**A Murderer Is Born**

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Translated from the Hungarian by Ottilie Mulzet

He set off from the deepest of hatreds and arrived, from deep below, and from far away, from so far below and so far away — that then, at the beginning of the beginning, he had not the slightest idea where he was heading; indeed, he didn’t even suspect that there was a route toward anything at all, he had come to hate the country where he lived, come to hate the city where he resided, come to hate the people among whom he stepped onto the metro every morning at dawn, and with whom he traveled home in the evening, it is futile, he said to himself, I have no one here, nothing ties me to this place, let the whole thing go to hell and rot away; since for a good long while he could not decide, he just went with the morning metro and came back with the evening one, back home, and when the day arrived, one morning at dawn, that he no longer stepped onto that metro with the others, he just stood for a while on the platform, there was nothing in his head, he just stood, and he was pushed around, here and there; he picked up one of the free advertising newspapers, then had a beer standing at the counter, and he looked at the want ads and picked out a country along with a job offer, because he knew nothing about it, Spain, that’s a good distance away, so let it be Spain, and from that point on things sped up, and a cheap airline was already dragging him along, he was traveling by plane for the first time in his life, yet he felt nothing other than fear and hatred, for he was afraid of them: he hated the self-confident stewardesses, the self-confident travelers, and even the self-confident clouds that whirled around below him, and he hated the sun and the sparkling light as well — and then he was nearly plummeting down, plummeting down straight into that city, and hardly had he set foot here then he had already been swindled, for of course there was no job behind the job offer, and the money he had saved up was almost immediately gone — it had gone toward the traveling, accommodation for the first few days, and food, so that he could start here, there was no going back, no going back at all — he could start to look for work in this foreign land, which of course he didn’t find, everywhere the “Romanian vagrants” and those of their ilk were chased away, he just wandered around in this beautiful city, and no one would give him any kind of work, and a week passed, and then another and then another, and then another Saturday came along again, so he set off, alone as always, for the city, but this time without hope of work, the weekends were particularly the worst, but he just sauntered, from hate, into it, into anywhere, from one Barcelona street to the next, in the thick Saturday-night multitude of people inebriated by wealth and the pleasures of life; he only had fifty euros, hunger gnawed uselessly in his stomach, he didn’t dare to go in anywhere, because, of course, of his clothes, in these clothes — he looked at himself — it was completely understandable if they wouldn’t let him in anywhere here, and then it happened, he was at that moment walking down the Passeig de Gràcia, that the crowd of people at the intersection swelled to such a density, and all of them in such elegant clothing swelled together and he was forced to stop, he withdrew next to a wall and looked at them from there, because he just didn’t want to be swept along from there, to move on from there, so he stayed by the wall, and because his back was pressed against it, he began to look at the building behind him and he was completely stupefied, for he had already seen many similar perversities in this city, but never anything like this; yet he had come this way before, he must have seen this one as well, but he had passed it in vain, he hadn’t noticed it until now, which was already strange enough, he thought, because this building at the corner of the Passeig de Gràcia and the Carrer de Provença was so colossal, so unwieldy, it weighed down so heavily on the intersection that actually it would be hard not to notice, he slouched further along the wall, then spotted a tourist plaque introducing this spot, which stated that this was the Casa Míla and below, in parentheses, that it was La Pedrera — it was indicating this place precisely — so that this had to mean that the name of the building was Casa Míla, that is, it must be some kind of famous building, well of course, he thought, here in Barcelona, in this district, they could put that on a lot of buildings, not even because it was famous but because it was built by a lunatic, then he took a closer look at the façade, at least as much as he could in the throng of people, and although it was much, but really much uglier than the others, he disliked it for exactly the same reason as he did its companions, as in general he did not like anything that was not orderly, and this was very much not so, this looked like a gigantic stomach, like a huge gut that had somehow, due to its weight, plopped out onto the sidewalk and sprawled there, it sickened him, indeed: now that he looked more closely at the colossal weighty façade, it somehow began to enervate him, to oppress him, he found it in every sense of the word repugnant, and he could not understand why someone had been deliberately allowed to build something like this, in this loathsomely beautiful and rich city; it could have been half-past five and it was still completely light, only he called it evening, as for him half-past five was still evening, he couldn’t help it, the multitudes desirous of entertainment or shopping just undulated on and on, turned, whirled at the corner, and wouldn’t let him go any further so he could get away from here unimpeded, on the contrary when he noticed that the entire thing seemed to be growing, even swelling, and not only here in the intersection but in both directions along the Passeig de Gràcia, he then decided that he would leave the neighborhood, go into the Carrer de Provença, and try to find some much, much cheaper neighborhood, one suitable for him, which on the one hand would be along the way to his new free accommodations, and where also he could finally eat something; and he went along the wall for a bit — to be completely accurate, the distance of a few steps — to an open entranceway, clearly the entrance of that La Pedrera itself, or whatever they called it; he looked in, but saw inside there not a single living soul, only a kind of ornamental staircase decorated with morbid ivy-tendrils that somehow curled, morbidly, upward in the slightly darkened entrance hall, they curled between five dreadfully hideous columns and some kind of painted marble-like wall; there must be some kind of event taking place inside, a wedding or something like that, he thought, but he didn’t move from the entrance, he just waited, waited for a guard to appear, or a valet, or someone like that, he was positive that this would happen, because he nearly wanted them to throw him out, but no one appeared so that, led on by a quick and foolish idea, he made a step toward the inside, and loitered there for a minute, looking around in the entrance hall that was obviously carved and painted in the most insane way possible, he loitered and . . . no one came, there was such silence as if this Saturday evening rabble, heaving and straining, were not clamoring right outside the entrance a few meters from here — silence, this was really strange, the door was open, he set off along the five columns up the ornamented staircase, he knew how insolent he was being, for surely if anyone had no business being there it was he; just out of curiosity, a voice said within, I’ll go a bit further up out of curiosity, and so he reached the first floor, where he again found a wide-open door, but the strangest thing was that there was no one even here, he was certain that he wouldn’t be able to go any farther, but no, inside, past the wide-open door a longish corridor opened up, in the corridor, there was only an empty table and an empty chair standing orphaned on the side there, he stepped into the corridor, and he noticed that to the left of the table there was a similarly opened, narrower door, then he saw eight steps leading upward, and still beyond that, looking from down here, another space opened up, or a room — he stood on his tiptoes, the better to see, very cautiously, what was up inside there, but up inside, in that raised room, only a dim obscurity appeared to him, from which further dimly obscure rooms opened up, and in the rooms there was not, as far as he could judge from here by the entrance in front of the eight steps, a single living soul; on the walls in these rooms were some kind of old-fashioned religious pictures, old-fashioned and beautiful and not right for this place, they all shone with gold, oh no, he thought, now he really had to leave, and he turned around uncertainly, like someone wishing to return to the main corridor and from here down the stairs and out into the street, he would run and, uninhibitedly, he would breathe the air deeply in at last, for here he was completely holding his breath; but even then he didn’t leave, he just took a few steps toward the opened door next to the table, he looked at the eight upward steps that led into the first room and looked again into that first room; suddenly these gilded pictures had begun to attract him; he didn’t want to steal them, no such thought arose in him — more precisely it did arise but he immediately chased it away — he wanted to see how they shone, really just to look a little bit more, at least until they threw him out, since he didn’t have anything to do anyway, when suddenly, from behind his back, there came from outside, from the ornamented staircase, with such faint steps that he didn’t even hear them, a middle-aged, well-dressed couple, arm in arm, they separated behind him, walked around him, and then returned to each other’s side, and in the meantime the person they had walked around trembled barely perceptibly with his entire body, the woman slipped her arm through the man’s again and they headed up the eight steps and stepped into the room, disappearing from view there, which decided the question of whether he should go in or not, as he immediately started after them, whatever happens will happen, at the very most they would throw him out, whatever, even then he would see a little more of what had shone in his eyes so much from below, so that he too, his legs still slightly trembling, went up the eight steps, and stepping across the threshold, he ventured in after the middle-aged couple — it was dark, moreover there were only lights above the individual pictures; he didn’t stop right away but went in further to create the impression that he was already inside, indeed, maybe even more inside than those who had come up from behind him, so that it was not the first picture, not the second, and he didn’t even know how many pictures it was, and suddenly Jesus Christ was looking at him, sitting on a kind of throne in the middle of a triptych, in one hand he held a book, namely the Scripture, which was open, and in the other he was ominously signaling