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Opening Extract from...

Butterfly Skin

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1

YOU ARE TEN YEARS OLD, OR PERHAPS YOUNGER. YOU are riding in the subway with your mother, looking toward the front of the train through the transparent doors of the cars. Suddenly you notice that somewhere up ahead, something has happened: people jump to their feet in a strange state of alarm and run back against the movement of the train, as if they are fleeing from something, until they reach the locked doors between the cars – and they tug and tug at the handles... But then their faces contort as panic sweeps over their normal features like a wind driving ripples across the surface of a pond. Something invisible is approaching, something nameless and formless, more terrible than death, more horrible than a nightmare. Something they have known about and tried to forget all their lives.

And now the front cars slowly enter the transparent wall of condensed horror, but you can no longer bear to look at the faces flattened against the glass, the mouths opened in mute screams, the eyes bulging out of their sockets – you turn your gaze to the passengers still untouched by the horror, sitting in the nearest cars, and again you see that faint shadow of anxiety change to panic, you see them jump to their feet and run, run and pound on the locked glass doors... and the invisible wall

gets closer and closer, advancing implacably, like in a dream. But you don't leave your seat, you don't feel for your mother's hand, you just think with relief that it will all soon be over.

These are only my fantasies. I was ten years old, or perhaps younger, and I often imagined this scene. As I got older, however, everything changed, it was no longer a wall, but more like a wave, a wave from a distant cold sea that froze the blood, a wave that swept along the train from the front to the final car. But now no one jumps up from his seat, everybody sits there until the shuddering contorts their faces like a hand crumpling a used tissue.

Yes, as a boy I certainly had a rich imagination. When I grew up a bit, I started telling other people what I used to believe when I was a child: that there was a place in the subway where hell seeped through into the tunnel in a thin layer of horror – and the trains passed through it so quickly that only really sensitive people noticed. I used to give the girls a suggestive look at the words "really sensitive." Sometimes it worked.

Now I know it has nothing to do with sensitivity. It is my own personal hell, my personal horror, my concentrated nightmare. The passengers will never have any idea about it, nothing will distort their faces, not a single hair will shift out of place. I am the only one who notices the signs, the only one who senses the approach, the only one who understands the language of the things and objects that warn me in vain of *the approach.*

The fine hairs on woolen scarves stand up on end, leather coats are covered with fine cracks, feathers creep out of down- filled jackets as if seeking escape, stockings grip legs even tighter, the colors drain out of the advertising posters, any moment now the glass in the windows of the car will rain down on to the seats, the handrails cringe under my fingers, the doors scream in horror. Everything stops, as if time has been switched off, the clatter of the wheels fades away, and suddenly you can hear what the two girls standing by the closed doors are talking about. One is small and skinny, with tousled black hair, the other is graceful, with long legs and light hair. Just a minute ago they were laughing and nudging each other as they discussed how they were going to spend their first pay cheque, but now their faces have aged ten years, and you hear the light-haired one say: "I can't believe she's gone," and see her wipe her eyes with a handkerchief as contorted as your own face, and the smaller one takes hold of her hand and replies: "And I still can't even cry."

And then the sounds get duller, space curls up round the edges of your vision like old wallpaper on a damp wall and everything goes dark before your eyes, as if the entire world is hiding behind those whirling black spirals: the sudden surge overtakes you, sweeps over you. You can't breathe, the outlines of your body blur

within this black cocoon as despair and hopelessness congeal: reach out your hand and you can touch them.

The old horror of childhood? No, this is not horror, it is anguish, concentrated anguish, a stifling feeling, a constant ringing in the ears, the flow of your own blood, darkness, darkness – the dark cloud will hang on the folds of your clothes, cling to the contours of your face, to the hairs stuck to your forehead, to the gnawed ends of your fingers.

You carry this cocoon, this cloud, with you as you leave the subway. You will make conversation, discuss work, come to decisions, write business letters. You will flirt with girls, play with your children, smile at people you know, try to live the way you always do. But on days like this, if you reach out your hand, you can touch the boundary of hell: suffering oozes out of doors slightly ajar, flows across the walls of buildings, crunches under your feet like broken glass; every gesture causes pain, every touch makes you shudder convulsively**;** your skin dissolves, leaving only the naked bleeding flesh, just barely covered by the gray cloud of anguish.

Days like this are excruciating for me. In order to cope somehow, I start remembering the women I have killed.

