

## Part 1

### 1

What to start with?

This story is not about my father. And it's not about me either.

Theodor drew his first breath late evening on Thursday, July 15, 2010, in Rivne Maternity Hospital №2. Height - 49 cm, weight - three kilos 900 grams, normal, healthy Cossack with such a loud voice that according to the midwife, the windows in the department sagged and several door handles melted.

Eva, my wife, was taken to the Maternity department the day before – on Wednesday, and the labor pain started on Thursday morning. Thursday turned out to be fine - dry, windless, and not hot, though I didn't pay attention to the weather at all. The excitement I had inside made me feel like a person who boards a plane: there is nothing to worry about, but the sense of helplessness keeps the body in a state of fever. I stayed in the hospital from 8:30 AM to Theodore's birth, but I missed the childbirth. Not because the doctor didn't allow me to be present. I could change my clothes and then stay in the operating room, but Eva didn't want me to see her during the labor.

I suppose that some of you are surprised by the name we gave to our son. What nonsense, you think. Cossacks didn't bear the name of Theodore! If only that depended only on me, I would rather call my son Ostap. Indeed. My mom – Kateryna Volodymyrivna Belinska, a strong Ukrainophile – would have been excited. She was working as a teacher of the Ukrainian language and literature all her life, and long ago wanted to call me Ostap. Eventually, she changed her mind and called me after Myron Katrannyk, the main hero of the novel “The Yellow Prince” by Vasyl Barka. I can't say that I don't like this name, - but let's be honest, there is some sort of hidden freakiness in the decision to call the son like a fictional hero, who died of famine, - but I wasn't excited about the name too. On the other hand, I was the only Myron at school, the only Myron at university, and later I realized that to some extent the uniqueness of my name determined my exceptional attitude to me. Although Myron perfectly rhymes with “gandon<sup>1</sup>” no one ever called me like that. In general, the name Ostap seemed wonderful to me, just perfect. But Eva's mother – Zhanna Lauda didn't even want to hear about Ostap.

At the twentieth week of pregnancy, the doctor announced that it was a boy. After that, at least twenty times Eva and I had a conversation about the possible name of our son, but we couldn't reach a

compromise. Probably, because Eva was mostly talking, and I was silent; maybe because the names she offered smacked of cheap soap operas. In her dreams, my wife imagined our son on the red carpet in Cannes or in the cabriolet that rushes at full speed among Hollywood hills. Consequently, I did not take these talks seriously. On the second day after the delivery, Eva gave me the list, I assume approved by her mother, of potential names for our son: Fabian, Daniel, Leonard, Hermann, Albert, Edgar, Theodore, Earnest, Oscar, and – Lord, forgive me, - Tamerlane. Tamerlane, holy shit! Have you ever heard about that?! Tamerlane, fucking, Belinskyi.

Zhanna Lauda - who had no wealth or status, but behaved as if she has played golf at the most expensive resorts all her life, and her husband Lavrentiy, an ordinary trucker, who adored getting blind drunk after his trips and lavishly upchucking in the elevator, stairs, and their porch - insisted on the name of Fabian. I asked what is, in her view, the short form of this name, but she easily answered, “Fania, of course. Sounds great, isn't it?” I said that my great-grandmother - Afanasia Berdnyk, who over the four years before her death couldn't recognize her reflection in the mirror - bore the same name - Fania. I also wanted to add that Fabian rhymes with “pavian<sup>2</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup>Ukr. scumbag

<sup>2</sup>Ukr. baboon

and ask my mother-in-law if she has ever seen the baboon's ass, but she got angry with me, and I decided not to exacerbate the conflict. Later I claimed that I couldn't put up with the names Daniel, Hermann, and, certainly, Tamerlane. Among those that were left, I chose the least loud – Edgar. Eva agreed immediately. Her mother grumbled at first but soon cooled off. But on the third day after the delivery before returning home, I don't remember what thoughts forced me to talk, but I made a joke that I would be calling the kid Eddie, which is very cool because the mascot, a symbol of my favorite heavy-metal band from the childhood – British “Iron Maiden”, has the same name.

My wife had a tablet with Internet access in her hospital ward so before I managed to get back home, she called me and started yelling at me, trying to prove that I'm an idiot and that she would never call her son after the silly British mummy.

So only Oscar, Leonard, Albert, Theodore, and Ernest left.