something to him who was looking, signaling outward from the picture, and really, everything around him shone — they made it with gold leaf, he determined, as earlier he had been in restorers’ workshops, even if now he was only on building sites; with gold leaf — he leaned closer, but almost immediately stepped quickly back — the gold leaf almost adheres to the base by itself, clearly this had been prepared with it — he looked at Christ, but strongly avoided looking into his eyes even once, for this Christ, although he knew it was only a painting, stared at him so sternly that the gaze could hardly be borne — it was, moreover, beautiful — that was the only word for it, beautiful — and a bit as if the painter had painted it in a time when people didn’t yet know how to paint properly, or at least it seemed so to him, for there was something elementary in the formation of the head and in the entire picture, in the background there was no landscape at all or any buildings as he was used to seeing in church paintings, there were only angels with bent heads, and saints with bent heads, and everywhere the illumination of this gold, and in a surprising way this showed Christ from completely close-up, so close that after a while he had to step back, because it’s too close, he thought, and he also blamed it on the painter; he suspected that these primitive pictures had been exhibited here on purpose, as well as in the subsequent rooms, in every space he could glimpse from here, as he also immediately perceived that there were some people in the farther rooms, and then he thought right away that it would be better to sidle backward; yet a long moment followed, and they didn’t come to usher him out, moreover, one of the people dispersed in the farther rooms came here, into the room where he was, and took no notice of him, then he thought, he’s just a visitor, just like me, and he began to feel more self-confident, and he looked at the Christ some more, but he didn’t see anything, he was not observing the picture but what the person next to him was doing; but he wasn’t doing anything, only going from one picture to the next, he’s really not a guard, he thought, finally relaxing, and he looked again at the Christ, above Him there was something like a very faint cross-hatching, but impossible to decipher, and so he tried to read what was written below the picture which might as well have been in Catalan, as he didn’t understand a word, then he took one step farther to the next picture; the background of that one was also completely gold, and it could have been made a very long time ago, because the wood on which it had been painted was already thoroughly chewed up by woodworms and the paints were peeling off to a considerable degree, but what he saw was very beautiful again, the Virgin Mother sat there in a picture within the picture, the Infant on her arm; the Infant particularly pleased him, as he pressed his little face as close as he could to the Virgin Mary’s, who however was not looking at the Infant but somehow in front of herself, outside of the picture, at him, who was looking at it, and her gaze was very sad, as if she knew what would happen later to her little son, such that he stopped looking at her and stared at the gold background until it dazzled him, and the third picture and the fourth picture and the fifth picture were all very similar, they were all painted onto wood, they all had gold backgrounds, in all of them the Virgin or Christ, or some Saint, were childishly painted, for there was some kind of Saint in each picture, frequently there were several, but the essential thing, he determined, was that these Marys and Jesuses and Saints, painted in vivid colors with gold backgrounds, were — well, as if children had created them, at least that’s what came to his mind — of course then he tossed it away as nonsense, for what could be expected of him anyway, he didn’t understand, he had, it was true, once worked for a few months in an art restorer’s workshop, but still! — anything here, well no, what he saw was certainly not childish, rather just only . . . probably very old, he concurred with himself, so old that people didn’t know the rules of painting, or that painting could have had a different set of rules; he went from one to the other, here leaning his head to the left and there leaning it to the right, and if the strained readiness to jump out of there at the first ominous sign had not ceased in him, he now lingered in front of each picture in a more orderly way, because not including the Christ here at the end of the room, whose stern gaze he had encountered at the very beginning, the rest of the Saints, the Infants, and the Kings looked at him with complete tenderness, so that he really did calm down a little, and still no one came to put him in his place or to ask for an entrance ticket, if it was an exhibit, it remained so, indeed, he didn’t go back into the first room he had blindly hurried across when he first came in, he continued on into the next one, where it was just as dark and where only little lamps also illuminated each one of the pictures from above, here too were the Saints with the Virgin Mary or with Christ, here too was no end of gold and illumination, which practically radiated out from them, as if they didn’t need a single lamp above them, because the light came from within them; he walked up and down with complete self-confidence now, given his circumstances, he went from one room to the next, he looked at the Saints and the Kings and the other Beatified Ones, and instead of feeling gratitude to the heavens for being able to be here undisturbed, he was overcome — exactly in that place where the eternal hatred was — by a kind of sadness, and he felt alone — ever since he had arrived here, he hadn’t felt anything like that; he stared at the illumination, he stared at the gold leaf, and something began to hurt violently within him, and he didn’t know what it was: if it was really being alone that hurt so much, the pain coming upon him suddenly; or that he had wandered into this happenstance so dispossessed, while everyone outside was wandering around so happily; or if it was that immeasurable distance that hurt so much, making him realize how unbearably far away were these Saints, these Kings, these Beatified Ones, Marys and Christs — and that illumination.

The influence of Byzantium and Constantinople was immeasurable, but of course that statement needs to be amended, for without Byzantium and Constantinople not even the Slavs themselves would have assumed Christianity across such a vast area, so, of course, it is natural that, on the subject of icon-painting, everything goes back to Byzantine origins, everything points in that direction, to the Byzantine Greek Orthodoxy; from there the first miracle-working images emerged, and from these the first miracle-working icon painters emerged; the Russians went to study with them in Byzantium, to the unprecedentedly wealthy and powerful city of Constantinople, preparing for immortality — it was from here that the stern outlines on the motionless face of the mighty Pantokrator that were painted onto the arches and cupolas originated, from here it was transmitted, before anywhere else, to Kiev, then to Novgorod, Pskov, Vladimir and Suzdal, to Radonezh, Pereslavl, Rostov and Yaroslavl, then to Kostroma, and finally to Moscow, to Moscow — all these countless chastising glances, these countless somber Virgin Mothers in mourning, those fierce rhythms, those immobile judgmental colors, and that extraordinary tautness and finality and steadfastness and unshakeable spirit and eternal life, but the Russians created something utterly different, something that was replete with gentle affection, reassurance, peace, sympathy, and reverence; that of course reached consummation only in the fifteenth century, because there — at least in the historical sense, from Kievan Rus’ to the Grand Duchy of Moscow, a long road had to be traversed, which moreover should not be envisaged as one unbroken line but as a kind of sketch, the main direction of which is indisputable but which stops from time to time at a certain point, like islands flashing in all directions, radiating outward like stars, leaving a trace on the map of the first five centuries of ancient Russian art, which at last culminates in the icon-painting of Moscow, and creates that tradition which renders it unmistakable, binding together Vladimir’s Mother of God and the Virgin of Volokolamsk, and so with that the ancient Russian art of icon painting could come into being — that which did not require time to be born, but immersion, which did not come about in one single process — time, therefore, was not the central element, but rather it was the glimpse, the sudden comprehension, the lightning-quick recognition, the sight of which was incomprehensible, unrecognizable, unseeable — this was the thinking of every saint — from the two sons of the Grand Duke of Kievan Rus’, Boris and Gleb, to the igumen of Pecherskaya Lavra, Feodosiy, to the abbot Saint Sergey of the immortal Monastery of the Trinity of Radonezh; truly everyone, the named and the nameless, who took part in this immersion — even those among them already able to feel the wonders of Creation — were aided in this magical atmosphere created by the icon painter, almost always working in complete obscurity; drawing closer, in his own tortuous way to the incomprehensible and the unrecognizable, and the invisible; for the icons explained to them clearly that the world was at an end, and that this world had an end; and that if they kissed the icon and looked into it, then they would be assured that something exists more miraculous than the miraculous itself, that there is mercy and there is forgiveness and there is hope, and there is strength in faith, and then there were the shrines of Desyatinnaya and Sofiya, created on the model of the Byzantine cruciform chapel, there was the Uspensky Cathedral of Kiev, and the Spas chapel of Neredica and the Paraskeva Pyatnitsa temple of Chernigov, there was the Pecherskaya Lavra and the Temple of the Gate, and the church of Berestovo and the monastery of Vidubitsky, but these were still the first wave of the glorious shrines, monasteries, and churches built in the joy of the new faith, as this was followed by the renowned Moscow Period with the Uspensky, the Andronikov, and the Troitskaya-Sergieva Lavra, so that the newer shrines and monasteries and churches were built one after the other to the north, as far north as Vologda and Ferapontov, and everywhere icons were created in the hundreds and thousands, the iconostases were raised, and the walls and the columns and the ceilings covered in frescoes, and the people were immersed in faith, and they stepped into the narthex and from there into the naos, and holding three fingers together, in a wide arc they made the sign of the cross, once in the middle of the forehead, once below the navel, then once to the right, finally to the left, then they bowed, and after a brief supplication they went forward to the analogion, the icon-stand, making the sign of the cross twice in front of it, and they kissed the edge of the icon, then again they made the sign of the