

Books by Anna Starobinets translated into English:

An Awkward Age

The Living

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AD VERBUM

ANNA STAROBINETS

THE ICARUS GLAND

AND OTHER STORIES
OF METAMORPHOSIS

Translated by James Rann

SKYSCRAPER



THE ICARUS GLAND

It started with trivial little things. He would get held up at work, often until late, and however much you called him, you'd get 'number not in service,' even though, supposedly, he didn't take the metro. And at home, in the evenings – not every day, but still quite often – he would take his phone off into the far room or the bathroom and shut the door tight “so that Bunny doesn't get in the way when I'm on a work call”. But Bunny had long since grown up and didn't get in the way of phone calls. He didn't get in the way at all. He sat in his room, at the computer, in fluffy headphones; he was thirteen... Time was, Bunny would always be interrupting, and wouldn't let you make a phone call or watch TV; he would charge into the bedroom at seven in the morning – he was cheerful and clingy, and constantly wanted them to go into his room and look at something entirely ordinary which for some reason he suddenly found thrilling. “Look at what I've done with my cosmonaut,” “Look at my tigers hiding round the corner,” “Look at me draw this yellow sun,” “Look,” “Look”... When they were busy or didn't want to go and look, or just ignored him for his own good, Bunny would get anxious and start to jump up and down on the spot. That's why they gave him the name Bunny. Now he didn't care whether they came and looked, he didn't jump up and down any more and he didn't tell them to come to his room, but the nickname still remained, as a reminder of everything they hadn't seen and never would...

“Don't bring Bunny into this,” she said once, when he came out of the bathroom holding his phone. “What's Bunny got to do with it? You were clearly hiding from me in there.”

In reply she expected a denial, irritation, for him to make a face, say something about her being paranoid; she wasn't being serious, she just said it, as a warm-up, more in the sense that he was neglecting his son, and neglecting her, that he was being distant basically – but he suddenly started blushing, like a child – first his ears, then his cheeks and his forehead. And only then did it come – the denial, the irritation, the look. She got scared.

When he had fallen asleep, she went on *socio* and wrote in the search bar, "I think my husband is cheating on me".

Other people had it exactly the same. The same "symptoms", the same fears and suspicions. And for some it was much worse: "I found a text from my husband's lover on his mobile", "I found a photo of a naked girl in his inbox", "I found condoms in his pocket." She felt better. Calmer somehow. She was not alone, and they'd deal with their shared problem together.

Plus, there was no proof yet that she had a problem.

... She read the advice of a psychologist. "If you think that your husband is cheating, don't be afraid of discussing this issue with him. You should speak calmly, with no hysterics, shouting or ultimatums, even if your worst suspicions are confirmed. Hysterics will only scare off your Man and drive him into the arms of his lover. Be smart. Don't get mad at him, be sympathetic. Infidelity is a sort of illness, but, fortunately, it's curable."

She didn't like this advice, it missed the point. After all, it's not a question of how to behave when "your suspicions are confirmed". It's a question of how to extract the truth from him. She entered another search: "How do you know if your husband is cheating?"

Immediately a *socio*-test popped up: "Is your husband cheating?" Only ten questions. In a fancy pink font. She answered all the questions quickly, with the exception of numbers five, seven and ten:

1. How old are you?

- a) under 30 b) 30 to 40 c) over 40

2. How old is he?

- a) under 35 b) 35-45 c) over 45

3. Has he had the operation?

- a) yes b) no

4. Do you have sex...

- a) more than once a week b) between once a week and once

every 2 weeks

c) less than once a week

5. Does he show you signs of affection?

- a) yes b) no

6. Do you have children together?

- a) yes b) no

7. Does he spend time with the children?

(Skip this question if you don't have children)

- a) yes b) no

8. Does he often work late?

- a) yes b) no

9. Does he spend weekends with the family?

- a) always b) not always

10. Are you an attractive woman?

- a) yes b) no

Numbers five, seven and ten prompted doubts. Does he show signs of affection – what are you supposed to understand by that? Meaning, does he buy her flowers? Well, for her birthday at least. Does he help her on with her coat? Yes, of course, he's well brought up. Nice surprises, perfume, jewellery, cinema tickets? No, none of that... Although at the weekend he always brings her coffee in bed. With a little sandwich – he makes these delicious little sandwiches... It's nice. So, signs of affection – yes. But as for the others... Does he spend time with the children? That's not the right question. *You* try and spend time with Bunny. He's an independent, self-sufficient sort of Bunny. He's got his computer, his *socio*-games, an enormous friend-feed, he keeps himself occupied. If the question were "does he love" him, "does he take care" of him – then yes. Definitely. He really loves the boy. He was even on the school's parents committee, but then they suspended him... Because when it was arranged for all the boys in the class to go for the routine operation and he had to sign the permission form – just a formality – he refused and Bunny didn't go to the clinic. One mother, the most active on the committee, said that they were irresponsible egotists. Subjecting a child to risk because of some crazy ideas of theirs, or, perhaps, just because they were too tight, even for

something as important as this. But money has got nothing to do with it! She knew: he didn't let Bunny go to the clinic because he was afraid. There was a minimal risk – a few tenths of a percent – that something might go wrong. All those stories about teenagers that afterwards *sleep all the time*. He didn't want that. He said: "I don't need a stuffed Bunny." At the end of the day, Bunny is pretty placid and mostly sits at home, all his friends are on *socio* night and day. So they weren't taking such a risk... So, basically, **yes**, then: he does spend time with his son.

