

The Advocates

by C. P. Boyko

Through slowmoving crowds we hurried toward an advocacy request. You, to indicate your disgust at being impeded, Uvering, threw your arms up and waddled clownishly, miming hopeless unfreedom. I, Iyznik, cleared my throat and said, “Pardon. Advocates coming through.” Soon a path was cleared through the throng.

You scowlingly cussed by hand.

We, Iyznik and Uvering, stood on busy streetcorners smiling, looking alert, judicious, and friendly.

Nobody needed us.

Mireez sat dharna that day. It rained.

A street poet, seeing us, Uvering and Iyznik, pass by, declaimed, by both hand and voice, an impromptu paeon to advocates.

We applauded, curtseying, and were curtseyed to and applauded.

I, the strangler, itched to be strangling.

You, Uvering, and I, Iyznik, responded to a request for advocates.

Said the redehyed complainant, pointing, “This lowlife twisted my arm. I’m worried it’s broken.”

Cried the defendant, “Nonsense! Else why not go to the sickhouse like I suggested?”

Meanwhile, you railed by hand.

to sit dharna: to protest a wrong by sitting at the wrongdoer’s door without eating until an apology or reparation is made.

I explained, by mouth and by hand, “My partner is deaf. Use sign language also, please.”

The complainant and the defendant, speaking by hand laboriously, grew calmer.

Iyznik, you asked, with silky solicitude, “Would you like to go to the sick-house?”

Uvering scoffed. “Stop puling, you baby. Master yourself, you wretch.”

The complainant stifled a snuffle.

When I, Uvering, in this story am quoted speaking, remember, reader, that I am speaking by hand.

“What would you like to happen?” asked Iyznik.

Said the complainant, “They should apologize.”

The defendant spluttered, “I said already that I was sorry five times, you idiot!”

I, Iyznik, spoke also always by hand (if also aloud) for Uvering’s benefit.

You, Uvering, asked, “And what did this whiner do to provoke you?”

Said the defendant with some reluctance, “Called me a suck.”

You made a conclusive gesture and crossed your arms.

I, the defendant, had in my childhood often been called a suck by my evenolds.

“I am *not* a suck,” I insisted.

“Are you going to make a countercomplaint?” you, Uvering, asked.

The eyes of defendant and of complainant fleetingly met.

“No, thanks,” the defendant muttered.

evenold: a person of the same age; a coeval or contemporary.

By footmail one day, you, Iyznik, received a letter on paper. Opening it, you savored its novel tangibleness, its rustle, its iron odor of ink, and sat, with a pleased expectancy, straighter—never imagining that your very life was about to utterly change.

I, the defendant, worried, deep down, that, deep down, I was a suck.

Iyznik, you'd known, abstractly, that any day this might happen—as it did daily, all round the world, to others. You'd thought, however, that when it happened to you, you'd somehow be different: wiser, or abler—older, at least. You still were too young! Statistically, though, you knew, you had passed already the average age. There had been no error. That distant, notional anyday was today.

You muttered, by voice but not yet by hand, “I'm going to be a parent.”

I, Leni, and you, Marjoey, together lay by the swimming pond, forging universes of mud—when someone in our direction kicked dirt and ran away laughing.

“Hey!” we cried, shaking dirt from our hair.

I asked, “Who was that? The strangler?”

You doubted it. “Just some shirky coward.”

“I'd like to make them eat puke!”

You shrugged.

I, Uvering, plucked the letter from Iyznik's faltering grasp, and read it.

A smile stole over my face. “We're having a baby!”

Your, the defendant's, parents requested advocacy, complaining that you were lazy and selfish.

Uvering remonstrated, “Your child is barely an adult. Lower your expectations a little.”

“We”?

I, Uvering, and you, Iyznik, spotted a person tossing an empty bottle aside one day in the gardenpark. We pursued the culprit.

“You dropped your bottle—by accident, I assume,” you said.

I said, “That was littering. Pick it up.”