The delivery went well. On Monday morning I took Eva from the Maternity Hospital and on our way home I told her that I didn't mind calling our son Theodore. And it wasn't a compromise, you know, I didn't have to break myself to agree with such a decision. Over the weekend I read everything I could find about Theodore on the Internet, I pronounced “Theodore” and “Theo” at least a hundred times, changing the tone, and finally, I decided that it was okay, I liked the name.

Seriously, I liked it. It embodies intelligence, power, and leadership. Theodore Roosevelt, Theodore Dreiser, Theodore Wilson. My impression was a little bit spoiled by the photos of teddy bears flashing before my eyes among the results on Google search. However, I decided that we would be calling our son only Theodore or Theo, not Teddy.

On the evening of the third day after the delivery Eva's friends visited us. The girls wondered what name we would give to him. So, Eva proudly replied – Theodore. And then one of those stupid hens snickered: “Like a bull?” And the second one added something about Corrida. The wife didn't get confused: “Exactly, a bullfight. Theodore will be strong and restless like a bull.” Over the next few months from time to time, I was recalling an annoying thought why, in fact, the bull? And why is bullfighting? I was desperately surfing the net to find a cartoon or a movie about the bull with the name Theodore, visited the websites where people sell breeding bulls, but I couldn't find a single Theodore. And only at the end of May 2011, I got that remark. I realized how deep the gap in perception of this world between men and women is. It was almost midnight; I was driving my client from the nightclub “Laguna” to the North district when suddenly lightning pierced my eyes. Theodore – toreador. Toreador – corrido. Corrida – a bull. TOREADOR! Eva's friend thought about the bull because the name Theodore sounds like the word “toreador”. How stupid, isn't it?

Only for a moment and only once did I regret the choice of his name: in July, of the same year. Once again after leaving the house to earn money for sacrificing some to the Blue Monster, I accidentally thought that my kid may be less fortunate than his daddy. What if I assumed my son will be called Teddyk-pedyk<sup>3</sup>? In fact, my anxiety proved futile. In autumn 2015 when my son could have possibly gained such a nickname in kindergarten, Theo and I were in the USA already.

So.

Eva, Myron, Theodore Belinskyi. Fuck you, it's a good name. Besides, it could have been worse, right?

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<sup>3</sup> Ukr. pedyk - gay

Theodore was two years and three months when I first noticed a small hard lump swollen behind his right ear.

In childhood, my lymph nodes were usually swollen. I knew what it was, so I didn't panic. Mostly my lymph nodes were swollen on the back of the neck, at the junction of the neck with the head. Sometimes such swelling was accompanied by fever, but it didn't lead to any serious complications. In a week the organism was able to defeat the infection and the swelling simply disappeared. That's how it normally happened when I was a kid.

But the situation with Theo was different. The swelling remained there the whole month. The second week Eva and I started to examine our son's ear every morning: I claimed that the swelling didn't grow, Eva was panicking and trying to convince me that the lump was growing, and we should have taken Theo to the doctor. And again, I reminded her about my experience and the process in my case: the lump disappeared without any treatment. I also considered the fact that Theodore had rubella before. The illness started with a fever and dry cough. The next day a rash appeared on Theo's face and then spread to the rest of his body. Consequently, the lymph nodes on the neck swelled up. As everyone knows, rubella doesn't require any special treatment, so we just simply stayed at home with Theo. In three days, the rash went away, the temperature became stable and the lumps behind the ears disappeared. Soon after, I noticed that swelling behind his ear again. In short, I refused to take Theo to the doctor because I thought that the swelling was a result of rubella, a sign that the organism didn't fully overcome the infection. I hoped that we could work everything out without doctors, because, you know, it was rubella, and you don't have to treat it.

First two years Theo often got sick. Colds, chicken pox, digestive problems, and allergic rashes. We didn't even think about kindergarten. And therefore, Eva and I had to adjust our work schedules – well, it was mostly I who did that – so at least each of us could stay at home with the kid. I was a call center operator at “Zoom Support”, a branch of an international company in Rivne dealing with the remote assistance of “Windows” and “Apple” users, and it was easier for me to adapt; I went to work once every three days and could choose night or nightly-morning shifts to be free during the day and look after Theodor, while Eva was working. Eva was a manager at the hotel complex “The Black Pearl” on the bypass road of Rivne. On weekends or when there were no corporate events or other celebrations in “The Pearl” she returned home earlier, I could leave Theodore with her to work a little bit as a taxi driver.

