No. I sensed that some kind of mission was there for me, the mystery of which I needed to solve. But for the time being it was being generated somewhere deep inside me, just as beans had germinated in a damp cheesecloth—we did that kind of experiment in biology classes in school. All thirty-five students grew beans on their windowsills, and after a few weeks brought the results to school. I remember well that my sprout was larger than the other ones. It happened a long time ago, in the sixth grade. But after my experiments, I understood what and how things develop inside me. And I waited patiently. So patiently that I tried not to call unnecessary attention to myself for the time being—since it made no difference to me. For the time being.

I finished school and quite easily got into the screenwriting program of the Department of Film (my entrance exam film script turned out to be better than the opuses of the already experienced and much older prospective students, and they kept it for a long time in the department as a particularly successful sample). After learning my admissions exam results, I left for a small vacation to the mountains, to a tourist hostel at the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. In fact, this was a cinematographer's hostel to which all my future classmates had gone—an announcement about unused student passes was hanging in the hall of the Institute. We didn't know one another well yet. We were united by the common spirit of the recent exams, during which we all crowded around jovially by the doors of the classrooms, clamorously saluting each lucky individual.

All this was behind us. We arrived at the tourist hostel little by little, without making any arrangements beforehand with one another, and ardently reveled at each familiar face. They put us up in small wooden buildings, and we immediately began to explore the territory, finding out where the dining room, swimming pool, and movie hall were along with the closest Silpo general store, where you could buy the cheapest port wine.

We felt we were grown-up and experienced. We tried to communicate with each other in a loosey-goosey way and uttered the names of our idols like good buddies. We gave each other Western names, that's why I was immediately christened "Dan." My roommate, accordingly, was called Max.

Dan and Max—two cool guys, the future geniuses—quickly ran over to the Silpo general store and loaded up on several bottles of strong “ink.” We drank like fish since our grade-school days and . . . like juveniles—nothing more expensive than cheap port wine. To be truthful, a little later I was sorry I had gone there. . . .

The mountains turned deep blue in the distance and it seemed they were glimmering, enveloped by the torn white silk of an evening veil. And I was forced to sit on a hard bed, chugging the port wine and listening to the chitchat of my acquaintances. When we all started to get sick (no one, of course, complained, and we tried our best to maintain our dignity), we began to take our turns going out “for a breath of fresh air.” I finally managed to tear myself away from the smoky room and, already no longer in a hurry, to stroll along the grounds of the camp.

This was quite a quiet little spot. Or else it appeared that way at the end of the summer. Behind the curtains of the cottages a dusky light shimmered, vacationers were sitting in spots on the verandas, from an open “green” movie hall the sound of the music from a film echoed. It seems like it was the movie *Yesenia*.<sup>3</sup> Altogether it was disorder and havoc. Just beyond an old-fashioned fence in pseudobaroque style, the shaggy black forest murmured alluringly, and from it a powerful wave of freshness and anxiety rolled onto me. It was already quite dark. Simple sculptures of girls with oars and other bodybuilders shone like snow on both sides of the alleys like ghosts. Almost all the benches were “toothless,” and all the lamps “blind.” I walked up to the end of the alley, sat down on a bench, and pulled out the cigarettes from my pocket. And nearly right away I noticed the flash of a red glow across from me. . . . If I had not been drunk then, and if, like the wine, the drunken feeling of the euphoria of an entry into a new life had not been playing inside me, nothing would have happened and would not have dragged behind it a chain of events that would pursue me my entire life.

But I was drunk. That’s why I saw *something*. . . . A silhouette, etched by the light of the moon resembling an incorporeal, empty outline in the total darkness. A woman was smoking a cigarette in a long mouthpiece. She slowly raised the small, red glow to her invisible lips, inhaled, and for an instant the silvery smoke filled her entire outline, as though it were sketching her body from the inside.

And then, with the last small cloud of smoke, it, this body, once again melted into the darkness.

Jeez!

I strained my eyes and comically waved my hand before my nose, chasing away the apparition.

“What, you got scared?”

The voice was husky, but so sensuous that I got goose bumps over my entire body, as though the woman had uttered something obscene (even later I couldn't get used to her voice: whatever she talked about—the weather, books, movies, food—everything sounded sweetly obscene, like candor).

“Well, no . . . I'm fine . . . ,” I mumbled.

However, the damp night and the appearance of the mountain summits that were blackening in the distance, and this little red light, and the wind—so saturated and fresh—sobered me up. I tried to get a good look at the woman who was sitting across from me. No use. Maybe at that moment I was already completely blinded by her. A similar thing happens, for example, with mothers who aren't able to honestly judge the beauty of their own child, or with an artist, for whom the most recent canvas seems to be a work of genius.

“Are you also staying at this resort house?”

I couldn't have thought up anything more idiotic to say! It's the same as if you were to ask a passenger after the plane takes off, “Are you also flying in this plane?” But I itched to hear that voice again.

“Do you like it here?” I continued.

The glow flashed even brighter (she took a drag) and slid down (she lowered her hand).

“Do you know where I like it?” I heard (goose bumps! goose bumps!) after quite a long pause.  
“There.”

The tiny glow of her cigarette flicked in the direction of the forest.

“I haven’t been there yet . . . ,” I said. “I arrived just today. . . .”