Said the culprit, “No, I will not. I’m sorry. I dropped that bottle on purpose, for a good reason—namely, to raise awareness: The nearest bottle collection tub is beyond the chokeberry grove. But shouldn’t there be one here, by the footpath everyone uses?”

The thought of raising a child with Uvering filled me, Iyznik, with angst.

I, Uvering, twitched with unexpressed rage.

You, anxiously laughing, placed a restraining hand on my shoulder, Iyznik. “Well, after all, the important thing is that no one’s hurt. Though unsightly, littering is a victimless wrong.”

I tightlier clenched my spine.

Reading, Kazhmi, you called to Exodi, “What’s the meaning of ‘talk outside of one’s brains’?”

“It means, I believe, to senselessly rave.”

“. . . That doesn’t make sense in context.”

“Then look it up in the dictionary.”

You did. “It means,” you announced, “to do what you did just now: to pretend to know things you don’t.”

“I didn’t pretend to know.”

“You implied you knew.”

“I believe I said ‘I believe.’ ”

“You didn’t.”

“You’re misremembering.”

“You, however, remember everything perfectly, I suppose.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“It’s what you implied.”

And so on.

Iyznik never forstood you, Uvering, always siding instead with hooligans, cads, and lowlifes.

Mireez sat dharna.

Uvering, you exhaled to the very end of your breath, imagining muscles softening, nerves unwinding, and heartrate slowing.

It helped a little. You felt a little less angry.

“Advocacy!” cried persons. “We need an advocate!” persons cried.

Menacingly, you, Uvering, told the strangler to strangle no one today.

Iyznik, you were congratulated by fellow advocates on your upcoming parenthood.

You rebuked me, Uvering, for announcing the news. “I haven’t decided yet if I even plan to accept!”

I balked in surprise. The duty of every citizen was to help raise tomorrow’s citizens, surely.

You sometimes, Uvering, didn’t want to breathe deeply, finding it too much work to relax.

I, the strangler, promised to strangle no one today.

At supper, Uvering, you announced that I, Iyznik, hadn’t decided yet if I even planned to accept my baby assignment.

forstand: to stand up for, to defend.

I in appalment glouted at you.

Iyznik, having been well brought up by your loving parents, Orzeel and Loubu, you feared becoming yourself a parent, and failing miserably to rise to their standard.

We, Iyznik and Uvering, to avoid Mireez, by the back door entered and exited.

Having been, as you saw it, Uvering, badly raised by your parents, Kazhmi and Exodi, you had always wanted to be a parent yourself, and shame them by doing better than they had done.

Someone complained about a street singer's cynical lyrics.

I, Iyznik, listened, translating into sign language for the benefit of my partner, while expurgating the pessimisticest parts.

You, Uvering, shrugging irritably, said, "What's wrong with this?"

You had seven weeks to refuse the baby assignment, Iyznik, the letter said.

"That shovel is mine," complained the complainant. "Tell them to give it back to me."

"No, it isn't their shovel," said the defendant. "Theirs, I admit, I borrowed, and lost. But this is a different one. I acquired it recently from a secondhand storehouse."

Uvering took it, saying, "You owe your neighbor a shovel. This one will do."

From not far, we, Iyznik and Uvering, watched the strangler playing a game of draughts in the draughtspark.

"Don't get angry," said Iyznik—making you angry, Uvering.

glout: to frown or scowl.

I, Shtuli, encouraged you to accept the baby assignment, Iyznik. “Just think how nice it would be to have in the house a baby again! We all could pitch in. I’ve lots of free time. I bet I still have Asfalyi’s old sleepsuits, booties, and bloomers stuffed in a closet somewhere . . .”

You hugged me, teary with gratitude and uncertainty.

You, a bicyclist, had been bicycling quicker than was safe. I, Uvering, flagged you down and rebuked you vigorously.

Defending your haste, you cited its urgent cause and your dextrous carefulness.

Anger at your defiance staggered my heart.