cross once and they kneeled, and they bought a bundle of sacred candles and they lit the candles in the candelabra placed at certain points in the church, and here, after reciting the mandatory prayers and all the while crossing themselves again, they purified their hearts, at last they took their places in the shrines, the monasteries, and the churches, the women on the left side, the men on the right side, namely, the women in the narthex and the men in the naos, and they heard the voice of the priest leading the ceremony, that in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amin, have mercy upon me, a sinner, our Lord Jesus Christ, The Son of God, for the sake of the prayers of Thy most pure Mother, the Saintly Ones, our Godly Fathers, of every Saint, have mercy on us, and Glory to Thee, Our Lord, Glory to Thee, O Heavenly King, Bringer of Comfort, Soul of Truth, Who art everywhere present and fillest all things, Treasury of all the Good, and Giver of Life, come abide within us, and cleanse us of all sins, and redeem, O Benevolence, our souls, and they heard the reverberations of the choir, the polyphony growing ever richer, constructed on the basis of the diatonic, chromatic, and enharmonic scales, they gave themselves over to the ikos, sounded in the scale of eight voices and its forty modulations, and they said the Amin if the time came in the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, and made the sign of the cross, as if scattering crosses, flinging one cross after another for hours, while this great Liturgy was taking place, until the priest kissed the cross and after the distribution of the prosfora, called upon them to leave; and they believed in God, because they saw the icons, because these icons demonstrated to them, and proved definitively to their impressionable souls that what stood before them on the icon-stand or what they could see hanging on the wall before them, the icon, was truly that place where they might glimpse into another world, a world above all else, so that their lives passed in one single prayer, or if that was not entirely the case, as in the midst of writhing struggle between the lesser and greater sins, committed over and over, it was difficult to maintain the intensity of the concentration demanded by constant prayer; yet there still remained wonder, the sincere rapturous wonder of those for whom this state of continuous prayer was not a superhuman task but was itself the only single imaginable form of this worldly life — truly one long uninterrupted prayer — for this was the case of those who chose the sacred path, of every cropped-headed votary of the subjects of Orthodox devotion, who following one of the twofold traditions of Byzantium, chose to pass their lives in that which the Lord had meted out for them: either a strict kinovion or a more free-spirited idiorhythmic type of monastery; nonetheless they lived in both places in this state of continual prayer, if not explicitly confined within this prayer, as were the most constant heroes of the faith, the Hesychasts; well, perhaps these monks couldn’t even have done otherwise, as for them anything else would have been unimaginable; therefore they lived as an inner mute prayer, immersed in perfect reticence, in a silence where no worldly sound was ever heard, not even the faint murmur of the prayers of the other monks, not even the murmur that could be heard from the whole of the Russian lands, which in accordance with the so-called spirit of history was slowly moving in a turbulent swirl toward union, for in the meantime the Russians had become enamored with Christ and the Virgin Mother, and with sincere murmuring fear in their hearts paid tribute to Our Lord the Creator, who looked down upon them as the Pantokrator from the heights of the church cupolas, they were enchanted by the dazzling beauty of the churches, by the endless riches that rained down upon them on Sundays and during every mandatory prayer on the church holidays; under the weight of their sins, they took part with the most profound trust — with the promise of redemption — in the long ceremonies, which in and of themselves were prayers; all the seven Byzantine synods of the Orthodox faith wanted this and ordered it as such, where everything, including the smallest details of life, was regulated, and thus everything could accordingly serve the everlasting sustenance of the Church in the enormous territory of Russia, emerging as a great power, everything could serve the everlasting sustenance of the buildings of its faith — polished, intricate, and infinitely refined — so that every object and every hymn and every supplication and every movement would conjure up amazement and preserve the sense in the believer, with his wretched existence, that here he was close to Paradise, close to Our Lord, close to Christ and the Holy Mother of God, close to the Unseeable, to that which was more Miraculous than the Miraculous, so that he would be filled with the heart-wrenching reverberations of the choir’s chant and the Word; his soul would be, after sorrow, penetrated with infinite joy, so that he would believe, truly believe, that his wretched life was nothing; for everything was above, was there in the beyond, was there if he looked, before kissing the icon’s edge, in the incomprehensible spectacle opening within the gates of the icon, it was there . . . there . . . somewhere.

He decided to leave, that was all he needed, to give himself over to this weakness, to the glutinous substance of a sadness that had precipitously descended upon him, all he needed now was to give in, especially in this place that was not for him, merely because the pictures on the wall here looked at him with such illumination; it was out of the question, get out now, the whole thing was totally absurd, he could not allow himself this, he had nothing at all, neither proper accommodation nor money nor work; not only did he have to be strong inside but he had to feel that way, facing whomever he would encounter on Monday while searching again for work; wandering around in here was pure lunacy, I’m out of here, to hell with it, and he was already going, that is to say backward, because one could not be certain, as he was not, that there was, at the opposite end of the series of rooms arranged like a labyrinth, an exit; he recognized this already, he did not have to ruminate: well, which way now, this way, he said to himself, and he went, backward, to where he had come from; he didn’t look at the pictures now, he was very angry at himself and felt it had been idiotic to sneak in here; he retreated from one room to the next, and he had already reached the first room, and was already below on the eight steps, and he was about to walk through the door that opened wide onto the corridor so he could then run down the crazy staircase and outside, out of this crazy building, once again into the crowd and then into the Carrer de Provença, and from there quickly toward a district suitable for him, so he could eat in some cheap buffet to hold out until tomorrow when, in the first room through which he had blindly hurried through when he first came in, yes, now he remembered clearly, that here in this first room he hadn’t really looked at anything at all, he hadn’t even seen anything, as if he’d had to shut his eyes; for the life of him, he didn’t remember anything of what was here, he had, in a word, headed inside unseeing, yet now, on his way out, he cast a glance at a picture of much larger dimensions than the others, altogether one glance, and he had already turned his head away, and he had already raised his leg to step across the threshold, yet he stopped, somehow he faltered in his movement, he could not complete it and because of this he nearly stumbled clumsily in front of the eight steps — almost, for at the last moment he was able to pull his leg back, and he was even able to keep his balance, he only clutched at the door frame and looked back once again, and, well, there would not have actually been any particular reason for him to be so troubled, for in this first room there was only one picture to be seen; true, it had been positioned differently, and it was also true that apart from this picture, nothing else had been placed there — an easel, a kind of painter’s easel had been set up in this first room, and on this, obliquely, that is at a slight backward tilt, and much bigger than the others — a painting nearly life sized had been placed, and, because the easel was high above the floor level, it so to speak welcomed the visitor, and if already from the beginning it would have been hard for him to explain why he had slipped into here, and what the hell he was looking for here, then now he knew even less why he had come to a dead halt before this picture, so that he nearly fell on his nose from the sudden stop, that is, in any event, how it occurred: he braked, he came to a dead halt, he leaned against the door frame, he regained his balance, and he turned in the direction of the large picture, and in the picture he saw three mighty, delicate, supplicant men, as these three men sat around a table; that was what he saw first, but he quickly discovered that these three men, each of them, had wings, it was not, moreover, easy to discover this as the painting was in fairly bad condition, it was immediately visible that many parts that had once been painted in were missing, but the three figures who, due to their wings, were obviously angels, had remained relatively intact, only a scar extended all the way down the middle of the picture, as if the wood on which it had been painted had split, and as if after this fissure had occurred, something else had been spilled there, resulting in a thick streak where some of the color was lost; but then he determined that there was, to the right, a similar though thinner streak where the same thing might have occurred; aha, he realized suddenly, these fissures occur in the two places where so long ago the boards were fitted to each other, there is a problem with the join, he thought worriedly, the material is warping and had already warped a bit, in other words it had cupped, as people who work with wood are wont to say, and in that first minute he didn’t even know why the hell he was interested, and what had made him anxious and why he wasn’t moving on already, what the hell was he doing standing around here and why was it so important to him, to him of all people, that there were two scars on this picture and what they were from, when he awoke to the realization that these angels . . . it was as if they had stopped him, it seemed like pure lunacy but there had to be something in it, he perceived that he was now staring only at the background, perhaps even more terrifyingly shining and golden than the previous ones, and that he wasn’t taking his eyes off of it, his eyes were dazzled from the illumination, just so he didn’t have to look at the angels — but already, he was well aware that he did not dare to look at the angels — so, this really takes the cake, have I gone crazy as well?! and he looked at the angels and almost immediately at the sight he collapsed, for he knew right away, as he looked at them, that these angels were real.