But let's return to the swelling.

In November 2012, I finally admitted that the swelling was getting bigger. The lump hardened, darkened, and grew to the size of a peach pit. The kid's ear stuck out as if somebody was pulling it intentionally. We selected the day when both of us, Eva and I, didn't have to work – Thursday, November 22, - and took Theo to the private pediatrician. Just by looking at Theo, the guy immediately sent him to the regional hospital.

At the hospital, we had an appointment with the otolaryngologist Kyrylo Mazur – a chubby middle-aged man. He examined Theo's ear, squeezed the lump twice - Theo hissed in pain – and then the doctor raised his head and stared at me angrily. Eva was sitting next to me, but the doctor devoured only me with his eyes and talked as if my wife wasn't in the room.

“When has it appeared?”

“We-e-e-ll...”, I remembered the day when I first felt the lump behind my son's ear, but hesitated whether to tell him or not, “A month and a half or... mm... two months ago.”

“And for two months you haven't even noticed that your son has an abscess of a plum size behind his ear?”

“I... well...”, I looked at Eva seeking support, but she was sitting motionlessly, like a mummy, clenching her lips, fixing her eyes on the doctor. “I had the same in my childhood. My lymph nodes were usually swollen and then everything disappeared, so I thought...”

“It’s a right-sided purulent lymphadenitis,” he interrupted me. “A huge purulent bump on the head. And it can erode anytime and anywhere.” He tapped a finger to his temple and repeated, “On his head.”

For a few seconds, there was a dead silence in the room and then I awkwardly asked, “What was the reason?”

“It began with inflammation of the lymph node. It is usually caused by staphylococcus, streptococcus, and other pathogens that spread through the lymph path. But this,” he pointed at morose and pale Theo, “what you are observing here now, is the result of negligence because someone was too busy or too lazy to take the son to the doctor for two months.

I clenched my teeth, so the jaw muscles protruded on my cheeks. “So, what now?”

“I’ll fill in the doctor’s note, but someone should stay in the hospital.” “Are you going to leave him in the hospital?” I asked dispiritedly.

Otolaryngologist leered at Eva.

“I’ll stay with him,” my wife dropped quietly.

“Good,” he nodded, and continued writing something in the patient record and only in a couple of seconds he answered my question, “Yes, we leave your son in the hospital. I’ll appoint all the necessary tests for tomorrow, and if everything is okay, we can operate the day after tomorrow.”

I felt my Adam’s apple twitching unintentionally.

“Don’t worry, it’s not dangerous,” the doctor continued, “I’ll put drainage, it helps the pus to come out of the wound. In three days, the boy will be at home,” Mazur raised his head from the text. “Any other questions?”

“No,” I cast down my eyes.

“Is the surgery under anesthesia?” Eva responded.

The surgeon arched an eyebrow as he was surprised to hear this from Eva and then answered, “How do you imagine this? You are holding the kid while I’m cutting his ear?”

“I’ve just asked,” answered Eva with ice in her voice. “Yes, under general anesthesia.”

3

“The Black Pearl” is not the place where a sick leave certificate is considered a reasonable excuse for absence from the workplace. Fortunately, over two years Eva gained a good reputation, so she managed to find a replacement for three days and stayed in the hospital with Theo.

On November 24, 2012, soon after breakfast, Theo was prepared for the surgery, and a few minutes after one o’clock he was taken to the operating room.

Eva and I stayed in the dingy corridor permeated with the smell of disinfectants that bumped into the wide double doors of the operating department and waited there much longer than we expected. I crossed that corridor so many times that probably remembered every nook and cranny, every bulge of the rough walls. There was only one window in front of the doors, next to the elevator and stairs facing the gloomy and dirty inner yard. The walls at the bottom were covered with poisonous green paint.

Kyrylo Mazur went to the pre-operative area ten minutes after Theo was taken there. When he saw us at the doors he nodded, smiled, and said that the surgery is unlikely to last very long, but no longer than an hour. Perhaps if in this devoid-of-emotion phrase, we hadn't heard "no longer than an hour", we wouldn't have been worried. But at three in the afternoon, it seemed like someone was roasting us alive on a small fire. Holding the palms between her knees, my wife was sitting on the bench nutating rhythmically: back, forward, back, forward. I was pacing the corridor in anticipation, biting my lips and watching my steps, having nothing to do.