She didn't like the last question at all. Is she attractive... from whose point of bloody view? Angry, she whacked the pink "**yes**" with the mouse. But as she did, she thought about the wrinkle – the vertical one, on the bridge of her nose. The very obvious one. But if she pumped it full of botox, it might get even worse, make her face look all wooden.

And the grey hairs at her temples. Every month she dyes the roots that have grown out with a Japanese dye, but he *knows*. Stupidly, she'd told him herself. If she hadn't mentioned it, he wouldn't have noticed.

The outcome of the test depressed her: "There is a chance that your husband really is cheating. Maybe he's having a midlife crisis. Nonetheless, you have a good chance of getting the upper hand on your rival and saving your marriage. Elective surgery is almost sure to solve all your problems."

She was rereading her result for a third time when she heard a noise. The quiet sob of his mobile phone. He'd got a text. At two in the morning.

Something shifted painfully inside her – it was as if someone had pulled sharply on a thread and the ball of ice tied to that thread had leapt from her stomach into her throat and back again.

She had extracted the phone from under his pillow an hour ago. Just in case. She'd taken a look at the inbox and the sent folder. She hadn't found anything suspicious. But now there was something there.

It's the phone company, she told herself. Just the phone company. Telling him he's run out of credit...

It wasn't the phone company. One new message from "Dovey".

Dovey? What on earth... There's a Bunny and now there's a Dovey... Maybe it's Bunny's teacher?

She poked at the hot buttons with stiff fingers. Open message.

"Are you asleep?" That's all. Just three words. And a question mark.

She wrote back: "No."

Delivered.

"What about her?"

The ball of ice jumped up again inside her and got stuck in her throat. It

was entirely obvious. Entirely obvious. But for some reason she wrote back again. "She is asleep." To be certain – the words went round in her head. To be almost certain, to be absolutely, definitely certain...

"Call me?" Dovey said. "I miss you."

"Bitch," she wrote.

No hysterics?

No accusations?

...It didn't work. She went into the bedroom, turned on the light and chucked the phone right in his face. He woke up, shaggy-haired and puffy-faced, ridiculous, like in a French comedy. He shielded himself from the light and from her. For some reason he covered his stomach with the duvet.

"Why Dovey?!" she screeched. "Why Dovey, why?!"

For some reason that seemed like the most important question. It was.

"Because... it's like, sort of... love. Lovey-dovey, you see..."

"I see. You're screwing her. You're screwing a bird."

The ball of ice, forcing back the sides of her throat, slid back down, and she, finally, started crying. He, meanwhile, pulled on his pants and trousers. With his back to her. As if he were shy. As if he had something there she hadn't seen before.

She said: Get out! He obediently started getting dressed.

He was already in the corridor when she caught up and grabbed hold of his jacket; he stayed.

No hysterics, she kept repeating to herself, no hysterics, no shouting, no ultimatums. They sat down in the kitchen, she even poured him some tea, as if everything were fine, they talked, she kept herself under control, asking calmly: when did it start? how often? how serious is it? So, do you really love her? ...and me? me? what about me?

He answered:

"I love you too. In my own way."

'In my own way.' She knew him too well. A gentle sort. He just couldn't say 'no' to people.

"In your own way?" she asked hoarsely.

And then suddenly she flung – good reactions, he ducked – Bunny's blue mug. With the tea still in it, or whatever was in there. Broken shards flew all over the kitchen, sludgy brown liquid stained the wall with enigmatic Rorschach tests.

...Trite, readymade phrases, not her own, but tacky, from off the TV, crawled on to her tongue, like ants emerging from a rotten overturned tree-stump. You've ruined my whole life... All the years I've given you... I want

that time back...

"Quiet... the boy," he said, sounding hunted.

Standing in the kitchen door was a sleepy Bunny. Barefoot. In just a T-shirt. Another batch of ants came pouring out. She didn't want them to, but they crept out all by themselves:

"You should have thought about the boy back then, you old lech. When you went and got yourself *that girl!*"

"Dad, are you..." Bunny said in a deep voice, before finishing in a childish squeak, "...leaving us?"

"His voice is breaking," she thought detachedly, but out loud she said:

"Well, come on then. Answer your son, *Dad.*"

"Don't you dare..." — he whispered with white lips — "...bring him into this."

He jumped up, went into the corridor and started pulling on his jacket again; in silence, with shaking hands, he zipped it up, taking a long time, much longer than necessary.

She shouted:

"If you leave, don't come back."

And she shouted other things too.

And Bunny said:

"Why do we need him if he doesn't want to be with us."

Then she went to her bedroom to cry, while he talked to Bunny about something, standing in the doorway. Then he went. To *that girl* of his. To *her*. Where else could he be going at five in the morning? But he didn't take any of his things, just his phone and wallet.