It would have been simpler if he had just immediately run down the steps, and then really had gotten out of here, only that from his point of view, looking at it from here inside, things weren’t like that: on the contrary, it seemed to him simplest not to flee through that door that the angels were guarding, but to go backward, backward once again, across the rooms, and there to look for a real exit, and he even did so, although of course he hadn’t thought it through; he was too frightened for that, it was his reflexes, not his brain, that were making the decisions, his simple sensory reflexes, so that he fled, and truly he ran, across the first room, then he ran across the second, then in the third one he slowed down — they weren’t actually coming after him — nonetheless in the fourth room he already tried to conceal his running, so then he ran further in a hidden running; if anyone standing in the rear rooms was looking at him, then they wouldn’t have encountered anything particularly conspicuous, it’s true he looked like someone who was dragging his feet a little strangely across the floor, but simply hurrying through the rooms, clearly he had some business to attend to, something undone somewhere, any one of the visitors to the exhibit might have thought this if they had cast a glance at him, only, they didn’t cast any glance, no one could have cared less where he was going, and since all were examining the icons such as, perhaps, the familiar couple from the beginning, who were softly whispering before each picture, but really, he engaged the attention of no one here until he reached the last room, where he saw a door that was not opened wide, it had to be opened if someone wanted to go through it, but it seemed obvious that it led outside, so he didn’t reflect too much over where to go, already he had stepped up there, and already he had opened the door, but stepping through it, he saw sitting, facing him, next to a little table, a large-framed, bearded old man, who immediately looked up when he appeared, hurrying through the door; he was already suspicious as to why someone was leaving the last room so hurriedly; oh no, that’s all I need, he thought, suddenly slowing his pace, but to no avail, it was too late, the old man got up from his chair and looked him in the face, at which he quickly looked away, and stood by a wall just as monstrous as the one on the first floor, he leaned back as much as he could against the pockmarked wall and puckered his mouth, looking at the floor before him, like someone who had just come out of the room to rest, or like someone who was just thinking about what he had just seen; he observed that having done so, the old man sat down again, or, more precisely, he slowly lowered himself down to his chair, but he was looking, not removing his gaze from him, because, well, of course he was suspicious, he thought, I would be suspicious too in his place, so that he stayed there; something was jutting horribly into his back, some kind of bauble jutting out from the wall, clearly some kind of wretched ornament, how much longer am I going to have to stand around here, he reflected irritatedly, when the old man somehow motioned to the rooms with his head and spoke to him, saying “Is Vasilka there?” which of course he did not understand, on the one hand because he didn’t speak Catalan — he had only learned a few basic expressions in Spanish, and on the other because the old man was not speaking Catalan and not even Spanish, but in all likelihood Russian, or in any event some kind of Slavic language, so he stood there doubly distanced from this presumed Russian language, and as always, when someone said something to him in this country, he nodded cautiously, so cautiously that it could be understood to mean anything, in any event he said not a single word, and just continued to stand there by the wall; the old man, as if put at his ease by the nod, sat back in his chair; he however looked at the old man now for the first time more closely, and he saw that this person, who had clearly been placed here in some sort of supervisory position, was not simply just old, he was downright ancient, his beard was thick and snow-white, and reached down to his chest, he was continually twisting the end of it, but his eyes, which were of a kind of blue like the cloaks of the angels inside, were fixed unblinkingly upon him, he said nothing for a while, then he began to hem and haw, and like someone who took it completely for granted that the other one understood what he was beginning to say in his own language in this foreign city, spoke again in what, as before, was most likely Russian, saying that he could not stand it anymore, all this slacking off, he’d chewed it over a hundred times already why these pictures were here, and what their purpose was, that the two of them were the Gallery itself, but as for that one, he gestured in vexation, it was a waste of time even to talk about it, he was just a slacker, oh, that Vasilka, the old man sighed, shaking his head at length, to which he responded again with a nod of the head, and with that he finally convinced the old man that he understood what he was saying, moreover that he agreed with him, and that Vasilka really should have been sitting there, obviously in front of something by the entrance where the angels were; yes, he must mean the entrance; the old man, sensing his concurrence, nodded in gratitude, since, he explained, the treasures inside there were of inestimable value, because there were things here, selected items, not only from the Moscow collections but material from Kiev and Novgorod and Pskov and Yaroslavl and from more recent times too, these just could not be left unsupervised, with no protection, there was no way this could be entrusted to the Catalans, they would have their heads off if they found even a single spot on any of them, he had kept explaining this to Vasilka, continuously, but you could explain all you wanted, Vasilka slipped away like a lizard and of course he knew — the old man pointed to himself — that if he went through the rooms, then there wouldn’t be anyone here, so what could he do; every morning he said, look, Vasilka, the devil will seize you if you slip away so much, you’ll never get back home — because they were sent here from home — and so on, he just kept on saying that they were the two room-guards for the Gallery, and that he had pleaded in vain for them not to stick him with Vasilka for this traveling exhibition, anyone but that Vasilka, but the main boss didn’t listen to him, because no one had listened to him for a long time now; he had grown old, in his left ear — and he showed him the spot — he was completely deaf, and he didn’t even see that well, but don’t tell that to anyone, no one had to know that, because they then would kick him out of the Gallery, he would die immediately if that happened, for the gentleman could well believe him, and again he pointed at himself with both hands, he had worked as a guard in the Gallery for more than forty years now, everything, he had lived through everything already that was just possible to live through: this one left, that one came, this one left again, that one was appointed again, it was a pure madhouse, that is why he had always stuck to being a guard, no one was envious of that, yet he was, he noted — a confidential expression on his face — a born Vzdornov, yes, he gave a brief laugh, from that branch, from the famous and renowned family of Vzdornov, not even as far removed from the most famous of all, batyushka Gerold Ivanovich, who for that matter was now living in Ferapontov, completely withdrawn from the world, so that every single day he could look at the world-famous frescoes of Dionisiy, which — they say — also had made him go a bit mad but that doesn’t really matter because, getting back to himself, they — Gerold Ivanovich here, Gerold Ivanovich there — they could talk all they wanted, he would never leave his position as a museum guard for any amount of money, this had always suited him and in the most perfect way imaginable, because here at least a person was left in peace and, spreading his hands wide, he waited for the accord of his audience, the audience of course nodded once very seriously, but by then had already decided okay, this was fine, he would act as if he were paying attention for one more minute but then no more, he would go down from here to the ground floor, from there out onto the street, and out of here, because it was, all the same, ridiculous how a person couldn’t get out of here because he had been attacked by a vision — because what else could have happened to him earlier than a vision, he didn’t dare to move from here lest they grab him because of the ticket, well he hadn’t done anything wrong, he hadn’t taken anything, he hadn’t even touched anything at all, the only problem was that he had no entrance ticket, so what, that’s nothing, he would talk his way out of it somehow, later, but when he had already decided, and had launched himself off a mere hair’s breath away from the wall, the old man started in again, at which he simply leaned back once more, for he thought it better if, for the time being, he was leaning against the wall, at least he could find a smoother spot for his back on the wall, and not that same bauble jutting out, yet still: he stayed there, and he could have heard that “I know you too, just came for that, I know, because everyone comes for that, everyone comes across that door, and I can see right away that they’re disappointed, well of course I would be too, because the Rublev, the real one, that’s something else, but that never, you understand, my dear sir, never will be moved from the walls of the Tretyakov Museum,” and there it would stay, he continued to explain, it had turned up there from the State Institution of Restoration during the time of Comrade Stalin; the monks from Radonezh, from whom it had been taken to be sent to the State Institute of Restoration, received a copy in its place, so that the original could only be seen by someone who traveled specially to Moscow and looked at it there, the one here, however, inside, was not the one from Radonezh but a third variation, and from among the hundreds upon hundreds of copies prepared at that time, before Ivan the Terrible, the most beautiful of its kind, indeed a perfectly magnificent copy, he gestured toward the inner rooms, no one could even say that it’s not, maybe Miss Iovleva or Yekaterina Zheleznyeva found it somewhere in the depositories, in a word it was beautiful and superb and everything, well, but the original, the Rublev, that was something else altogether, it was too difficult even to say where this very difference lay, because as even he could see, the figures, the contours, the composition, the measurements, the placement all corresponded near perfectly to the original Rublev, and, well, as a matter of fact, there was a divergence only in the table, because in the Rublev, there is a chalice on the table, and that’s it, we don’t even know what kind, because the paint peeled off, it didn’t happen in the State Institute of Restoration, my brother-in-law’s wife’s younger daughter, Ninochka, worked there, it wasn’t there but in an older time, still under the Czars, for as you know, these icons . . . the old man dug sadly into his beard — although it isn’t clear that you do know, because, he pointed at him standing by the wall, he immediately saw, as he came through the door, that he was Russian and that he wasn’t really an expert, but one of those art-loving types, the kind that speak very little as they view the exhibition, while the experts, they never stop blabbing on and on, that is how you can tell who they are, they haven’t even come through the door yet and you can hear them blabbing away already, just like birds chirping back and forth, that suchlike and suchlike and Byzantine this and Theophanic Greek that, and Rublev this and Dionisy that, well, to put it briefly, it would be better if they kept quiet, and he pointed to himself, he during those forty years had come to know everything about these icons, there was no question anyone could put to him that he could not answer, because he had read everything, and so many things had stuck in his mind that even Miss Iovleva or Yekaterina Zheleznyeva herself sometimes asked him about a name, or a date, if they just couldn’t happen to recall it right then, and he always answered too when he was asked a question, because he never forgot anything, because everything stayed in his head; he had grown up with these amazing icons at home, so that he could be trusted when he said these icons here inside, you understand, don’t you, and the other ones too, all the ones back home, were very frequently repainted, restored, or simply painted over, yes — and that one too, the Troika — you understand already, and the one back home, the Rublev, it was painted over many times, they even say — the old man gestured for his audience to come close, who in turn, however, did not budge from the wall — that there is no point in restoring it to the original state with all of these modern tools, even then it isn’t the original state, “because it is impossible by now to restore the original state and even sometimes you can hear” — the old man lowered his voice —“that this is particularly true for the Lord Our Father and the Holy Spirit, in