You, Marjoey, not meaning any detraction of your own parents, whispered in Iyznik’s ear, “You would be my favoritest boombi ever.”

“Need this infraction,” asked the defendant meekly, “be entered into my public record forever?”

Uvering was intransigent.

Iyznik, speaking by voice when Uvering wasn’t looking, said soothingly, “My report will offset my partner’s.”

You’d had since earliest childhood, Uvering, what your family still euphemistically called a wasp up your nose.

At the storehouse, Uvering, you and I, Iyznik, closely followed the strangler as they selected groceries.

Someone, it seemed, had slept in the park all night, despite rain. Concerned passersby that morning submitted advocacy requests on the sleeping per-

boombi: (an affectionate name for) a parent.

wasp up one’s nose: an ingrained feeling of resentment deriving from a sense of inferiority and characterized by a quickness to take offense at perceived slights.

son's behalf.

You irritably corrected a person's sign language, Uvering.

You, Iyznik, stood strides away and in soft but loudening tones called out to the sleeping person, "Awaken, friend! Friend, wake up!"

I, Uvering, clapped my hands near their ears—effectlessly, so I nudged them between the ribs with my foot.

A person was peeping in through your window.

Startled, you called your spouse, who in turn was startled, and drew you into the hallway.

"Tell them to go away."

"I already tried that," you lied. It anyway seemed unlikely to work.

You, Iyznik, pulled me away. "Stop kicking that person, Uvering!"

Anger flooded my bloodways. Always, I felt, you misrepresented me and my actions thus. You were always thwarting me; you were never supporting me. You were far the worst partner any advocate ever had.

The peeper, still peeping, grinned.

"Have your book identify them," suggested your spouse.

"Without their permission?"

"Ask their permission, then!"

"Is a peeper likely to give permission to be identified?"

You, who'd slept in the park, had slept in the park because you'd been robbed. "They took my last quarterpiece—which in fact I'd borrowed to pay a debt. I owe gold all over the place. Not even my parents, spouses, or kids will lend to me now. I can't seem to turn a profit to save my life. I'm a waste of skin. I'm a worthless failure. I'm doomed."

"But why sleep outside," said Iyznik, "when there are plenty of empty homes in the suburbs?"

“Foodcredit homes for foodworkers? Yes,” you grunted, “I guess that’s all I deserve.”

“Call for advocacy,” suggested your spouse.

“A person who peeps is probably harmless. Look at that face.”

The peeper, still peeping, grinned.

“I shouldn’t have stopped your kicking that person,” Iyznik apologized. “I’d have liked to kick them myself.”

Said Uvering, “Kick a goldworker, spoil a shoe.”

That day, too, you, Mireez, sat dharna.

You, Iyznik, tried to recall that goldworkers needed advocacy as much as, or more than, foodworkers did.

“Your peeper, whose name is Geelan, is harmless,” Iyznik informed you.

“See?” said your spouse.

“Yes, Geelan’s alleged record of wrongs is brimful of peepings, surely, but peepings only.”

Your spouse said, “Didn’t I say so?”

“We will escort our friend from the neighborhood, which will solve the problem for now . . .”

You opened your mouth—

“If Geelan comes back,” said Uvering, “shut your curtains.”

Said the advocates’ oath, ‘An advocate sympathizes with all.’

We, Iyznik and Uvering, at the strangler’s doorstep stood waiting watchfully.

In Pamoj’s memorybook, you, Uvering, wrote: ‘Increasingly, speech by hand is becoming artless and sloppy, due to a lack of practice. Too many

persons today rely on their books—rely on the written word—to communicate with the deaf. But writing is not, and never can be, true speech. Thus ‘to speak by book,’ as is said these days, is a most nefarious oxymoron.’

Iyznik, to you Asfalyi confided, “Probably I don’t want to raise children, either. There’s nothing wrong with that. Don’t let anyone tell you what or what not to do.”

You were touched, the more so because Asfalyi and you had hardly had cause to talk before now.

