

Excerpt from
BUTTERFLY SKIN
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1

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

And now the front cars slowly enter the transparent wall of condensed horror, but you can no longer bear to look at the faces flattened against the glass, the mouths opened in mute screams, the eyes bulging out of their sockets - you turn your gaze to the passengers still untouched by the horror, sitting in the nearest cars, and again you see that faint shadow of anxiety change to panic, you see them jump to their feet and run, run and pound on the locked glass doors... and the invisible wall gets closer and closer, advancing implacably, like in a dream. But you don't leave your seat, you don't feel for your mother's hand, you just think with relief that it will all soon be over.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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