a word, you know, I understand that in the Rublev the mouth of the angel on the left and the angel on the right originally curved down a bit more, thus they were sadder in the original, which of course I just happened to hear somewhere, I don’t even know where, it could be that not even the half of it is true,” what did it matter to him anyway, to a Russian who just happened to wander in here, it didn’t matter here anyway, he could just delight in this copy, for it was beautiful, wasn’t it? and as he held a slight pause here, and again just waited for a sign of consent, he leaned forward a little, toward him, again he had to nod once, but now somehow it was going a little more easily, because now he was convinced that the old man was not dealing with him in an unfriendly way, but rather gave the impression of someone who was trying to explain something, so that there was nothing in his voice to suggest that he was about to ask for the ticket, no, this was no longer about the ticket, but what then was it all about, the old man had clearly mistaken him for someone else, but if that were true, then what would happen if it emerged that he was not the person he had been mistaken for; or it wasn’t even a question of mistaken identities but just that he was bored, very bored, and he had to sit down here, and his only hope was that he might latch onto someone coming from the last room, someone with whom he could while away the time; but what was he talking about, how the hell could someone just go on and on like that, and why did he even think that he was interested, because he wasn’t interested at all, and even if he understood he still wouldn’t be interested, and it was just for the sake of appearances, for self-protection, that he had stayed with him in this crazy building, where there were even angels; this was all he needed, well enough of this, he thought, and now he pushed himself away from the wall a little more decisively than before, but the old man right at that point raised his left arm and said to him, what, don’t be in such a hurry, they’d been having such a nice conversation, he had to sit there from morning till evening, he wasn’t saying that by way of complaining but it was just that, well, it was nice to talk a little with someone about these things, with someone who was interested, and it was just as if they were back at home in the Gallery; there too, if someone asked him a question, he always told them everything he knew, just as he was telling him now that all in all, in his opinion, the Troika was the most beautiful painting in the entire world, no one had ever succeeded in depicting Heaven — the imperceptible — with such staggering results, that is to say, like reality itself; never, declared the old man and he raised his index finger as well, at which the visitor of course began to retreat back toward the wall, never, no one, and that was exactly why every single copy is so important, and that is exactly why this one that he had seen at the entrance to the exhibit was so important, because the copy, as he obviously knew — the old man looked at him sternly — was not the same thing as here in the West; at home, if a copy was created from an icon, and then this copy was consecrated by the bishop, it was then accordingly acknowledged as genuine, and from that point on the very same sanctity would emanate from the copy as from the original, and it was like this with the Troika too, and in addition to that, a copy more beautiful than the one they had brought here would never be found anywhere, it had only come to light recently, and everyone had come to see the miracle, they even came from the highest echelons, all the restorer-colleagues were there, all of the historians, when Miss Iovleva or Miss Zheleznyeva — he didn’t recall exactly who it was now — had found it and brought it up from storage, a small crowd stood there, he remembered it well to this very day, and everyone was amazed by this copy, because at first glance it really seemed to be the original, as everything in it tallied, if he could put it that way: the measurements tallied, the composition tallied, the proportions, the outlines, it was only on the table that something was different, but up to this very day no one has known, there is only speculation, what could have originally been painted on this copy, and chiefly as to why it was different than what was on the table in the Rublev, they just stood there and they were all enchanted, and the guards were there too, and they wanted to exhibit it straight away, but then nothing at all came of that, because where should they put it? perhaps next to the original?! a nearly perfect copy?! — no, that was impossible, so then instead they didn’t put it anywhere, yet when this traveling exhibit got started, there was no debate to speak of, they immediately selected it namely as one of the first items, because of course moving the original was out of the question, the original by Rublev, that one — the Director himself, Valentin Rodionov, stated — shall remain forever in its place, for where the Rublev Troika is hung becomes a shrine, even Director Rodionov said that; and he himself would say that it didn’t really matter, where the Troika was, its sacred force was immediately felt, if someone looks at it they surely understand, and that is why no one dared to touch it; he — and again the old man pointed by way of explanation at himself — believed that this was the reason why no one had dared to move it since 1928, well who would take on the task of touching it without praying, without kissing it, it was trouble enough that it had been moved in the old days from the church at Radonezh because, well, it wasn’t painted to be put in a museum, and for people just to stare at it like some ordinary picture . . . but no matter, one thing is certain, that at least no one was going to touch it anymore, in this way it would stay with them, in the Tretyakov, for even if the Tretyakov is not a church, the world — the old man lowered his voice and signaled with a movement of his hand, like a great lord, that he could go now if he wished, he had concluded all that he wished to say — the world should just look at this copy, and then try to figure out which one was real.

Many, many things demanded an explanation, as he nearly burst out of the building and rushed into the Carrer Provença, and onward from there, as if he were deaf and blind, and he had not the slightest idea of where to begin, as he had not the slightest idea of where he was at that moment, nor was he even interested; his brain was throbbing so hard that he could not bear, he simply could not bear to deal with anything else, only this throbbing in his brain; at first he thought it was throbbing because he was slamming his heel down too hard and that was making his brain tremble inside his head, but then he walked more softly and with that nothing improved, there was only this throbbing, in general he was thoroughly unhinged, the chaos inside him was total and he was dizzy, so dizzy that he had to keep stopping; certainly the passersby thought he was drunk or that he was going to throw up, but no, he was neither drunk nor was he going to throw up, he was just under assault from this dizziness and this throbbing, and by the fact that at the same time he began to see various things: he saw himself running through the streets, avoiding people; he saw faces as they arose before him for an instant then disappeared; he saw the old man from the museum or whatever it was that he had just left, and he saw at the same time that middle-aged couple too, as they separated while still behind him, passed around him, and then, moving in front of him, took each other by the arm again; he saw the staircase too, as it spiraled upward, and he also saw how in the middle of the big painting, and to the right, the colors were somewhat faded; then there was the staircase again, but now it was winding downward, and the gold leaf on the pictures gleamed, but what disturbed him the very most was that in between all of these simultaneous pictures flashing again and again were the three angels, as they bent their heads to one side, or more precisely, as the middle one and the one on the right bent their heads toward the one on the left, who bowed his head toward them, then all three of the angels looked at him, but just for a second, because almost immediately they disappeared, only the colors remained, the luminous blue and crimson of their cloaks — of course not just any old luminous blue or any old crimson, if these were even blues or crimsons at all, he wasn’t even sure of that, and not even sure that it was even colors that he had seen, he wasn’t certain of anything at all, because they just flared up and then flashed away, but in such a way that the other pictures were flaring up and flashing away at the same time, with such speed in his head, and it was probably that which was making him reel and making everything inside him throb, but the very worst was that he could not stop, which meant that he wasn’t able to bring the entire thing to a halt, he wasn’t able to say to himself, well enough of that, it’s over now, stop, pull yourself together, and then he would stop and pull himself together, because it was precisely this he couldn’t manage, the suspension of this speed out there, because it was inside him as well, he had to run — possibly in such a way that he would not bump into people too much, a lot of people were coming this way and it took a while for him to get out of the city center — and he came out toward the north, to the wide and heavily trafficked boulevard called Diagonal, and well, after that the situation was already better, in addition he already knew this area, so he kept to this northern direction, the one that he had to choose to reach his accommodations, for here already there were fewer and fewer people coming in the opposite direction, and that was exactly what he wanted, for fewer and fewer people to be coming along, so that at last the heavens could have mercy on him and free him from them as well, and then he could already bear to slow down a little, indeed, when he realized that no one was coming after him — of course he knew all along that no one had been coming after him — still it was somehow important now, it had become important that no one was, in any event; when this became unequivocal, and he was able to slow down his steps completely, when he was already proceeding at a walking pace along the narrow streets — he couldn’t exactly say that on a day like today, Saturday, let there be no one outside, because there were people on the sidewalk or in the windows, or how could he not have seen here or there, where the little streets bulged wide, a children’s soccer team now and then, but still, he no longer felt the presence of that monstrous strength that had driven him until now, so that now he could pose to himself the question of what exactly had happened, why was he running to and fro like a madman, and how had he, of all people, got mixed up in this story with the horrendous building, why hadn’t he just left when he could have done so, why had he stayed, what did he even want from this exhibit, he had never before been to an exhibit in his life so why now, of all times, accordingly why and why and why; this had to be answered, he explained to himself, and he rapidly looked around, wondering if he’d been speaking aloud, but that was unlikely, as at least here the passersby did not stare at him, and so everything began to calm down, eventually even his brain slowly left off with the questioning, and with a few vulgar turns of phrase — that is to say fuck it, and really fuck it, and just fuck the whole fucking thing one more fucking time — he succeeded in gaining a psychological advantage in the face of another compulsion that drove him on, saying fine, if he was stopping too, or if he was even sitting down on an empty bench, then he should do so first and foremost to figure out what the hell had happened with him in the past hours, and why had he gone into that Perella, or whatever the hell it was called, and if he had gone inside why did he stay there, and why did he look at that picture, and why had there fallen upon him, with such force, what he had seen there, so that again just why and why and why, the only problem was that this advantage proved to be only momentarily effective, and he had stopped in vain, he cursed in vain, he sat on the empty bench in vain, namely this psychological advantage was all in vain, at the end it was not his more lucid self but instead the other that was triumphant, the one that wanted to find an explanation for why he had allowed himself to be swept into something of which he had not the slightest idea, and of which he never could anyway, I don’t even know what that was hanging on the wall, I don’t even know what building I was in, I — apart from restoration workshops — know the trowel, the mixing hod, the plane, because that didn’t matter now, it didn’t matter that there had been more than one restoration workshop in his life, just as it didn’t even count that he had not become what he was all at once, this nothing who went in with the metro every morning, then out with the metro every evening, it did not immediately start with that foul-smelling, damp, dark room which he had rented during the past year, and where he lived alone, it