She sent him a text: "You have to choose — her or us." There was no reply. Then she wrote again: "You will never get to see Bunny again." A reply came: "Julia, that is blackmail." Swallowing her snively tears, she typed: "What else can I do with you, you bastard?"



In the morning her mother rang, her faultless vulture instincts having sensed this fresh pain.

"What's happened? There's something up with your voice."

"Everything's fine," Julia said. Her mother didn't give in. She kept circling around, insisting, suggesting, pecking away, tightening her circles — until she hit the sore spot.

"It's Igor, isn't it?" She nonchalantly buried her beak in Julia's wound.

"Found himself a little dolly bird, has he?"

Weariness swelled up in her, she didn't have the strength to resist, and she told her everything.

"Now you've gone and done it," her mother said contentedly. "Well, if you'd treated me with respect..."

"What has this got to do with you?" Julia moaned. "My God, what on earth has this got to do with you?!"

"Because you should listen to your mother. And your mother told you that it's dangerous if they don't have the operation. And what's happened now? You and your 'personal freedoms' have really gone and done it. Where's that free person of yours gone gallivanting off to now? Now look at Arkady Germanovich..."

...Arkady Germanovich, Julia's step-father, was no longer young, and somewhat worn, with stomach ulcers, when her mother inherited him, but he had been wonderfully operated on. He and her mother had worked hard to build a three-room nest in a residential area, and deep down he wasn't a bad guy, but Julia didn't like him because he made stupid jokes and his breath smelled rotten.

"...and you'd have lived together happy as you like... but now you'll rue the day you didn't listen to your mother in time... you have to do the right thing... look after the boy... before it's too late... what if something happens... you're hurting your son... mark my words... sort it out ASAP... don't put it off... I know a wonderful doctor... a real genius..."

Julia hung up.

It was Saturday. Not a peep from him. She'd tried to call — not in service, her texts didn't get through. She spent the whole day as if she were in a murky fish tank. She didn't give Bunny anything to eat, so he clattered away with something in the kitchen himself. She sat on *socio*. She read about unfaithful husbands, about divorce and about the gland. She registered herself on the glandtidings.org forum, sketched out the situation and asked for advice. The people on the forum proved responsive — they threw together heaps of helpful links, and advised her, to a woman, to 'get it cut out asap'.

Julia-Julia: but he's left!! — she wrote in despair.

k1ss3s: hell b back wherez he gunna go

nicksnum: you ve got to think positive anyway you ve got a kid

fairyy33: definatly if theres a little l they always come back!

happy_goat: ive pmed u the number of a clinic. even if he dont come back

ⓈⓈ go along neway and take a look cos ule lern sumthin

He came that evening. Bunny didn't say hello and slammed his bedroom door. Igor smelled of tobacco and spirits, and of some strange, affectionate bitch. She wanted to hold him, hold him long and tight, to press the damp armpits of his shirt against him, and her hair and her mouth, to drown out this abnormal smell and mark him with her own scent, the smell of home.

Of course, she didn't touch him. She asked him tiredly:

"Why are you here?"

He said:

"Because I've chosen."

"Who?" she asked, already anticipating, already celebrating.

"You and Bunny," he said, like a schoolboy answering a question in class.

He was sick all evening: he had drunk too much and mixed his drinks; Bunny came over and asked in a wavering voice, how you doing, Dad?; she asked too and scratched on the door to offer to help. At the same time, automatically, she listened in to check whether he was on the phone.

When he felt better and Bunny had turned out his light, they sat in the kitchen to talk. He begged for forgiveness. He said that the family meant everything to him. Promised that he wouldn't cheat.

She listened with a special "bored" face. Then she said:

"I don't believe you."

"Why not?"

"Yesterday you said you loved someone else."

"I'll get over it eventually."

She was furious. That was the wrong answer.

"It's nothing serious," he corrected himself obediently. "I love you. You and Bunny."

She sat on his lap.

They sat there for a long time, like before, as they had long ago. She said:

"I just have one condition."



"...The operation? What a load of rubbish! I don't need surgery. I'm not a little boy. I'll decide for myself. And it is my decision, I think. Just stop it would you, I'm not going to stray! Not in a year's time either. I am in control of myself. Don't try and twist things. No, I am not torn! No, I haven't called

her. But I know that I haven't. Go on then, please, you can look on my phone. I haven't deleted anything. I never delete anything! Go snooping through my email if you like. It's a normal word. I haven't deleted anything. We're not in contact. No. I'm not hiding anything. What's the point of all this?! Julia, darling, what's the point of this operation? I'm here, I'm home. Julia, I'm with you even *without* it. I don't understand. No, I really don't understand. 'To be on the safe side'?! Do you even know how dangerous it is? At my age... Are you willing to put me at risk?! Harmless? Where does it say that? On *socio*?! You go back on that *socio* of yours! And what if it says on there that I should jump out the window? No, I don't want to take a look...!"

She made him read an article on Glandtidings. A very smart, sensible article, written, incidentally, by an expert. They read it together: he snorted indignantly; she felt almost normal.