No one went out of the operation department.

Because of confusion everything mixed up in my head, I still see that day as in the fog and now I'm not quite sure when I heard the first scream. Approximately after three, but when exactly, it's hard to say. I remember the moment when the anxious cries arose behind the doors. A woman was talking very quickly. I couldn't understand a single word, but I didn't like her tone.

"Have you heard that?" I turned to my wife.

"Yes", Eva stood up. She was still angry that I refused to take Theo to the doctor and avoided looking into my eyes. I was standing closer to the operation department. She pointed at the massive double doors and asked, "Have you understood anything?"

I shook my head.

"It's a woman's voice," I also wanted to add that it seemed to be frightened but held its tongue.

In about two minutes the doors of the elevator behind our back burst open. Two men in green operating gowns went out. The taller one was about thirty. The second one was well-set and older: his temples were already grey. I don't know how, but I managed to remember that. They were pushing high manipulation tables on wheels.

"Step aside," the older one ordered. "Step aside, please!"

The corridor was too narrow for four people and the table made of stainless steel, so Eva and I pressed ourselves against the wall, clearing the way.

While the doctors were approaching, I was looking only at them. And only when they passed us, I lowered my eyes to the table. The lower shelf was full of bottles with liquids, clamps, forceps, and other obscure and creepy instruments made of stainless steel and with ampoules and syringes: from very small to enormously big. On the top shelf, I managed to discern an oxygen tank with a mask, suction, and several small digital devices, one of which - a long flexible tube is probably a probe. A pale green plastic case with a handle and a digital scoreboard stood out among devices. It's better to say, something like a plastic case. A few buttons showed around the grey monitor. Underneath them, I saw a schematic picture of a sinusoidal heart rate pattern. On both sides of it, I noticed small toy-like irons with red buttons on the handles. They were attached to the case with black twisted wires. When I realized what I was looking at my body limped like wax over the fire.

Defibrillator.

I couldn't breathe. The air seemed dead, as if... at first, I thought as if at the hospital, and then: damn it, we are at the hospital!

I rattled:

"What's going on there?"

Resuscitators reached a side of the corridor coated with tile. Double doors swung open. "Tell me what's going on!"

The younger of the men looked around. He wanted to answer, but the older one pulled his sleeve and pointed at the operating unit. They pulled the table through the door towards the preoperative room and disappeared behind the doors. I rushed to the operating room, but Eva darted, blocked my way, and stopped me.

“Wait!” The wife was holding me around the waist. “Don't do a foolish thing! Don't go there!” I clutched my head and stood like that for a long time, overcoming the desire to make a dart for the door and start pounding it with my fists. Finally, Eva and I went back to the bench and continued waiting.

At about four o'clock one more doctor entered the operating block. Tall, stately, with a chiseled face and lush, curly bush of hair. He didn't carry anything with him and was holding his hands in his pockets. As he was passing us, he glanced at us with interest but said nothing. Neither I nor Eva dared to ask anything.

At 16:30 Kyrylo Mazur finally appeared. His round face almost merged with faded background – a corridor filled up with calm light. Because of the shadows under the eyes and tensely curved mouth, his face remained a full moon that was silhouetted against the light sky a few hours before sunset.

“What happened?” Eva and I sprang to my feet as soon as we saw him. The wife took a step forward and I was standing next to the bench astonished at how my knees were trembling. “How's Theodore?”

Mazur stopped in the middle of the corridor, a few steps from us. There was no sign of arrogance he expressed the day before yesterday. The surgeon started talking and it seemed like another person was standing in front of me:

“Your son is all right.”

“Where is he?” popped out of Eva's mouth.

“In intensive care. And it would be better if he stays there for a while.” “Can we go to him?” the wife continued. “Can we see him?”

I finally managed to open my mouth, and out of anxiety the words like a noisy avalanche poured out of it:

“If Theodore is fine, then why do you want to keep him in intensive care?”

Mazur froze holding his back unnaturally flat, keeping his hands in his pockets and casting down his eyes. It seemed like he didn't hear any of our questions. He was standing motionless and only fingers on his left hand were clenching behind the thin pale green cloth of the pocket - I saw how bones showed through the fabric after each clench. I felt languid from that gesture.

“Something happened during the operation,” finally answered the surgeon.

My mouth got ash-dry and something like a boulder of crushed ice started moving from the chest to the belly.

“Was it serious?”