2

AN ELECTRIC BEEPING. NOT A METALLIC CHIME, NOT the tinkling of a small bell, but the artificial trill of a microchip. The signal of an alarm clock bought in IKEA, a child's alarm clock covered in bright-colored soft plush, with a big dial and yellow hands. Out from under the blanket comes a hand, a thin hand, with a silver ring on the index finger, an arm with a faint scar just above the elbow. The little palm swats a blue velvet pimple, the ringing stops, the arm disappears.

You don't want to open your eyes, you don't want to wake up. As if through half-closed eyes we see the corner of a pillow, a braid of hair, the edge of a blanket. You want to sleep, with your head hidden under the blanket, swaddled up as tight as you can get, hidden away, as if you were nestling inside a cocoon, sleeping like that forever, ever since you were a child.

"Good morning!"

Who did you say "good morning" to in that muffled sleepy voice? There's no one else in the room. A patch of yellow sunlight – it matches the hands of the clock – on the bright- colored kilim by the bed, an open laptop with its matte screen reflecting nothing, a fluffy pink rabbit lurking between the wall and your body.

Good morning, as if you were trying to wake yourself up. Yes indeed, good morning, Ksenia.

Yes, your name is Ksenia, you live in a rented flat, cheap, found through friends. That's about a third of your salary, everything's very Western, the way grown-ups live. You're completely grown up now, twenty-three years old, you work in the news department of the internet-newspaper *Evening.ru*. E-v-e-n-i-n-g dot ru, not a very well-known newspaper, second flight – maybe you've never heard of it, but our news section is good.

Outside the window there is rain, outside there is December, gray sky, not a single snowflake. You only imagined the patches of sunlight in your sleep. Slip your feet into the fluffy slippers, pick the white dressing gown up off the armchair, push the "Play" button and turn up the volume. The Gotan Project playing a remix of Gato Barbieri. That's how the morning starts.

On the way to the bathroom you can't resist looking at your email. Five messages, including four pieces of spam, two of them offering to increase the size of your penis and your breasts. You don't need either – you don't have a penis and your breasts are just fine.

What do you look like? Thin, short, with tousled black hair, lips puffy from sleep, big eyes that simply refuse to open in the morning. You look at the fifth message. Aha, from your friend Olya, good that it's not about work. But then, how could it be about work? You went to bed at three and got up at eight – at that time everyone's asleep, no one's writing work emails.

You walk through into the bathroom, turn on the shower and freeze in front of the mirror, trying to put the day together in your mind. What's in store for us today? The usual stuff first thing in the morning, then a talk with Pasha about money, lunch at the coffee house, Mom's birthday, she asked you to be there at seven and not be late. You take off the dressing gown with a sigh and look in the mirror, already dewy with condensation: it's damp, steamy and warm in here, the way you like it.

The bruises on your breasts and shoulders are barely visible, but your thighs – oh, that's quite a different matter. And the welts on your buttocks sting in the scalding water. Yes, you like your body to retain its memories of your assignations for a long time. You like to be hurt. You have a small collection of various amusing gadgets at home, black leather toys, whips, gags, nipple clamps. On good days you don't see anything unusual about your preferences. The way you think about it is more or less like this: sometimes I want to dance the boogie-woogie in a club in the Kropotkinskaya district, sometimes I ask someone to beat me and hurt me. Sex is like dancing; the important thing is to have a good partner. That's the way you

think on the good days, but on the bad days you remember that sex is not dancing, and it's not easy for someone with your tastes to find a worthy partner. It's not easy, but you cope one way or another. More or less.

But you're not coping too well, to be honest. You parted company with your last lover a week ago, it's over between you now – that's why, instead of the sweet pain of gratification, your skin is smarting with the nagging pain of separation.

You turn off the shower, rub yourself down with a towel and your raw spots ache. Smiling, you walk through into the kitchen and put the kettle on. The music from the other room is almost inaudible. You look at the clock: you still have enough time for a cup of coffee.

This is how the day begins. Outside the window, a colorless sun in a gap between December clouds. Good morning to you, darling Ksenia. Don't forget to dress warmly, there's a strong wind today. Don't forget to take the present for Mom, your cell phone, money, ID, travel pass. Don't forget – you have a lot to do today, darling Ksenia, take good care of yourself. Ah yes, and the keys too. Don't forget them, please.