You promised, “I won’t.”

Demanded Uvering, “Talk by hand! I can’t understand what you’re saying!”

“This is a private, personal conversation,” said Iyznik.

Uvering, your imperfect ability to read lips was hampered by rage at feeling ignored.

Life was unmeaning.

Friendship, and love, and honor, and happiness, and success, and wisdom, and hope, and duty, and charity, and ambition—these were mere words, mere noise.

There was nothing anywhere firm or sound. All the world was but an electric dustcloud, a troublous vacuum, a boundless void by minute vibrations perturbed incessantly.

Human persons were only vagabond scum that floated upon this turbulent, filthy welter awhile.

We, Odori and Joopi, told you that we were there for you, Iyznik. “Like it or not, you’re family.”

A sob of laughter escaped you.

A person, unwell and haunted by thinking, chose to *fordo* himself.

fordo: to put a living being out of existence, to kill.

What had been in your thoughts “a baby” became degreemeal “the baby,” Iyznik.

You, who had made the choice to fordo yourself, would require a suicide bomb.

The clerk at the storehouse asked what you planned to use it for.

“Suicide,” you replied.

The clerk was relieved.

Uvering, you were envious of the fawning attention Iyznik was now receiving. You wished that you’d been assigned the baby instead. It should have been you instead.

A suicide bomb was sometimes, though rarely, used as a murder bomb—one that killed the murderer too, of course.

The baby’s expected birthday was just a season away, the letter informed you, Iyznik. Its biological parent lived in Remoteland, whither you’d have to travel to welcome it and to bring it home—if you so decided to do.

“Do you mind if my book identifies you?” the storehouse clerk asked.

The suicide said, “I give my permission.”

The baby, you, Iyznik, learned, would by now already have grown lanugo.

The advocates’ oath asserted, ‘To use a suicide bomb for murder deserves the bitterest condemnation.’

We, Iyznik and Uvering, went to your, the suicide’s, house.

I, Iyznik, condoled with you. “Are you sure you’re ready to end your

degreemeal: degree by degree.

lanugo: fine, soft hair, especially that which covers a fetus.

life? Would you like to speak with a nurse?”

“No, thank you. I’m sure.”

Because you were old, I didn’t in earnest try to dissuade you.

I, Odori, discreetly pointed across the street.

You, Marjoey, loud, said, “Who’s that?”

I waited until the person had turned the corner, then said, “The strangler. Avoid that person.”

“That’s weird.” —“What’s weird?” —“I don’t know.”

The strangler looked different than you’d imagined; but you already couldn’t remember what you’d imagined.

Uvering said, “Remember to use the bomb out of doors, and far from all habitations and persons. Shout, if you can, a warning before you detonate it.”

“I’m neither a fool,” the suicide answered, “nor an assassin.”

Iyznik said, “Well, we wish you a brief and painless transition. Nothing, at worst, awaits you. Farewell.”

I, the storyteller, will use, when persons are talking, double quotation marks.

I will use instead, for things written, single quotation marks (or inverted commas, as they in whimsical illustration are sometimes called).

We, Iyznik and Uvering, hadn’t reached the street when the house behind us was shaken by an explosion.

Anger and rue confounded us.

Uvering, I, Mireez, only wanted you to admit you’d wronged me.

A dancing mania would be passing that afternoon through the neighborhood, and Marjoey longed to attend.

Odori and Joopi wondered if it was safe for an unaccompanied child to

dance with the maniacs.

“Don’t be fools,” I, Uvering, said: “It’s perfectly safe. No rowdies or troublemakers are tolerated. And scores of nurses and volunteers will be giving food and first aid and water. There’s no such thing as an unaccompanied child there. Nowadays even yardbabies safely dance in the streets. Don’t worry.”

Marjoey, cheering, embraced me.

To refuse a baby assignment, Iyznik, you learned, one had to appear, or deputize someone else to appear, in person before a judicatory panel and sing (by voice or by hand) the Song of Renunciation of Parents’ Privileges and Duties, then swear an Oath of Solemnity and Sincerity, and then give a vial of blood.