She'll persuade him. She'll make him. Blackmail, tears – it doesn't matter, it's all for the best, for Bunny, for the family, for him.

Everything will work out.

He will atone for his sins.

She will forgive and forget.

The main thing is to find a good clinic.

www.glandtidings.net

Removal of the Icarus Gland: Myths and Realities

The Icarus gland is an endocrine gland present in humans and some animals. In humans the Icarus gland is small in size (not more than 2cm across) and located near the solar plexus. It is a *vestigial organ*. In women the gland is practically atrophied, with the remaining fragments having fused to the upper *mesenteric lymph node* and the nerves leading from it. In men the gland is still preserved as an independent organ. This gland begins producing *hormones* in boys aged 11-12 and continues to do so until 60-65 years. The hormones made by the Icarus gland do not play a role in metabolism or help important organs to function. But the secretions of the Icarus gland do often have a negative effect on men's *psychological make-up* and *temperament*. Doctors recommend that all males have this organ removed. A *routine operation* to remove the glands can be carried out at both state and private clinics.

At our clinic the operation is inexpensive and carried out by qualified doctors.

Unfortunately the general population is badly informed about the operation and idle speculation often leads people to put off a visit to the clinic until the situation becomes critical. To that end, we would like to list some of the basic facts about the operation.

OK. Fact No. 1

In animals the Icarus gland performs important functions. A release of the hormone produced by the gland into the blood of a predator (wolves, vixens, tigers etc.) triggers the so-called *stalking instinct*, which helps them track and pursue their victims and also causes a specific *blood thirst* immediately before an attack.

It has been recorded that in migratory birds the highest concentrations of hormone are observed during seasonal migrations: evidence suggests that the gland helps birds keep their bearings in the air when flying across large bodies of water or during the hours of darkness.

A gland similar to the Icarus gland is found in the majority of insects that go through full cycles of transformation (for instance, *neuroptera*) - it helps them to go through *metamorphosis*.

Fact No. 2

In humans the Icarus gland is completely USELESS. Think about it: humans do not need to hunt prey and then tear it apart with their teeth and claws, humans don't fly over the sea at night and they don't pupate ☺

Fact No. 3

In humans a functioning Icarus gland is DANGEROUS. In teenagers the hormone that it produces can cause: aggressive outbursts, surges in adrenalin, unmotivated predisposition to risk, highly emotional and suicidal moods and various other psychological disturbances. In adult males - predisposition to weapon-use, risk-taking, vagrancy, drug dependency and marital infidelity. In unoperated men aged 35-40 a specific "midlife crisis" is frequently observed.

Fact No. 4

In many countries - for example, in the EU - removal of the Icarus gland is a compulsory operation undergone by all males.

Fact No. 5

In this country the operation is voluntary and is performed on the basis of a declaration (minors require the written consent of both parents). However, it should be noted, there are significant limits to the career opportunities open to unoperated males. A man with a functioning Icarus gland can never become a politician, doctor, teacher, or

law-enforcement officer etc.

Fact No. 6

The Icarus gland can be removed from males aged 10 to 60.

Fact No. 7

The operation has no impact on men's health, or on their sexual and reproductive capabilities.

Fact No. 8

A routine removal of the Icarus gland will help preserve marriages, find peaceful resolutions to geopolitical conflicts and encourage nuclear disarmament ☺

and widespread myths (collected from monitoring socio-forums)

Myth No. 1

"Without my Icarus gland I'll become lazy, fat, stupid and uninquisitive, I'll just eat and sleep."

That can happen with the gland too ☺ - there's plenty of examples. It has been statistically proven that post-op men not only do not lose interest in life, but are in fact more driven, more conscientious and more focused on success and career development than peers who are still dependent on surges of hormones.

Myth No. 2

"Without the Icarus gland I'll lose interest in sex."

See Fact No. 2. Sex drive does not suffer in any way. A healthy man will feel and fulfil the need for regular sex with his spouse.

Myth No. 3

"If my husband has his Icarus gland removed, he'll no longer be capable of loving me and he'll fall out of love with me immediately."

Nothing of the sort. Marital love is a sort of reflex - it is located in the brain and the operation has no effect on it whatsoever. On the contrary, the operation will probably protect you from your husband cheating or going on long business trips.

Myth No. 3

"After the operation my husband's personality will change for the worse. He'll take revenge on me for convincing him to remove the gland and will turn aggressive."

A man will not take revenge on you for making his life calmer and simpler. As a rule, the personalities of post-op men do not change, and if they do then it will be for the better. Men become more domestic and thoughtful and show more care for their homes and children, as well as more interest in cooking, television, interactive socio-journeys and

socio-games.

Myth No. 4

"Removing the Icarus gland is a sin. I heard that the Icarus gland is effectively your soul. If it's removed, then when a person dies their soul doesn't go to heaven."

These are anti-scientific superstitions spread by members of the Icarian Brotherhood cult. In actual fact the Icarus gland has no connection whatsoever to religious belief or the afterlife. It has nothing to do with the "soul" either. Think about it: the gland, if it's not removed, dies along with the body and stays inside it, and doesn't ascend to the heavens (ask a coroner ☺).