did not immediately begin with this, but rather it ended with this, this was the end already, he thought now on the empty bench and this thought suddenly quieted down his brain inside, whoopee, the end is here, he said the words to himself, and these five words at last stopped the throbbing in his brain, certainly this is the end, old man, he repeated again, and he looked around the square, or well it wasn’t even really a square, just a kind of forced widening of the street because one crummy house had been torn down among the other crummy houses, and there was just that much more extra space where he sat, and where a group of children were kicking a ball around, only now did he have a good look at them, one of whom moved fairly adroitly, he passed the ball well, it was evident at first that although he was the smallest among them, he was also the most intelligent, because not only did he skillfully dribble the ball, but it was plain that he understood what he was doing, while the others just kept running back and forth and shouted out obviously, I’m over here and the like, but that one, the little one, did not shout, one could tell that he took it seriously, indeed, now that he watched him more closely, his face remained surprisingly, even disconcertingly, serious at all times, as if something depended on whether he could stop the ball arching this way with his chest, or if he could make an accurate pass to the forward; he’s serious, he decided, even too serious, he now only watched the grubby youth, always, unceasingly, unflinchingly serious, that is to say the youth did not for a single moment take part in the common joy as did the others when he kicked the ball, maybe for him it wasn’t even joy but something else — and then at once his head was filled with a wracking pain, he quickly turned his glance away from the children, he didn’t want to see them, and already he wasn’t even there, he went on further in the narrow street, then again, just as the narrow street turned off to the left, he found himself suddenly facing . . . the three angels in the picture, the whole thing was before him in such detail as if it were real, which of course it was not, he stood there rooted to the ground and he looked at them like that, he looked at the miraculous faces, he looked at the angel sitting in the middle and the angel sitting on the left, and how their mantles were so dazzlingly blue, he looked at them for time immortal, then he stared into the gold, finally again at them, and he was disturbed to realize that they weren’t even looking at him; they weren’t looking at all at the person who was looking at them, or rather that, inside the museum or whatever it was, he had been seriously mistaken.

Everything went back to the definition of the Holy Trinity, practically the fate of all Eastern Christianity rested on this, indeed even Christianity itself rested upon the extraordinary concerns surrounding this fundamental question; as a rule, things don’t usually occur in this way, because as a rule the fundamental questions only crystallize later, only later is it usually clear what is being debated, why certain principles are being put forward, why the quarrels, the schisms, then the heaps of massacred bodies; the questions occur generally speaking later; but this was not the case of the Christian religion of love, as here the discussions had been taking place since the fourth century, and finally it was because of this that the theological schism, made official back in 1054, occurred, although there actually had been an Eastern and Western Church since the creation of the Eastern Roman Empire, there was Rome and Constantinople; and this Eastern Church, to speak of only that now, this Constantinople, was none too reassured, neither at the time, nor later on, when an ultimate decision was reached as to the nature of the Almighty, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and what there even was in this realm that surpassed the human, because they had to make up their minds — on every occasion, once and for all — six times; the problem was that human beings — that is the Fathers of the Church, the patriarchs, metropolitans, bishops, priests of the synod, in a word the local and universal synods, and so on, the great Saint Athanasios, Saint Gregory of Nazianos, Saint Basil the Great, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa — had to make a decision in a question that clearly surpassed not only their extraordinary talents but their human capacities, because when the time came to say what was the relation between the Lord, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit, everything came into it: and there were the subtle and heretical distinctions of the most outrageous versions, heresies so subtle that it is not easy to comprehend the large quantity of blood, symbolic or real, that was periodically shed due to one or another miniscule detail of the so-called theological question, that was shed, therefore, because of the teaching of the Holy Trinity: for there were those who argued for the Lord alone, and there were those, too, who acknowledged the uniqueness and primacy of Christ alone, then there were those who argued for the precedence of the Lord and Christ together, but there were finally those who advised for the equal standing of all three, that is of the Lord, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and this school of thought was finally victorious, together with that peculiar formation which became the central tenet of Christian belief: the single essence of the Father but in three forms, so that there followed afterward, for those who can even understand it, the so-called filioque controversy, i.e., as to whether the Holy Spirit originated only from the Father, or from the Son, and this split the Christian faith into two once and for all, and there arose the Orthodox world of belief — this colossal mysterious Byzantine Empire — which remained for a thousand years even after the great collapse of the West, where there reigned a life subordinated simultaneously to the desire for pomp and sensual hunger, and additionally, with equal justification, a life subordinated to a theologically driven faith; and where the essential, earth-shattering

attack on the entire Orthodox congregation following the Seventh Ecumenical Council no longer threatened this fundamental tenet of faith, which of course did not at the same time mean that the question was resolved, the question was not resolved; every decision concerning the Lord, as well as that of the relation between Him and the incarnation as Christ and, respectively, between Him and the Holy Spirit, remained in an unapproachable obscurity, or looking at it from the viewpoint of the later materialist heretics, on the terrain of a fairly indefensible logical failure, where only deference to authority and faith itself was of assistance, that is, as for the most profound saints of the Church, from St. John Chrysostom of the Golden Mouth to St. Sergius of Radonezh, the question of the nature of the Trinity never was problematic, it was and remained a problem only for the others, that is for the world, for all those who were not capable — since they were not capable of what the saints were — of seeing the embodiment of the Creator, of seeing the mystery of the Trinity, of not questioning but experiencing, experiencing for themselves and perceiving the extraordinary concentration of the created and the non-created world, the godly atelier and the supremacy — stunning, miraculous, inexpressible in words — of the strength of creation; allowing the decisions to be rendered upon them, through them, through their saintly beings, by the Church, that is the Holy Synod, as to what the tenet of faith was that could no longer be cast into doubt concerning bodily manifestation, concerning the mystery of the Trinity and its depiction, because it could be depicted, they concluded after some debate — a debate that did not forego destructive resolve — yes, they concluded that it could be depicted, yes, Christ the Son, the Embodiment of the Lord, it could be represented — as the order of the Ecumenical Council of One Hundred Articles conceived it — if Abraham had seen them beneath the oak-tree at Mamre, which indeed he had, then they could be represented, namely if Abraham saw Him in the depiction of the three angels, as was repeated by thousands and tens of thousands, from Athens to the Monastery of the Holy Trinity in Radonezh, then nothing could be said against the idea of the holy icon-painter depicting the Trinity, strictly on the basis of the prescription of the Council; and in the practical sense, on the basis of the descriptions of the monks of Podliniy, according to them, only Abraham, the most ancient of ancients, once, under Elonei Mamre, that is under the oak of Mamre, saw the three winged youths, sat them down at a table, and feasted them; Sarah’s future was discussed, then after a similarly interesting dialogue between Abraham and the Lord during His celebrated appearance as the Three Angels on the topic of Sodom and Gomorrah, at the end of it, there was, briefly, a promise, that namely if He, the Lord, should find ten innocent people there, pure in soul, then He would show mercy to Sodom and Gomorrah, although inasmuch as later on he does destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, the conclusion can be reached that the Lord did not find even ten innocent people pure in soul in this Sodom and Gomorrah, but enough about that, let us return to the point where after this memorable dialogue, everyone went about their own business, the Lord in some form or another — contradictions arise in the relevant traditions as to what this form was — He went on toward Sodom and Gomorrah; Abraham could have reflected for a long time on what he saw and whom he saw, and what had been said to him under the oak, well then, after all this, from this renowned encounter of Our Father with Abraham, from this meeting’s sacred Ordinance preserved namely in Moses 1:18, the precept of the Synod was established as such, after a good few hundred variations — in consequence of which, the divine grace descended upon Andrey Rublev, and his gentle hand and his humble soul, through the agency of his continuous prayer, and from the inspiring strength of the Unnamable Himself at the commission of Abbot Nikon of Radonezh, in memory of St. Sergius, it bore the title of “The Holy Trinity” and came into being, and was preserved, the extraordinary news of which, like a kind of storm of beauty, swept across the whole of Russia, so that Dionisy’s imagination burst into flame a generation later when a copy of the Rublev perfection was commissioned on behalf of a church now unknown to us, and Dionisy set to work, he and no other, because, although it cannot be authenticated that the author of the copy in question could only have been Dionisy, at the same time, the thought that it could have been anyone else: say, one of his followers or someone from the artel of Dionisy, is inconceivable — it is inauthenticable and impossible — for this painting, which turned up later in the Tretyakov Gallery via a path equally unknown and which, thanks to the auspices of a traveling exhibition, arrived in Martigny, Cannes, and then Barcelona, some five hundred years later, was in its essence such a perfect copy of the perfect original, any painter less talented than Dionisy could not have been capable of it, either in that period or any other; after Rublev a magnificent artist such as Dionisy had simply not turned up for a long time, so that it was only he, and he alone, with nonetheless extraordinary help, namely that the condition of the fulfillment of the commission was nothing else than Dionisy receiving assurance that he could inspect the Rublev original without being disturbed, so that Dionisy must have had to spend a very long time in the Church of the Trinity — in the monastery of St. Sergius in Radonezh — for he would need a very long time to draw near to the spirit of this master-work, the spirit of Rublev, and to draw near to the presence of that which the icon of the Trinity on the iconostasis, located in the first space to the right of the Royal Gate, reveals, inasmuch as not only was it necessary to take within a hair’s breadth the measure of the outline of the figures and all the items depicted in the icon, not only did he have to study the forms, the sketching, the placement, and understand the colors and the proportions, but he had to be able to pledge himself as well to the task, for he must have been aware, while in the midst of contemplating the icon, of the dangers inherent in the task: if word got out about someone, even about Dionisy himself — this celebrated icon-painter of the fifteenth century — that he was not worthy of the preparation of the copy of the Radonezh original, for surely Dionisy knew better than anyone else that if the soul did not feel what Rublev did in that time, then he himself would certainly end up in Hell, and the copy would come to nothing, because it would be just a lie, a deceit, a mystification, just an ineffectual and worthless piece of trash, which would then be placed in vain in the Sovereign Tier of the church’s iconostasis, in vain would it be placed there and worshipped, it would not help anyone and would only lull them into the delirium that they were being led somewhere.