You didn’t like singing, swearing, or giving blood.

Marjoey galloped and twirled and shimmied and writhed and gamboled and pranced and swayed through the twirling, galloping, writhing, shimmying, prancing, gamboling, swaying crowd with delight.

On the omnibus, Iyznik chatted to me, the strangler, about the rainfall.

You glowered, Uvering.

At the breakfast table, Odori, reading the world’s bad news, said, “It says in Brookstate last night an oldperson died while trying to kill that murderer with a suicide bomb.”

Said Iyznik, “Alleged murderer, please.”

You, Uvering, scoffed. “There’s hundreds of witnesses!”

“The defendant, nevertheless, has yet to confess.”

The baby, you, Iyznik, learned, would by now be hiccupping.

Said Kazhmi, “So what? One oldperson somewhere tried to do something good with their death. I’d say that the only *bad* news is that the murderer got

away!”

“That’s disgusting, Grambi,” Asfalyi said. “That’s a person.”

Exodi said, “And when will you try to do something good, I wonder, with yours?”

“You’re older than me!” cried Kazhmi. “The work that I do is useful!”

Uvering left the table.

Said Iyznik, standing, “Another wonderful breakfast, Joopi. Most thanks.”

Lairn, you—my, Iyznik’s, baby’s progenitor—were exhausted, having been celebrated and lionized by your neighbors, family, and friends for months now. You fell asleep to their laughter, woke to their singing, ate what they cooked and baked for you, talked and walked with them, were upheld by them, entertained by them, calmed and coddled by them—and bored and annoyed by them.

You were looking forward to giving birth.

If, Iyznik, it’d instead been Uvering who’d received the assignment, there would be no decision to make, of course: you would simply do what you could to help bring the baby up.

Exodi, neither standing nor sitting hurt any less than lying recumbent.

We, Iyznik and Uvering, relieved you, the advocates who’d been watching the strangler’s door overnight. We wished you good sleep, and you wished us better weather.

Your joints felt rubbery, Lairn. You waddled when walking.

Briefly, Uvering, you and Iyznik patrolled a protest against some picketers who were protesting the inhabitants of an ugly, dilapidated apartment building beside the river downtown; these occupants had refused to allow the city to raze their home and rebuild it prettier and capaciouser. ‘Think of Others’

and ‘Don’t be Thwarters’ and ‘Be More Generous’ read the picketers’ placards; ‘Don’t Be Your Neighbor’s Conscience’ and ‘Think of Others’ and ‘Try to Empathize’ read the protestors’.

Mingling, chatting, and sharing food, the two groups had merged, and the mood was festive.

Because you didn’t like being jostled, you said, “Let’s leave.”

The baby had ceased to be an abstraction, Iyznik; it was becoming—not only in your imagination—a little person.

You, Uvering, felt your disparate parts unite and align in anger.

Marjoey, you asked the clerk at a candy kiosk for sugarplums.

“Not without a parent’s permission,” kindly the clerk replied.

You peed by accident, Lairn.

Persons passing would sometimes ask you, Mireez, your reason for sitting dharna.

“There lives an advocate here,” you told them, “who pushed me violently down a staircase.”

They all agreed, with surprised indignance, that such behavior in any person was inexcusable, but was utterly unbecoming of someone calling themselves an advocate.

You, Iyznik, wrote, on a private page of your book, that Uvering’s unremitting irascibility was increasingly crazing.

Uvering, confiscating from me, the strangler, a rubber strap, gave my pate a smack with it.

Iyznik glowered.

crazing: that crazes, or makes crazy; maddening.

You, Iyznik, remembered vaguely the time, three lustrums ago, when you had yourself been pregnant. The leafy neighborhood where you'd lived then, the gloomy music you'd then been humming, the paper letters you'd penned and traded with friends, the feeling of being lonely, unique, and misunderstood—these memories all were vivid now than what it had felt like growing a child inside you.