What is more, the presence of the Icarus gland in many bloodthirsty creatures (jackals, wolves, hyenas), as well as ruthless ones (wolverines, dragonflies) and just plain nasty ones (caterpillars) disproves beyond any doubt the absurd Icarian theory of "the gland as a divine spark".

We note that in developed, civilised countries like Britain and France the Icarian Brotherhood is an illegal cult.

Myth No. 5

"There are often complications after this operation."

No. The operation to remove the Icarus gland is a simple one and in 99.9% of cases it is carried out without any complications.

Myth No. 6

"I'm afraid of getting the gland removed because it will hurt."

The operation is completely painless. What is more, the procedure is non-invasive and does not require open abdominal surgery. The doctor irradiates the Icarus gland for a few minutes with a special ray (all that you need to do is strip to the waist to expose the area around the solar plexus). Then, over the course of three (3) days the Icarus gland dies off by itself. The process is not reversible. During this period the post-op patient needs *special care* (see the "post-operative care" section).

Myth No. 7

"My neighbour/brother/father-in-law had his gland cut out and he still cheats on his wife anyway. So that must mean the gland can grow back?!"

No it doesn't. The Icarus gland NEVER recovers. In extremely rare cases after the operation some "living" fragments of the gland can remain in the solar plexus, which then have to be removed again. This only happens when the operation is carried out by an underqualified doctor. There have been no such incidents at our clinic.



It was a simple decision. Sad and simple. After two days he broke. He called *her*, he couldn't resist. He told Julia that he was going for a smoke on the stairs. She didn't smoke, but a minute later she went out to join him. She could sense it.

She didn't interrupt him, convinced that he knew that she knew, and she retreated. He returned, looking beaten.

He said it himself: "OK."

They decided to tell Bunny later, after it had been done.



The clinic was nice and clean and tidy and the staff were all smiley. The two of them waited in the corridor, flicking through magazines; opposite them were a young couple and a teenager accompanied by his mother. The young couple kept giggling at each other and kissing with a hearty smack. They're probably engaged: lots of people have the op before their wedding.

The teenager sat there slouching and messed about on his *socio-pod*. The expression on his face said something like "I couldn't care less", but his legs, if you looked closely, were shaking. The mother was flicking through *The Good Housekeeper*.

Igor was white and silent, gripping the arms of his chair as if he were on a plane and that plane were falling.

At last, they were called. It turned out they had to go and see the psychologist first. They went in together. The psychologist had a plastic smile and didn't look them in the eye.

"Do you have any questions?" he asked the bridge of Julia's nose.

She didn't actually have any questions. Out of politeness and a sense of due process she asked whether it would have any effect on Igor's health or ability to work.

"It'll have no effect whatsoever," the psychologist answered animatedly, with beads of boredom flashing in his eyes. "On the contrary. For me personally, after the operation I started getting fewer colds. And I don't get tired so often. Basically, I have no complaints when it comes to my health!"

She took a look at his doll-like face, content and healthy, then examined his figure impolitely: well-built, but not fat. He hadn't run to fat.

"The metabolism doesn't suffer in the slightest." The psychologist intercepted her gaze. "And you, Igor, why so quiet?"

"I haven't got any questions. I'll sign whatever I have to," said Igor, colourlessly.

"O-o-o-h, come come now." The psychologist wagged his finger jollily. "You sound as if you're about to sign your will! Right then... Julia, yes? Right then, Julia my dear, you pop out for a second and wait in the corridor while your husband and I have a little chat, man to man."

She got up, scared – God forbid it's all going to be called off? – but the psychologist was a sensible fellow. He gave her an imperceptible little wink, as if to say 'don't worry, I won't spoil anything.' She left.

The psychologist paused then confidentially, respectfully even, asked: "So, was it an affair?"

Igor nodded.

"And your wife insisted? On the op?"

He nodded again. And added:

"We've got Bunny, you see..."

The psychologist tensed in incomprehension.

"...Erm, that's what we call our son."

"I see." The psychologist shook his head disapprovingly. "And if you don't have the surgery, you won't get to see the boy, right?"

"Right."

"A typical bit of manipulation. Not good."

A shiver of hope: is he really going to advise me not to have it removed...?

"And what about her, the other one?"

"The other one" – Igor closed his eyes tiredly – "said: come and live with me, I'll give you ten kids... And never make you go under the knife."

"Under the knife" – what does that mean?" The psychologist furrowed his brow in incomprehension, which made him look like a very clever monkey.

"She was talking about the operation."

"Ah so that's it..." His face smoothed over for a moment. "Well, we don't use knives! Where do all these old wives' tales come from? Our procedure is non-invasive..."

He fell silent, looking with interest at Igor's forehead. As if trying to find traces of a lobotomy.

"Manipulation," he said finally. "From the both of them: manipulation. You are not free. You, Igor, are not a free man. You're dependent on hysterical women, on your gland, on hormones. Hormones and women decide everything for you. Isn't it time you freed yourself?"

"But will I really..." Igor shook his head to get rid of the intrusive gaze from his forehead. "But will I really be able to choose after it?"