He went to get the linden himself, and as a matter of fact, he really would have liked to complete the entire commission on his own, but the others in the artel — among them his son Feodosiy — were convinced that the master did not wish to work alone, for surely they could, just as they had been doing for years, help him out with this or that, finally — already this was somewhat typical of the era as a whole, and many such matters were similarly concluded out of a love of comfort — it was permitted, and so they allowed him to select for himself the linden wood best suited to the original Rublev; but already they did not allow him to squander his sacred gift on completing the planing, the joining, and the gluing of the icon board, or the formation of the two sponki, that is the two crossbars crafted from beech wood, whose function it was to hold the board together, as well as the hollowing out of the space for the two sponki, the so-called “sponki vrezniye vstrechniye,” they did not allow him to complete this work alone; there first came, accordingly, someone who sawed and planed and hollowed and fitted and glued and assembled the icon board and tautened the tightening bars, then someone came who completed the work pertaining to the sponki, then the polye was created to demarcate the border formed by the luzga — that is the border-area beveled inward — and the kovcheg — done by the one who was best at this — followed the direction of the luzga, already drawn; deepening the paintable surface, as it were framing it; because just as in the case of all other icons, the very first order of business was to ensure that the polye, the luzga, and the kovcheg were in good order, moreover in this particular case it was also mandatory for all three parts to correspond to a hair’s breadth to the original, that is to say the polye had to be in the same place and of the same extent, the luzga had to be beveled in the same way and at the same angle, and at last the kovcheg had to be as deep and as straight as related by the descriptions of the original in Radonezh, so that after this the priming-master of the artel could take up his work and with his assistants prepare for the canvas that would be glued onto the surface to be painted; the levkas — that is the diluted glutinous liquid — mixed with chalk dust, was applied, in this case, in exactly eight layers, to the icon board, and when finally the last layer of levkas had dried, and it had become as smooth and clean as it possibly could, then there came the znamenshchik, the composition master, who was one of the most important personages in the artel, and especially here in the artel of such a famous painter, for he was the one who, for instance, could now, upon the surface of the completely dried levkas, sketch in, following the outlines of the Radonezh drawing originating from the Master’s hand, with unerring assurance and fidelity, the three angels, infinitely gentle, with their enormous wings, gathered around the table; and behind them the outlines of the church, the tree, and the cliff, the table with the chalice and the platter filled up with veal; the entire artel stood behind his back with bated breath, as his instrument, the grafia, did not quiver even once in his hand; all of this, of course, from the assembly of the icon boards to the work of the znamenshchik proceeded self-evidently in such a way that it was not just the assistants and master of the artel who observed each other, but at each individual phase of the work the Master himself stood behind the backs of those who were working, and it remained so in the following phases up to the end, for this was not just any old work; the Master observed from behind to see if the paints, that is the lapis lazuli, the vermilion, and the rust and the malachite and the white, indeed, even the beaten egg-yolks corresponded exactly to that which had been chiseled into his memory as he stood immersed before the Radonezh original for all time; he stood there at the back, and he prayed, while first the lichnik and the dolichnik set to work, painting what was entrusted to them; the lichnik, in this case, exceptionally, just the arms and the legs instead of the face, the dolichnik, however the khitons and garments — and no matter, the Master governed every movement, practically guiding the hand of the lichnik and the dolichnik, so that it could be asserted with confidence that the Master himself had done everything from first to last, for it was evident that his assistants in the artel were obedient to his volition — namely, through the Master’s prayers, the volition of the Highest — until the famous copy reached the phase where there was no longer any intermediary assistance, where the Master could not entrust the task to another, where he himself had to take the brush, dip it into the paint-stained dish, and paint the faces, the mouths, the noses, and the eyes and, although according to the accustomed order of things as the last great phase of the painting, at this point, the appropriate master would have followed next in painting the outlines, he did not, as the Master insisted that he himself would lay down the outlines of the asisti and the dvizhki, but at that point he prayed much more intensely, he recited the Jesus prayer, for perhaps he was thinking that in this too he should trust in tradition, and one must believe that Andrej, at all times, but especially while working, had recited this Jesus prayer to himself, he could hardly do otherwise as he worked, not only that, he didn’t even stop praying, not taking his eyes off the icon for a second when he stepped aside for the assistants to put on the olifa, the transparent protective layer which, from this point on, had to protect all that had come into being so far, for it had come into being, said the people in the Master’s artel happily, their eyes sparkling, the copy of the Rublev icon is completed, here before us again is the Holy Trinity, and whoever was able to come from the neighboring monastery, they looked at the icon, and they couldn’t believe their eyes, because they were seeing the exact same thing, not a copy, and not an icon but the Holy Trinity in its own radiant beauty — the Master only stepped back from the workshop of the artel when the last layer of the olifa was being applied, and he stood before the completed icon, looking at it for a long time, then suddenly turned on his heel, and no one even saw him, in the time to follow, even cast the slightest of glances at the icon ever again; however, he had to have been there when the patron placed it in his own church, had to be there when the bishops consecrated it, had to stand there and listen as the bishops, after the opening prayer of the sanctification of the icon and the Sixty-Sixth Psalm, sang Our Lord, Our God, Who art praised and exalted in Thy Holy Trinity, hear our prayer, and send Thy blessing upon us, and may the icon be blessed and sanctified through the holy water, to venerate Thee, and bring salvation to Thy poor people — he heard this, he watched as the bishops consecrated the icon, he listened and he watched all of this, and he crossed himself and he said Amin, then immediately after that, Gospodiy pomiluy, and Gospodiy pomiluy, and Gospodiy, Gospodiy, Gospodiy pomiluy, but he was troubled, and he did not reply when later people went to him to express their recognition and wonderment, he was silent that day and he was silent for weeks on end, and every day he went to confession, finally completely withdrawing from life, and from that point on whoever, whether from curiosity or ignorance, dared to speak in his presence of how splendidly he had painted Rublev’s Holy Trinity either risked having Dionisy gape at him in incomprehension, questioningly like someone who does not understand what is being talked about, or — and this was principally before his death, at the time when he painted the Blagoveshchenskaya in Moscow — the celebrated icon-painter of his age would suddenly turn pale, his face distorted, and with enraged eyes would scream inchoately at the top of his lungs at his understandably terror-stricken interlocutor — except if it was his son who was asking, for until the very last moment he always forgave him for everything.