Uvering said, “What shit are you writing now?”

“That’s okay,” the complainant said. “I’m not deaf. You don’t have to speak by hand.”

“But my partner, Uvering, is,” I, Iyznik, said both aloud and by hand.

“I tender apologies,” the complainant fumblingly signed.

You, Uvering, scowling, said, “You should practice more.”

The complainant simpered ingratiatingly.

An oldperson said, “Tomorrow I might feel better; I might tomorrow feel worse . . .”

You, Uvering, nodding, gently relieved the oldperson of their suicide bomb.

Like many other young biological parents, Uvering, during pregnancy you'd decided to keep your baby. You had, however, like many others, been too confused and abashed to say so before the parent arrived, and then you were too exhausted, polite, and flustered to make a fuss. But, like many others, for months thereafter you languished, racked by remorse. —You vowed and took care to never again get pregnant.

Not since advocacy academy had you, Uvering, held a suicide bomb.

“That isn’t a toy,” said Iyznik.

“I’m not an idiot.”

“Give it here.”

lustrum: a period of five years.

“Get away!”

“You’ll blow us both up.”

“I ought to!”

And so on.

Lairn, you asked for some time alone, and received it.

Restless, confused, and lonely, you, weeping, mourned your old life: anonymous, ordinary, and independent.

Under Iyznik’s stern gaze, you, Uvering, placed the suicide bomb inside a disposal chute—and let go.

We, Iyznik and Uvering, while we walked, held hands, because that’s what advocate partners did when on duty.

A suicide bomb was triggered by firmly squeezing its safety lever, and detonated by letting go.

While we, the concerned complainants, explained to Iyznik that we had failed to elicit any response but crying, you, squatting, Uvering, showed the lost, frightened child your advocate’s brooch, and, grimacing sympathetically, said, “We’ll help you to find your boombi, okay?”

Though able to speak, the child, at first shyly, answered by hand.

I, Uvering, found your hand to be reprehensibly sweaty, Iyznik.

You, Uvering, and I, Iyznik, responded to a request for advocates.

The complainant looked bashful when we arrived. “My ex was just here, and pestering me, but left when I called for advocacy.”

We scanned the defendant’s public alleged record of wrongs. The record was long.

You wanted to find the ex and intimidate them. I thought instead we should stay and soothe the complainant.

When I, Iyznik, held your, Uvering's, hand, its warmth and its softness reconciled me a little to you.

"I'm staying," said Iyznik.

Uvering said, "I'm leaving," and made a move in the door's direction.

You, Iyznik, flinched, but stayed put.

I, Uvering, flinched, but exited.

Said the billboards downtown, 'Be Kindly,' and, 'Think of Others Before Yourself.'

We, Iyznik and Uvering, stood on either side of the door, each trembling with rage and shame.

You by hand, Iyznik, spoke my, Uvering's, name reprovingly.

Said the advocates' oath, 'An advocate never parts from their partner.'

You, Uvering, called your partner a shithead, shitheart, and shitheel.

We, Iyznik and Uvering, stayed awhile to soothe the complainant, eating their cake and drinking their punch.

Your, the defendant's, record of allegations included pestering; skulking; laughing unkindly; being ungrateful; teasing; insulting; littering; touching persons without permission; complaining; missing appointments; bullying; not returning things borrowed; sneering; and teaching children to swear.

I, Uvering, checked your foodcredit balance also. You'd finished positive only thirty of more than eight hundred weeks of adulthood.

"Idle, vicious, and antisocial," I judged.

I, Iyznik, enjoined compassion. "Remember, persons who bother others can

hardly be very happy.”

Uvering thought this truism noxious treacle, and said so.

Shtuli at breakfast said, “I’d be strangled rather than be a strangler.”

Odori said, “But we shouldn’t pity the strangler, either.”

“Their family, though, must be mortified.”

I, Iyznik, by book requested a meeting with the defendant. ‘Nothing would please us more than to hear your side of the story.’