"It's only after *it* that you will really be able to choose. Decide what you want for yourself." He held out the form to the client. "Fill it in in the corridor."

"Thank you, goodbye." The client scampered fussily towards the door, like a hen.

"Puppets," the psychologist thought as he watched him leave. "Limited, restricted people. Going grey at the temples and only now do they come to have it removed."



He managed to walk home by himself, and even drank a little water – giving him lunch wasn't allowed – but then he said:

"I think... I'm going to have a little lie-down."

He lay on his back and stayed lying there.

She knew that this would happen and that there was no point in being frightened. The doctor had given her precise instructions, written it all down on a piece of paper, and just to be sure she went on *socio* again.

For the three days while the gland is dying off, he will lie motionless on his back. This is the body's normal reaction to a change in the hormone profile. His eyes will be open. He will not be able to blink.

moisten the conjunctiva of the eye with "artificial teardrops"

every 1.5 to 2 hours

the lighting in the room should be low

He will be cold

cover the patient well, put a hot water bottle at his feet

He will need liquids

in order to avoid dehydration feed him boiled water from a syringe,

every 2-3 hours

He will be incontinent

for evacuation of the bladder and bowels use adult nappies;

change them at least 1-2 times a day

She did everything according to the instructions, very responsibly.

"Has he died or something?!" Bunny came back from lessons. "Has Dad died? Has my dad died?"

He turned on the light and looked into his wide-open glassy-blue eyes and his chin shook slightly.

"What are you on about...?" She smiled and clicked the switch.

the lighting in the room should be low

"...He's just had an operation..."

"An operation... *that* operation?" Automatically Bunny crossed his arms over his stomach. "The one he didn't want?"

"We decided," she said, emphasising the we, "that it would be better that way. The operation is harmless..."

Bunny didn't hear her out, but went off to his room.

She did everything the instructions said, for all three days, but Bunny didn't help. He sat on *socio*, munching crisps, only came out to go to the toilet and didn't look at her.

On the third day they ran into each other in the kitchen. She said:

"Bunny, you could at least say hello..."

He said "hlo" through gritted teeth, spat right into the sink with unwashed dishes in it and went off to his room.

On the third day Igor came to.

He groaned, tried to get up, vomited and fell back down, closed his eyes and fell asleep; she cleaned it all up.

An hour later he got out of bed and wandered off somewhere; his eyes were bloodshot, he didn't recognise her, said nothing and staggered around like a drunk. Bunny came out and watched this – biting his lip, not breathing – then bolted into the corner and whimpered gently. She wanted to comfort him; he waved his hand and squeaked "Go away".

They heard a noise – as if something had fallen in the bathroom – and she and Bunny ran in and found him, sleeping, on the floor. They dragged him back to the bedroom. Laid him down, covered him.

Bunny said calmly:

"What have you done to him."

But in theory, all this was entirely normal, it was just as bad for other people. Because on *socio*...

nicks mum: they have a hard time getting over it. mine wobbled about the place, puked, walked in his sleep. what he got up to at night I cant even say!

but then in the morning he was fresh as a daisy!

happy_goat: as soon as they wake up they have a bad time of it. they need care, warmth. ladies, love your men! show them tenderness and consideration, specially on the third night. and everything will be OK!

k1ss3s: the 3rd night is awful. dont let them near the windows!! and check on there breathing.

The doctor had also warned her about the third night. A standard psychotic disorder: *they want to go down as low as possible*. The instinct for self-preservation doesn't work. So you've got to close all the windows and balconies, block them off so he doesn't jump out... And if you live in a house, not a flat, then he might go and sleep on the ground, which is also dangerous: it's not exactly the month of May out there right now, frostbite, the kidneys, the prostate, well, you understand... She understood, but they lived in a flat, not a house. On the ninth floor. She blocked off the balcony with stools, one on top of another, so they would clatter over if he tried to get near the balcony. She shuttered all the windows, and hung little bells on all the catches, even in Bunny's room.

She decided not to sleep. But it looked as if he was snoring away so nicely, rhythmically, comfortably, and that comfort lulled her...

She woke up at the sound of a crash, and ran barefoot into the living room – sure enough, the stools!

He was on the balcony. He wasn't going to jump, no: he was looking down, hanging his head.

"What are you doing out here?" she shouted. "Igor, darling, Igor, for God's sake, what are you doing out here?!"

He came to, as if he had just woken up. He looked at her in surprise. He shuffled obediently to the bedroom, lay down and fell asleep at once.

Bunny appeared, and in a whisper either asked or explained:

"He wanted to kill himself."

She was furious, trying not to wake him, she hissed:

"What a load of rubbish?! I told you, they want to go down. That's how they react to the surgery..."

"You're lying."

"You... what's that...? Is that how you're going to speak to your mother...?"

Bunny left. She was disgusted to realise that she had talked about herself in the third person. In that same horrible folksy manner as her own mother. Mother Earth. The Holy Mother. The Great Mother.

