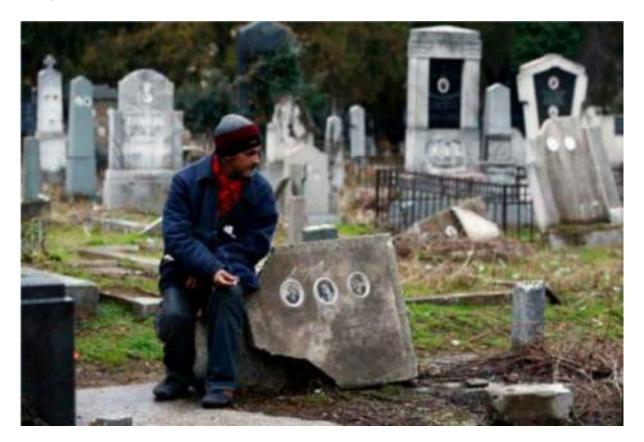# BORN DEAD

Pashka woke up heavily and reluctantly. The sparrows chirped, rustled by fallen leaves. Sunny beams, penetrating through the branches of the bushes and trees, spread over his face and eyes. Their bright rays were visible even through closed eyelids, and didn't let him sleep longer. Pashka turned his head and the rays began to fall on the back of his skull. That's better. He rubbed his eyes and face, but still didn't want to wake up. Fresh air was bracing and at the same time it was reminding him that autumn came into its own right, and he could not just sleep like that on a bench anymore.

In the distance, music was playing. Pashka leaned his hands on the wooden beams of the bench on which he lay and sat up. "Where am I?" A dumb question popped into his brain and made him open his eyes. Such an awakening was not Migalkin's first: he looked around and saw crosses, gravestones, and grave mounds scattered around. Obviously, he was at the cemetery.

"Again…why am I so attracted to this place?" Pashka scratched his head and fumbled in his pockets. They were empty. Terminated music once again pierced his organism with a rusty creak: when somebody is burying someone who has died, that means they can give him some vodka. He got up and began slowly

hobbling in the direction from where the sounds of music were heard. A narrow footpath twisted among the graves, looping, losing, and again emerging through and between the fences. The look involuntarily saw monuments, photographs, inscriptions.

Migalkin looked closely and was stunned. "Chumakov Grigory Efimovich…was born in 1940…died in 2003…lived for 30 years…" Pashka got lost in his thoughts. "If 1940 is deducted from 2003, it will be 63, not 30…error, probably." He glanced at the nearby grave. "Pestrukhina Anna Fatyanovna…born in 1938…died in 1998…lived for 22 years…also an error?" But at the next grave, Migalkin discovered the same mismatch, and the next…and the next…dazed, shaking his head, he rushed to the side where he heard the sounds of the funeral march, but he did not make a dozen steps before he bumped into the old man, who had revealed himself as if from under the ground.

"Where are you running, cutie?" the old man, smiling, asked Pashka. Having seen in the hands of a stranger a shovel, a broom, and a rope with a weird hook on the end, Migalkin realized that he was dealing with a caretaker of the cemetery.

"Yes, that's something I do not understand…" Pashka wheezed. "Here…the inscriptions on the graves…"

"What inscriptions, darling?" the old man's voice rattled in response.

"Do not coincide…the dates do not match…was born, died, but when recounting we get a different result…"

"Ha ha," grinned the old man. "Here are buried those who did not simply live, but those who have lived for the benefit of the people, for the all-folk. The rest of the years do not count. Here, for example," and he waved his hand to the side, where a huge crypt towered above them, "Bandit Panteleyev. Lenka—so to speak, the paramedic of our society—Robin Hood of the 20th century…he often took away from the rich people their wealth and distributed it to the poor…true, not to all people…only to his friends…but they also benefited from this…bandits are also part of our citizens."

Pashka glanced in the direction of the monument and was stupefied, unable to contain his surprise: "Lionka? Was born in 1902, killed in 1923, and still lives?" Pashka jabbed his finger at the clearly visible inscription.

"Yes! He lives…" the servant answered modestly. "So far, in the memory of the people."

"And do you have many such dead persons?" sighed Migalkin.

"No, not much. But there is, here," and he waved his hand in the other side, "General Pronin."

Major Pronin? thought Pashka.

"No, General!" As if he was reading Pashka's thoughts, the old man cut him off. "He was a major in his youth. Nimble, straight, merciless. He strived, and became a general of the NKVD.*"

On the pedestal, which exceeded all conceivable and unimaginable dimensions, like a VDNKh** worker with a big hammer but without a collective farmer-woman, stood a stone giant dressed in the NKVD uniform. His nickel-plated Mauser shined down in his raised hand, and the bodies of defeated enemies was thrown down near his legs, dressed in high, shiny chrome boots.

"We change our uniforms every year. She suffers from the bad weather," whispered the old man in a completely informal, almost friendly way into the ear of Migalkin.

But Pashka was struck by another observation: on Pronin's pedestal, there was no date of death at all!

"Myth! Epic hero," old man explained clarifyingly. "Such people do not die at all…"

Pashka had a thought about himself. "I lived for half a century, years of life were left behind…how many years will they give to me? What have I accomplished? What benefit did I bring? Graduated from school with a silver medal…"

"The school does not count." Again, as if reading Pashka's thoughts, the old man cut him off. "You got knowledge for yourself."

"The college? Military college?" Migalkin asked aloud. "With honors…"

"Was learning to kill people 'excelling?' Children, woman, old people murdered or imprisoned by you in a perfect way? What is the use of it?" The

cemetery janitor bared his rotten teeth in a smile. "Want to get into America: go to the rocket school?!"

"Homeland! I defended the homeland!" shouted Pashka. "Afghanistan! The military rank was awarded to me ahead of time! Two medals!"

"Protected your homeland? And who attacked it?" screamed the man. "Hungary? Czech Republic or Slovakia? Afghanistan? Two medals…for what? In Afghanistan, how many local people did you murder? So who was you supposed to defend? From whom?!"

Pashka's legs let him down and he flopped down on the bench beside him.

"Why did they fire you? And for what reason?" the yardman totally devastated Migalkin. "For a drunken brawl! Because of the discredit!"

Heavy sobbing shook Pashka's crooked back.

"Now? Now…" The cemetery caretaker compassionately patted him by the shoulder. "You have applied for benefits, you are unemployed…in fact, you sit on the neck of the state. You're not working! What is the benefit from you to the people? What are you doing? You drink vodka and visit promiscuous women…you parasitize, so to speak, on the bodies and souls of Russians, you drink our blood…"

The old man pushed Migalkin in the breast with a broom. Pashka felt the last bit of energy leaving his body and, suffering from a hangover and swinging, he fell down to the legs of the janitor.

"Okay, poor thing, do not worry," said the caretaker, leaning over to Migalkin and fastening the hook to the collar of his jacket.

Migalkin could no longer resist, and, as if from outside his body, he was watching what was happening. The old man dragged Pashka to a remote corner of the cemetery. Near the rusty fence, amidst the old graves, among the bushes of ambrosia, Pashka saw a new empty pit.

He tried to snap off a hook, moved his legs, but his strength had completely abandoned him, and the old man, with a malicious smile, crossed with his finger—"Come on! Do not be naughty…"—and, having unhooked the hook himself, without any effort, pushed Pashka down into the grave.

Through the rustle of the sepulchral soil, covering him, Migalkin heard: "Do not worry…here we bury the ones like you. We are here to bury everyone…and I will write about you…you were born dead…"

Tale by Serge Clause, Voronezh, may 2017

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