Came the defendant’s answer: ‘Get shat.’

Which, Uvering, made you angry.

You, Iyznik, wrote to your biological child (who now was sixteen, and possibly having babies herself!) a casual, reacquaintory note—not mentioning your impending, prospective parenthood yet.

Uvering, you were able, from information available in the public library, to deduce the defendant’s whereabouts.

“We are going to visit them,” you declared.

I, Iyznik, agreed reluctantly.

I, the defendant, idled at home unhappily, lonely, irritable, and bored.

To me, all the world seemed a chafing, comfortless, endless maze of perversely pointless malignity.

I, Iyznik, said, “Calm yourself.”

This enraged you, Uvering.

I, the defendant, answered the door, expecting some fresh affliction.

Two advocates on the threshold stood. I, disgusted, sighed, “What am I supposed to have done wrong now?”

You, Uvering, as you elbowed your way inside the defendant’s room,

warned them, “Speak by hand, child of cheats.”

I, Iyznik, apologizingly followed.

It was, at that time, ignoble and antisocial to overlive.

You, Uvering, said, “I also can pester persons. It’s easy.”

I, the defendant, helplessly watched you touch my belongings, sit in my chairs, and sniff at my food contemptuously.

Marjoey, you stared at shelffuls of sugar longingly.

You, the defendant, pleaded with Iyznik, “Leave me alone.”

“We’ll leave you alone,” said Uvering, “if you promise to leave alone the complainant.”

Racked by dismay, you promised.

Exodi’s snores were worryingly irregular, Kazhmi.

“Everyone hates me,” sobbed the defendant. “No one can stand me. Even my face is pestersome to the persons I love.”

I, Iyznik, comforted the defendant; you fleered at both of us, Uvering.

You, the strangler, at yet another new job, explained that the only time that you felt like strangling a child was when you were left alone with one.

“Well,” your coworkers laughed uneasily, “since we never have children here, and you’ll never anyway work alone, you’ll do fine.”

I, Iyznik, gave the defendant pamphlets on selfcontrol, selfrespect, and friendmaking.

You, Uvering, wrote an almost ungrudging note to your biological parent,

thanking them for the mootable gift of life.

I, the defendant, racked by the thought that you, the complainant, loathed me, returned again to your house to try to explain myself, and to prove to you that I wasn't bad.

You refused to open the door or even acknowledge what I was saying—calling instead immediately for advocacy.

“Perhaps we ought to let other advocates handle this one,” I, Iyznik, rapidly walking backwards before a rapidly walking Uvering, said by hand.

That I, Iyznik, didn't trust you to keep your temper is what provoked you to lose it, Uvering.

The fact that your, the defendant's, ex, the complainant, hated you was what made you behave so hateably.

Mireez, you also, the day that you, as you claimed, were pushed down the stairs by Uvering, had been arguing through a door with your ex.

You, Uvering, pushing me, the defendant, threatened to punch my face if I didn't leave the complainant be, and to break my neck if I came again within throw of them.

I retreated abjectly.

The target of all your sorrow and spite had shifted that day, Mireez, from your ex to Uvering.

The ire you, Uvering, vented at the defendant drew from a well of wrathful resentment harbored towards Mireez for, by sitting dharna, defaming you.

Iyznik, you wrote a wellwishing note of thanks and congratulation to Lairn,

mootable: open to discussion; debatable.

the baby's progenitor in Remoteland.

Uvering, you'd admitted to having pushed me, Mireez, but claimed that I'd thrown myself down the stairs to make you look bad.

I, Lairn, the progenitor of your, Iyznik's, baby, received your chivalrous note, and chivalrously replied.

I, Iyznik, hadn't corroborated your story, Uvering. Having been at the crucial moment interrogating Mireez's ex on the other side of the door, I'd seen neither push nor fall. I, you felt, abandoning you, had broken my oath. You bore me a grudge for that.