Again, heavily, as if earth were being sprinkled on her from above, she started to be swallowed up by sleep. With great effort she clambered out, as if from a freshly dug grave, and then didn't go to sleep again. What if he goes on to the balcony again? Or the window? And then on that third night they get apnoea too. Their breathing stops.

they just forget to breathe – you know, like babies

She listened carefully. But his breathing was measured and even. And he didn't jump up again.



In the morning he started to recognise people, and to talk. That is, he didn't say anything, but if you asked him: Igor, dear, do you recognise me? he'd say: of course, you're Julia.

"And who is this?"

"That's Bunny."

She felt calmer immediately. But Bunny, for some reason, started crying. Then, for many days, things were bad.

If he wasn't sleeping, then he'd sit for hours and hours staring at the wall. When you told him: get up, go and sit somewhere else, he would get up and sit somewhere else. If you told him to eat something, he'd eat it all up. Hug! And he'd hug. If you didn't say anything, he didn't move a muscle.

They would turn on the television and it seemed as if he was watching it. But if you turned it off, he would continue watching the dark screen, as if it made no difference.

Bunny would sit next to him and take him by the arm, but then he stopped. He said once, rudely, meanly:

"Why should I sit with him? You've as good as killed him."

Even she realised it: something wasn't right. Something had gone wrong.

She went on *socio*: "husband has changed after removal of gland" and suddenly all sorts of things came up... She hadn't seen this before. She hadn't read about this, she didn't know about it. She had used different search terms before...

tatusik: we got the op and now the whole family regrets it. he has become sort of mindless. he sleeps and eats the whole time.

vampiress: help! my son isnt recovering after a routine operation.

he is weak all over and apathetic and completely depressed.

he keeps saying I dont want anything.

unknown user: girls, take my advice, dont ever do it! without the gland my husband has got mean and aggressive. all day he shouts at me and the kids. he pisses on the loo seat on purpose.

No, he hasn't become aggressive. Not the slightest bit of aggression. But apathy, indifference – for sure.

sleeps and eats

I don't want anything

Is that really what's going to happen?!

She bought a DVD of a sad, touching film, by his favourite director. He watched it attentively.

"Did you like it?"

"Yes."

"What did you like about it?"

"The acting. The writing."

She got down on her knees in front of him. She took his face in her hands.

"Forgive me..."

It was as if he didn't understand:

"For what?"

"For what I did to you."

"Oh, it's nothing. It doesn't hurt anymore."

"What, did it hurt?" She touched his stomach where his gland had been.

"Of course it hurt."

"We've got cocodamol and nurofen... Why didn't you say that it hurt?"

"I did."

She suddenly felt a pang above her belly button. By her solar plexus. Where the atrophied remnants had fused with the nerves...

She was so ashamed, so sorry for him, it was beyond repair, that she was ready to do anything. Even let him go. Give him back to *her*, to that snake, if that would help. It does happen after all. They do write, they write that "after the operation he cheated anyway"... She'd also read that sometimes it grows back all the same. And maybe – and actually this might well be the case – there are still some *fragments* there. Living fragments – and if she just gives him a chance, then maybe he'll warm up a bit, he'll get over it...

She phoned the doctor – he said, don't worry, wait, it will sort itself out.

She couldn't wait. She couldn't look at him, sitting there, holding a newspaper for an hour or two, and *not turning the pages*.

She took his phone – out of battery, turned off, just like him – she charged it, turned it on. Found her number. Dovey. As in Lovey. I hope you choke on your own feathers, birdbrain...

She called her.

"Yes?!" *She* picked up straightaway; her voice was fresh and clear.

Not feeling her lips, not feeling her tongue, she introduced herself, said

that Igor wasn't well. Said – you can come and take him, I'll let him go, if that's what he wants.

"When should I come over?" asked this Dove, presumptuously, as if she were making arrangements with his secretary.

"Today, if possible."

She came the same evening.

So young – God, she's nineteen! – and so overdressed. As if she were going to the theatre. A plunging neckline, some black number, figure-hugging, glossy, skimpy. A funny little face, like a furry little animal with big eyes. And that neck. Such a long neck.

She had no idea what to do with her.

"Please, do come on in..."

She offered her a seat at the table.

They sat in silence, as if at a wake, all four of them. There were some nibbles: ham, sausage and cheese. No one ate, except for Igor. He didn't look at either of them.

But Dovey looked at him, at him - and you could see her heart beating under that skin-tight top.

"Would you like some coffee?" Bunny said in a deep voice.

Julia shuddered. She had forgotten about him.

But Bunny – her Bunny was sitting there, it turns out, all red, and devouring this Dovey with his eyes. Staring at the chain with a cross on it that snuck down into her cleavage. And her neck. And her firm nipples beneath the tight black number.

"So then, are you going to go with her?" she asked her husband while Bunny was messing about in the kitchen.

"Go where?"

She quipped bitinglly:

"Forgotten the address, have you?"

"Let's go, hey, Igor, let's go..." Like a siren song. Like a love spell. Like a lullaby. That voice, quiet and silky - it promised him life. It promised him sweat, and a loud thumping in the chest, and a bitter tang on his tongue, and pungent ooze, and a hot womanly embrace. She knew, his wife knew, what he was being offered. She thought in horror: he's about to say yes.