“Strange!” The fire in an instant flew into a bush and went out. “Let’s go! There’s a hole here in the fence. . . .”

By the rustle of her clothing I understood that she had gotten up and made a step in my direction.

“Give me your hand!”

I stretched into the darkness and stumbled on a chilly palm. I got goose bumps again. Her hand was hearty, not soft.

“You’re completely drunk!” She started to laugh.

I got up, trying to keep steady. We were the same height. I was able to discern something more or less definite: an elongated figure, a dark, possibly black shawl that covered her shoulders . . . but nothing more. And I could also smell her scent.

Back then I still didn't know the scent of expensive perfumes—they got them from “under their skirt” on the sly, girls I knew for the most part used the overwhelming Scheherazade or the highly concentrated Lily of the Valley brands. And here, suddenly, a wave of a fragrant aroma—bitter and dizzying—wafted in on me. Involuntarily, I clenched my teeth and pressed her hand more tightly. Giving in to her will, I swiftly moved toward a dead end where the fence stopped. There really was a big black hole in it, which I didn't notice right away. Without letting go of her hand, walking after her, I bent my head down sharply, and we ended up on the other side of the tourist hostel on a wide plain that was overgrown with tall grass. We walked, buried in it up to our knees. Again I tried to look over the woman who had commandingly led me by the hand like a little boy. Her long, black shawl covered her from head to toe, so the length of her hair was unclear to me—it flowed with her shawl and in full sight was just as black and long. Not once did she turn back toward me. It seemed she was completely indifferent to whomever she was dragging behind her.

I strove not to fall and not to lag behind, so I began to look beneath my feet more often, and the wild vegetation reminded me of the sea that rolls powerful, fragrant waves and just about drags you to a depth from which you can't swim away.

My head was topsy-turvy. The night, a thin crescent of the moon above clouds, mountains, goose bumps all over my body, intoxication, this unknown woman. . . . Everything seemed to be phantasmagoric. I cherished these kinds of adventures. I couldn't imagine what would happen further! Maybe wild sex in a clearing in the forest? Who was this woman? Why and where was she taking me? How old was she, what does she look like? What does she want? We walked up to the slope of the mountain covered in trees that rose above the clearing like columns next to the entrance of a pagan temple. The gloom again swallowed her, and from the forest the particular thick scent of resin wafted. The woman led me beyond the fence of the first stand of large pine trees, from which the forest began, and leaned up with her back against one of the trees.

“Wonderful, isn't it?”

I barely caught my breath and looked around. Really, it was wonderful! It was as if we had ended up in the bowels of some great living organism, some fairy-tale fish. The trees were its twisted muscles, it breathed through the treetops, and somewhere inside, in the depths, slowly, its heartbeat. I could even hear this rhythmic, uneasy sound.

“It’s alive. Do you sense it? During the day it’s all not quite like this. . . .”

She clicked her cigarette lighter, and for an instant I saw the semicircle of her cheek and the flash of her black pupil. Then once again the red glow began to dance in front of me.

“What’s your name?” I asked, persistently thinking how this strange adventure might end.

“What’s the difference? Especially now . . .”

The red glow traced an arc and disappeared. And again I sensed that I had been taken by the hand and dragged somewhere higher. We walked quickly, as though we were being chased. I heard her intermittent breathing. At a certain moment things got uncomfortable for me. Branches of trees that I didn’t manage to brush aside smacked me in the face from time to time.

Finally, we made our way even higher and stopped. Everything repeated—her merging with the tree, the red glow.

This time with wonder I looked below: we had come out of the maw of the beast, and in the distance the outlines of the closest village were being painted by vague little lights, intersected by the golden line of the river. From here, the thick tops of trees that grew below seemed like clustered storm clouds, along which you could walk as though on dry land. I completely came to my senses and breathed deeply, enjoying the strange taste of the air, which I was able to appreciate just now. Together with this air, rapture filled me. How good it was that I had torn myself away from the stifling room and stumbled upon this woman, who led me on such a wonderful stroll! I understood that the two weeks of my vacation would be wonderful. I turned back, I wanted to thank her. . . .

The glow disappeared. I walked up to the tree where she had just been standing, I even touched it with my palm. No one there!

“Haloo,” I hailed quietly. “Where are you?”

My voice echoed unusually in the darkness. Somewhere not far away a night bird began to flap its wings. I walked around each tree, each bush. A mad thought entered my brain that somewhere she had spread out her shawl, had lain on it, and was waiting, so that I’d stumble on her body more quickly.

Then I became angry: What kind of idiotic prank? Then I began to worry whether I could find the road back. And then a little later I inopportunately recalled that his place was swarming with legends about mermaids, niavka river nymphs, mavka forest nymphs, molfar wizards, and witches. . . .

It was unpleasant enough to go down the mountain by myself. The entire time I listened attentively to try to hear the sound of her footsteps nearby. But the forest only breathed deeply and grabbed at me with its stiff fingers. I even fell twice.

Coming out onto a flat clearing, I took a breath and again looked around at the forest. It seemed to me that up above once again, the little red glow of her cigarette was breathing. It was observing me like an eye. And maybe, it was laughing. . . .

*Translation from the Ukrainian By Michael M. Naydan & Olha Tytarenko*