Mazur raised his eyes and peered into my face:

“Cardiac arrest,” pause. “During the operation, Theodore's heart stopped beating for a short time.”

Eva sniffed loudly and shielded the mouth with her hands. “What..?”

“Don't worry, I beg you,” the doctor pulled his right hand out of the pocket and reached for Eva, as if he had the intention to pat her on the shoulder reassuringly, but suddenly regained control – his hand froze in the air halfway between him and my wife. “Everything's fine now, the heart rhythm is restored, there is no deviance and I assure you: right now, there is nothing to worry about.”

I winced. “There is nothing to worry about?! Of course, because it's not your son has just come back from the other world!” I bit my cheek to blood trying to subdue the surge of anger.

“Why did that happen?” I came up to Eva and put my hand on her shoulder. Her body was shuddering, her breast was expanding and falling in arrhythmic spasms, and at the same time no sound, even the tiniest sob came out of her mouth.

The doctor hid his hand back in his pocket but didn't look away.

“It's hard to answer. His heartbeat was restored before emergency physicians came into the operating room. In fact, neither I nor my assistant nor my anesthesiologist had time to do anything. We were just...” he shrugged, “observing. Mmm... in 90% of cardiac arrests, the reason is fibrillation, but during fibrillation, the heart doesn't stop. Ventricular fibrillation is an arrhythmia when the myocardium twitches so erratically and so quickly that instead of pumping blood the heart quivers. Fibrillation always has a clear physiological reason (usually a serious heart disease), which is relatively easy to detect. But very rarely the heart can stop – the bioelectric activity suddenly disappears in the heart muscle. This state is called asystole or is also known as a flatline, and that's what happened with Theodore. Fortunately, his heartbeat was restored, and no irreversible physiological changes had happened. Half an hour ago I called a specialist on duty from the cardiology department, and we made a final electrocardiogram and he confirmed that he didn't see any visible deviance.

For three hours while we were sitting there, no one went out of the folding doors. Everyone was just entering. I thought that the doctors can't stay there all the time, therefore, the operating room should have one more exit.

“So, you don't know what could cause the cardiac arrest?” I said.

A long wrinkle of dissatisfaction appeared on the surgeon's nose and in a moment smoothed quickly. He continued quietly looking straight at me without hiding his eyes for a moment, although his voice was strained:

“I think that the reason could be anesthesia. Sometimes it's not very easy to pick an appropriate dose of anesthetics even for an adult, not to mention the two-year-old boy. And it's not the fault of the anesthesiologist. It happened, maybe, because his body reacted in a certain way, who knows...”

“What do we have to do?”

Kyrylo Mazur shifted his gaze to Eva, who was still trembling. “I cleaned out his ear, it's fine now.”

“I'm not talking about the ear”, she replied.

“We'll keep him in intensive care tonight. He has already regained consciousness, but he is still a little drunk. Moreover, we give him a sedative because he was nervous when you were absent. If everything is fine, we can move him to the hospital ward again. You can wait there.”

“And then? What's next?” – I couldn't speak coherently, but Mazur understood me.

“It's better to stay at the hospital for two days. I will observe the process of recovery. And then...”, he paused, “I advise you to examine him at a cardiologist. Take the heart ultrasound. Maybe, the kid will be put on a list there, and for some time you will be required to keep him under observation. The cardiologist will explain it to you. I've done everything I could.”

Mazur headed towards the lift and stairs.

“Wait!” this moment sank deep into my mind. I remember how weak and insipid my voice seemed. “How... well... How long it didn't beat?”

“A bit more than half a minute”, said the surgeon. “Thirty-five, maybe thirty-six seconds.”

“Thank you.” I lowered my head.

Eva turned around to me and hugged me.

Half a minute. Thirty-six seconds. In thirty-six seconds, Theodore was somewhere at the border between this world and the world of the dead. And then he returned.

Two years after the surgery passed before I started realizing that Theo returned not alone. Something grabbed a hold of him while he was there – on the other side of the line that most of us cross only once. During those thirty-six seconds, something seized my son and returned together with him.

[...]

8

On Valentine's Day, February 14, the weather was nasty - dark, dank, and windy - so Theo and I stayed at home all day. There were only two of us – Eva normally was up to the eyes in work during such days in “The Black Pearl”. In the evening we watched “Shaun, the Sheep” together and then Theo moved to his room, where I read him a fairy tale about Rapunzel. At about half past nine the kid fell asleep.