Bunny came back with the coffee cups.

"I'm not going," said Igor. "Sorry. My place is with my family."

She looked into that beloved, wooden face and tried to feel shame, as she had before, and not this gloating tickle of victory.

And *she* left, dressed so fancy, this slender little bird, and Bunny gave her a

packet of tissues to take with her.

Then he came back to the table and said:

"I hate you both."

And then, all of a sudden, things sorted themselves out. Something like two days later, starting that Saturday.

She woke up in the morning – and he had brought her coffee. And a little toasted sandwich with tomato and cheese.

He waited for her to finish eating and drinking, and crawled in next to her under the duvet.

"Do you want to be on top or shall I?"

She said:

"First you, then me."

...And he didn't sit staring at a fixed point anymore, and he washed all the dishes. And then after lunch they watched a TV show about vampires together, and got scared and laughed.

But Bunny – only out of stubbornness, only so he wouldn't have to admit she was right – kept repeating that nothing had got sorted. That he was still "fake" and "dead".

Igor didn't take offence. He jokily goggled his eyes, hung out his soft tongue, and lisped in a scary voice:

"I'm a zombie, I'm a zombie..."

Bunny didn't like it. He got angry and left.

In the middle of the night he came back covered in blood and drunk.

"Now you've gone and done it!" Julia sighed.

She broached the subject gradually, in a roundabout way. By suggesting that something's not right with the boy. An awkward age. And, maybe, still... We should consider... A routine... because...

She was afraid to finish. She was afraid of how he'd react.

But he reacted wonderfully.

"He's got to have the op." He said it himself! "Otherwise who knows what will happen? It's not easy with the gland. Especially at his age."

They booked an appointment for two days later. They told Bunny while he was still hung over.

He squealed and thrashed: I don't want the operation! He tried, completely naked, to run away. He called someone, begged someone, grabbed at knives and forks. Oh God, oh Lord, they'd obviously let him run wild completely... How long has he been in this state...? It's lucky he's still alive. No, there's no time to waste. Get it out, ASAP...! They moved the appointment forward to

the next day.

They had to lock Bunny in his room for the night. Harsh, but for the best. Because he'd gone a bit crazy and could very easily just run off, who knows where, into the night.

She was terribly tired. Bags under eyes.

"You go and get some sleep," Igor said.

She went. Barely able to put one foot in front of the other.

He was sitting in the living room; he had turned on the laptop and gone on a *socio*-journey to Africa. Bunny banged on the door – his room was off the living room – and shouted that he needed the toilet.

"You've got a pot in there," Igor said.

He had a little dig through the remains of ancient *hominids*, had a bit of a wander about, pressed on *Welwitschia*, a plant endemic to the Namib Desert.

it grows two enormous leaves for the entire duration of its life (more than 1000 years) – socio explained

the roots go up to 3m deep; the plant can survive in arid conditions, using dew or fog

as a source of moisture

"Open the door!" Bunny yelled. "Open the door, open up, open up!"

Igor liked the *welwitschia*. It was like a bird with two big wings.

"...If you don't open it I'll jump out the window!"

...Igor watched Berber women weaving colourful carpets... Manipulation.

"I'll jump, I swear!"

Primitive manipulation...

In Bunny's room the window opened with a crack; a bell tinkled briefly. Then everything went quiet.

I shouldn't open the door, Igor decided. If you open it, he'll run away again. He won't have jumped. He's probably hiding somewhere. He's waiting for me to open the door. He'll start yelling again in a minute.

But Bunny didn't yell anymore.

I should go and check, Igor thought. But the balcony in the living room doesn't face the right direction, I won't be able to see. I'd have to go outside. It's cold outside. Get dressed, zip up, go downstairs, walk round the building... Can't be bothered, plus it's cold.

He decided not to go.

After all Bunny was probably only sleeping.

THE CITY

Everybody Wants to Get to the City...

...The neon words on the façade opposite burn so brightly that it hurts to look at them. You can try and block them out with the blinds, but it doesn't help. Because, when I close my eyes, I see those words imprinted on my retina, scorched red on black on the inside of my eyelids. "Everybody wants to get to the City. Not everyone manages. You did."

At night I barely sleep. It's too stuffy, too noisy, too bright. And my skin itches all over. Translucent gnats crawl through the torn mosquito net. When they have sucked their fill of blood, they turn a dark crimson colour. If you kill them, they burst like poisonous berries. It leaves shapeless brown marks on the wall.

The blinds are broken, you can't shut them fully. Through the dirty window panes, through the long gaps where slats have broken off, this city soaks into the room with a poisonous, unctuous radiance. It spreads shiny, greasy stripes on the walls and the sheets, on the pillow, on my face. It thunders with music, roars with motors and fire engine sirens. There's a lot of fire engines, day and night – why, I wonder? I've never seen a fire in the City. But they're constantly patrolling up and down the city streets, howling and spinning their cyclopean eyes, creating a sense of imminent disaster. The blinds reply to the sirens with tinny jangling.

At night I watch the glowing stripes on the wall and scratch myself terribly. The marks left by the gnats look like love bites.