Sundays were like a monster that settled upon a person and wouldn’t let go, just chewing and digesting, biting, tearing, because Sunday did not want either to begin, nor to go on, nor to come to an end, it was always like that with him, he detested Sundays, much, but so much more than any other day of the week; all of the other days of the week contained something that slightly allayed the pressure, if only for a few minutes, of how intolerable it all was, but Sunday had never allowed this pressure to relent, that is how it was here, too; in vain had he come here to this country of Spain, in vain was this Barcelona different from that Budapest, in vain was everything here different, because in reality nothing was different, Sunday here settled upon his soul with exactly the same horrible force; it just didn’t want to start, it didn’t want to continue, it didn’t want to end; he sat in the Centro de Atención Integral, in the homeless shelter of the city’s social facility at Avenida Meridiana no. 197, which he had happened upon once by accident still at the very beginning when having temporarily despaired of finding any work here, he had set off on the so-called Diagonal and just kept on going and kept on going, he had no idea for how long, but at least for one hour, because he wanted to walk this temporary despair out of himself, and at one point he was just there in front of a building on the Avenida Meridiana, he saw that figures similar to himself were going inside, so, well, he went inside too; no one asked him any questions, he didn’t even say anything, they pointed at a bed among many other beds, and since then he had spent the nights here, and now here he sat, on the edge of the bed, and it being Sunday, he had to spend the entire day here, because where could he go on a Sunday, especially after everything that had happened to him yesterday between the Passeig de Gràcia and the Carrer Provença; he could remain alone, remain on the bed, take the plate of food dished out at noontime, and be happy that it was already noon, only that he couldn’t even bear to be happy about that, he was so nervous and chiefly not knowing why he was so nervous made him even more nervous, his legs kept moving; he jumped up, he could not bear to be still, he wasn’t interested in the others, everyone was preoccupied with themselves, generally they were lying on their beds and asleep, or they made it look like they were sleeping, and he tried to think about the infernal stench that hung in the air so that he wouldn’t have to think about how time was not passing; quite high up, on the wall facing him, a large clock had been affixed, and he would have been very happy to beat it down with something and stomp it apart into tiny pieces, down to the tiniest screw, but it was placed very high and he didn’t want any commotion; but he could not bear it anymore, so, well, he tried to concentrate on the stink, and not pay attention to the time which he suddenly realized was not passing — his legs, however, unfortunately kept moving back and forth like a reel — it was still twenty minutes after twelve, my god, what was he going to do here, he could not go outside into the immediate neighborhood, someone had explained this to him at the beginning, gesticulating that if he went outside, all around there was La Mina, some kind of living hell where they would murder him, so don’t go out there, La Mina, they repeated it several times over, si, he said in reply to this and did not go out into the immediate neighborhood, he solely used the dreadfully long street called Diagonal and that alone, this always took him into the city center, but he was too tired now, so tired that he couldn’t even think that if he could head in there again, the day would pass more quickly, just the mere thought of the Diagonal made him feel ill, he had gone up and down the length of it so many times, it was so, so long that he too, like the others, remained on his bed; there was a TV, again stuck up somewhere high on the wall, but it didn’t work, there was nothing else to do but to wait for time to pass on the clock-face, for a while he watched the hands of the clock, then he turned over on his left side and closed his eyes, and tried to sleep a little, but he couldn’t, because when he closed his eyes the three enormous angels appeared, he did not want to see them, never again, although to his misfortune they kept coming back, either because — as just a moment ago — he’d closed his eyes, or because — as now — he opened them; so he got up from the bed, which was itself a particularly awful bed, sinking down in the middle, with some kind of hard wire mesh, or whatever it was below, pressing into his back or his side so that even at night he had to keep getting up again and again to try to do something about it, but in vain, because when he beat at the mattress it only relieved the situation momentarily, the whole thing immediately caved in again under the weight of his body, and there was that hard iron grating, or whatever it was; now, too, that he had gotten up and looked back at it, the whole thing had sunk in again in the middle; he looked back, and he went out to where you could smoke a cigarette, because it was forbidden inside, although he himself did not smoke but, he thought, at least there it’s somewhere else than where he was before, only that even this didn’t solve anything, because from here he saw the clock inside, in a strange way this clock could be seen from anywhere, there was no escape, it had to be seen, to be seen at all times and by everyone for whom this place was a temporary shelter, to see that time was passing, that it was truly passing, it was passing very slowly; one thing was sure, whoever turned up here was obligated to have be continually preoccupied with time, and especially right now, on Sunday, he thought bitterly, and he went back to his bed, and lay down again on the caved-in mattress and watched the old man lying next to him who was pulling something from underneath the mattress, he pulled out something from there wrapped in newspapers and he slowly unwrapped it, and when he took a long-bladed knife out of the wrapping, he looked up and noticed that someone was watching him, namely that he was being watched from the neighboring bed; then he held it up, and there was a kind of pride in him as he showed it to him, in any case he said cuchillo, and motioned with his hand that by this he meant the knife, then when he saw that the other one didn’t even blink an eye, he showed it to him again, and he said by way of explanation, cuchillo jamonero, but nothing; he didn’t understand, he let the old man pack the whole thing with an offended expression, but then suddenly he sat up on the bed, turned to the old man, and signaled with his head and hands to repeat the word, please, those two words, cuchillo, cuchillo jamonero — he had the old man repeat it again and again until he had it down, then he signaled to him that he would like it if the old man showed him the knife once again; the old man cheered up, took the package out again, and unwrapped it, and clearly kept saying it’s beautiful, because somehow he had an expression like that on his face; he in the meantime took it into his hands, turned it over, and then gave it back, and tried to make the old man understand that he would now like to know where he had bought it, but the old man misunderstood the question and protested vehemently, quickly wrapped it up and shoved it under the mattress, signaling that no, it was not for sale, at which point he could do little else but try to say without words that he only wanted to know where he had got it from, the old man looked at him, trying to figure out what the hell this one wanted, for he didn’t even know how to talk, when suddenly his face lit up and he asked ferreteria? of course he had no idea what this ferreteria was, but he replied si, at which point the old man dug out a scrap of paper and wrote something on it with pencil, and this is what was on the paper:

CALLE RAFAEL CASANOVAS 1

he looked at the clumsy letters, then with a movement of his head thanked him, and signaled that he would like to take the piece of paper, and the old man nodded in approval and wanted even to reach across to help him stuff the paper into the upper pocket of his shirt, but already for someone to touch him was too much for him, it was not possible to touch him, he had never been able to withstand that, during his entire life he had had a dread of being touched by anyone, even now no one could touch him, especially this old man with his putrid filthy hand; quickly he withdrew from him, just to make sure he wouldn’t consider getting carried away like this, he turned his back to him and lay like that for a few minutes, until he was certain that his neighbor understood that he didn’t want to talk to him anymore, nothing at all, as for him he had wrapped up, he had concluded the friend-making part, he lay motionless, closed his eyes again, and again the angels came to him above, then he opened his eyes, got up, went into the smoking room, stood around there for a while, then strolled into the toilets, sat there for a good long time; this was one place where he felt good, just like all the others there, because here it was possible to latch the door shut, a person could be alone, he could be alone now, no one saw him, he saw no one, but then it just bored him, because just sitting and sitting here above all the shit — because as it happened the toilet in the one free stall he had found was filled with shit — why didn’t it go down, he even pulled the cord several times to no result, before he sat down and after a while he just got bored sick, and he went back into the large room, he lay down, he looked for a while at the dead eye of the TV up above, then at the second hand of the clock, then at the TV again, then at the clock again, so that the day finally passed in this way; he could not remain in control of his legs, his muscles were completely exhausted because his two legs kept moving — particularly the left one, it beat with tiny steps into the air if he lay down — or if he was walking on the floor or the sidewalk, or if he stood; he was dead tired by evening, and he thought at last he would sleep unbrokenly, but of course, just as before, even now nothing more was granted to him than a half-hour now and then, as the others snored, cleared their throats, and made rattling noises, continually causing him to awaken with a start, on top of that the angels too kept coming, then one evening a swarm of mosquitoes: if he pulled the blanket over his head to keep them away, he was too hot, then, well, he had to get up in the large half-lit hall and stumble out to the toilet to urinate, then stumble back again, and the whole thing started over again from the beginning, one half-hour of sleep, then the angels and the swarming mosquitoes and the snoring, in this way the hour finally came when he saw the first signs that dawn was breaking, so that by the time there was daylight he had already washed his face, largely tidied up his clothes and his shoes, and was outside of the building already, he did not wait for the morning tea, he was much too exhausted for that, and he couldn’t take it anymore; he went along the street but not, this time, toward the Diagonal, but in the opposite direction, just like that, backward, so he could find someone who could give him directions, and at first he couldn’t find anyone, the streets here were very empty, but then someone was coming from the opposite direction, he showed them the paper first, then to many other people, until he got to the Calle Rafael Casanovas, then it was still too early, everything was closed, he guessed fairly confidently which building it was that he was looking for, it bore the sign Servicio Estación; that’s it, he thought, that could be it, and he began to pace up and down in front of it until a person came, pulled up the sliding gate on the entrance and opened up the shop, he was surly and rumpled, and he stared at him with distrust, indeed, when after a while he went into the shop after him, he looked at him with an expression that seemed to say it would be better if he just cleared out of here, but he didn’t clear out, he stayed and went over to him, took out the fifty euros — actually, he had spent four last night on a sandwich and something to drink, he showed the money now, then creased it into his hand, and with this hand he leaned onto the counter, bearing down on it with all of his weight, finally leaning forward slightly, toward the shopkeeper, and in a soft voice said just this much: cuchillo, understand? cuchillo jamonero, and he added for the last time, lest there be no doubt as to what he wanted: a knife, old man, a very sharp knife is what I want.