

Fat and Skinny

Two friends ran into each other at the Nikolaevsky train station: one fat, the other skinny. The fat one had just had dinner in the station, and his butter-smeared lips glistened like ripe cherries. He smelled of sherry and fleur d'oranger. The skinny one had just gotten off a train and was loaded down with suitcases, bundles, and boxes. He smelled of ham and coffee grounds. From behind his back peeked a thin woman with a long chin-his wife-and a tall schoolboy with a screwed-up eye—his son.

"Porfiry!" exclaimed the fat one, seeing the skinny one. "Is it you? My dear fellow! Long time no see!"

"Good heavens!" the skinny one said in amazement. "Misha! My childhood friend! Where did you pop up from?"

The friends kissed three times and fixed their tear-filled eyes on each other. Both were pleasantly astonished.

"Dear friend!" the skinny one began after the kissing. "How unexpected! What a surprise! Let me have a good look at you! As handsome as ever! A dear soul and a dandy! Oh, Lord God! So, how are you? Rich? Married? I'm already married, as you can see...This is my wife, Louisa, born Wanzenbach...a Lutheran...And this is my son Nathaniel, a third-grader. Nathaniel, this is my childhood friend! We were in school together!"

Nathaniel pondered a little and took off his cap.

"In school together!" the skinny one went on. "Remember how they nicknamed you? They called you Herostratus, because you burned a schoolbook with a cigarette, and me Ephialtes, because I liked snitching? Ha-ha...We were kids! Don't be afraid, Nathaniel. Come closer to us... And this is my wife, born Wanzenbach...a Lutheran."

Nathaniel pondered a little and hid behind his father's back.

"So, how's life, my friend?" the fat one asked, gazing rapturously at his friend. "You're in government service somewhere? Worked your way up?"

"That I have, my dear! Been a collegiate assessor for two years now. Poor salary...but never mind! My wife gives music lessons, I make wooden cigarette cases on the side.

Excellent cigarette cases! I sell them for a rouble apiece. Anybody who takes ten or more gets a discount, you see. We manage somehow. I used to work in head office, you know, but now I've been transferred here as chief clerk in the same department... I'll be working here.

Well, and what about you? Already a state councillor I'll bet? Eh?"

"No, my dear, aim higher," said the fat one. "I'm already a privy councillor... I've got two stars."

The skinny one suddenly turned pale, froze, but his face quickly spread in all directions into the broadest smile; sparks seemed to fly from his face and eyes. He himself shriveled, shrank, subsided...His suitcases, bundles, and boxes shrivelled, cringed...His wife's long chin grew longer; Nathaniel stood to attention and buttoned his school uniform...

"I, Your Excellency...Very pleased, sir! A friend, one might say, from childhood... suddenly turns out to be such a dignitary! Hee-hee, sir."

"Enough, now!" The fat one winced. "Why this tone? You and I are friends from childhood—no need to go bowing to rank!"

"For pity's sake... It's not that, sir..." The skinny one started to giggle, shrivelling still more. "Your Excellency's gracious attention... like life-giving water... This, Your Excellency, is my son Nathaniel... my wife Louisa, a Lutheran, in some sense..."

The fat one was about to protest, but written on the skinny one's face was such veneration, sweetness, and respectful twinging that the privy councillor felt sick. He turned away from the skinny one and gave him his hand in farewell.

The skinny one squeezed three fingers, bowed with his whole body, and giggled like a Chinaman: "Hee-hee-hee." His wife smiled. Nathaniel bowed, scraped with his foot, and dropped his cap. All three were pleasantly astonished.