I settled down in the bedroom and was aimlessly surfing the net for half an hour. Then I got tired, put the laptop aside, and took the book – “Captain Pantoja and the Special Service” by Mario Vargas Llosa. The story was meant to be funny, at least not boring – the cover promised a “phenomenal sarcastic novel that mocks the military-bureaucratic machine, the clergy and the entire state system of Peru”, - but somehow it turned up to be flatter than the Internet jokes from Vkontakte, and I dozed off. At quarter to midnight, I was woken up by the book that slid from the chest on the bed. I put it aside, turned off the light, rolled over, and fell asleep again.

The second time I woke up at about one. I kept my eyes shut, having decided that Eva woke me up, however, I strained my ears and realized that something was wrong here. I couldn't hear any sounds coming from the corridor, so the wife wasn't there yet. In the meantime, a strange feeling overtook me, as if I wasn't alone in the bedroom. I felt someone's presence unmistakably. And it wasn't Eva: she would never sneak into the room quietly.

I opened my eyes and gasped in surprise. Just above me - a few centimeters from the bed – Theodore was standing. The kid was hanging over my head. I took a deep breath, feeling the fear fading, and, throwing off the blanket, I leaned into the pillow. I was waiting to hear what he would say. Such situations happened several times: Theo couldn't sleep and often came into the bedroom and asked to stay in bed with Eva and me. I even held out my hand to touch him and to ask why he didn't take Yuan Mykhailovych with him when suddenly fear that disappeared so quickly covered me again. Blazing up in the bottom of the belly, it slowly crept to the throat.

Something was different. Something was wrong.

When I leaned on the pillow, Theo didn't react. He continued looking at the spot where my head was while I was sleeping. My hand froze in the air and then dropped on the blanket. I was lying frozen, expecting that the kid would say anything or move, but he was as silent as a grave. Slow, stretched seconds stuck together; a minute passed, then the second one, the third, but Theo was still silent.

I lifted my head and carefully investigated his face. His eyes were half closed and still, his lower lip was slightly hanging down. Theo was sleeping.

*Or not?*

A wave of biting cold swept through my arms and back. My skin was showered with blebs. I didn't see those blebs in the dark, but they pulled the skin so much that it seemed each of them was the size of icy hummocks in Antarctica.

*How long is he staying like that?*



Carefully, without any rush, I waved in front of Theodore's face. Nothing. No reaction. The kid remained a wax statue abandoned by the sculptor next to my bed.

Finally, I broke down and whispered:

"Hey, Theo."

He immediately responded, turning his head to the sound of my voice. But the eyelids remained half-lowered, and crescents of creepy white eyeballs peeked from behind the eyelashes. I was really scared. I knew that Theo was sleeping, but I did not know whether I should wake him up. If yes, then how?

Damn it, how long has he been hanging over me?

Trying not to creak into the bed, I stood up and got around Theo. Counting heartbeats, I stopped behind his back – a minute, two, three, - and then backed away to the exit from the bedroom. Why? Who knows. I perceived not much at that moment, except that I must do something. For a few seconds Theo didn't move, but then - when the door between the bedroom and corridor slightly cracked – he jerked up his head and turned it to me. Turned in a special way: only blind turn head like this. Heard. The eyelids, however, were still half-lowered. He could hear, but he didn't see me.

I was almost in the corridor when Theo turned around and made his way towards me. His head was slightly bent, eyelids half closed, and his hands hanging down along the body.

I was so cold that I itched to the toilet. If weak glares penetrated the bedroom from the outside - from streetlights and windows of neighboring houses – then the hallway was completely dark. I saw only the outline where I hardly could discern my son. And this outline approached, trapping me in the darkness.

I could no longer hold back.

"Hey, Theo! Theo! THEODORE! Wake up! What's going on with you?"

And he opened his eyes. As if someone scrolled the eyeballs, placing the irises in their place. Theo saw me. Shuddered and started crying.

"Dad, pa...!"

I hunkered down and threw my cold trembling arms around him. "Did you have a bad dream?"

The kid cuddled in my arms and didn't answer, only wept. "Dad, Dad, Pa..."

In five minutes, a key scraped in the lock, and the front door opened. At the threshold in the clearly defined rectangle of light, Eva froze. She didn't understand why her son and husband were sitting in an embrace on the floor in the dark corridor.