After seasons of overhearing a parent's bullying, we, some scandalized neighbors, filed on the child's behalf a request for advocacy.

Many of those who bothered to read your side of the story, Uvering, felt that nevertheless an advocate shouldn't ever for any reason be pushing anyone. Others, advocates mostly, fervently disagreed, saying pushing sometimes was necessary—but wouldn't specify when or under what circumstances, instead preferring to trust the advocate's intuition and expertise. Such defenses only provoked more savage denunciations. Your public shelves were replete with them.

I, Iyznik, told the defendant, Motu, "We're here today to discuss a serious matter."

"You've been accused," you, Uvering, said, "of teasing, insulting, gaslighting, underestimating, manipulatively withholding affection from, and discrediting the emotions of your own child."

Seeming blandly amused, you, Motu, assured us, Iyznik and Uvering, that there must have been some mistake: "I dote on that little kid." Then you

chivalrous: characterized by consideration and courtesy.

turned and, in the same breath, vociferously berated that little kid for repining, dawdling, and getting dirty.

“Would you mind,” asked Uvering, “if we talked to the child a minute?”

“Of course not,” Motu said. “Hey! I told you to hurry up and get over here. There are persons waiting to talk to you. This is Sozu. Tell them how good a parent your boombi is—and for once, no lying!”

You, Motu, had been by bullying parents raised.

“Perhaps we could talk to Sozu alone?”

Asked Motu, “What for?”

Said Uvering, “Children sometimes are shy with parents around.”

“Not this one! I can’t get this one to quiet down to save lives. Huh, Sozu?”

I, Sozu, downcast, said nothing.

“Now you’re just acting perfect to make me look like a liar—one of your favorite games! Well, I’ve had enough of it. Tell the advocates what I told you to tell them, now!”

I, Sozu, your, Motu’s, child, was afraid of you—and dependent utterly on you.

You, Motu, before becoming yourself a parent, had never tasted prepotency. Now you batted on it—and loathed yourself for your gluttony. That self-loathing, too, was on Sozu vented.

I, Sozu, swallowing sobs, denied that my boombi bullied me.

You were satisfied, Iyznik.

Uvering wasn’t.

repine: to feel or express discontent; to fret, grumble, or complain.

prepotency: the condition of being more powerful than others.

Uvering, you and Iyznik interrogated my, Sozu's, teachers, of whom a number admitted gravely to having noticed my melancholic distractability.

You, who every day badly wanted to strangle everyone, never did.

Iyznik, you helped me, Uvering, interview the complainant neighbors, of whom a few under open oath were, if need be, willing to swear to Motu's abuse of Sozu.

You, who every day badly wanted to strangle everyone, wished dismemberment on the strangler.

Uvering, you and Iyznik brought several advocate pairs and upbringing experts with you next day to Motu's and Sozu's house.

"What's all this?"

You gently explained, "A parenting intervention."

After all, Iyznik, every citizen had to help raise tomorrow's citizens.

"Don't I have any choice?" asked Motu.

"Not really," Uvering said. "Alternatively, I publish the allegations and let the public decide."

An upbringing expert held out a pamphlet luringly.

Motu, grimacing, snatched it.

You, who every day badly wanted to strangle everyone, craved to strangle the strangler.

"So, let's suppose," an upbringing expert said, "you begin experiencing somatic concomitants of the anger cycle. What now?"

"Acknowledge," you, Motu, voice hoarse with repetition, replied by rote.

"That's correct. And then what?"

“Negotiate.” ”

“Using what?”

“My breathing.”

“Because?”

“The body is better bargained with by the body itself.” ”

I, Uvering, said, “I find this to be the usefulest part.”

We, closing our eyes, all took a deep breath together, then let it ease-fully out.

You, the defendant, swaggered about the crowded carousal parlor in elbow rowels, luxuriating in how much berth you were given.

Suddenly you were seized by two advocates who rebuked you sternly and confiscated your rowels.

“Someone,” said Iyznik, “might have been hurt.”

At the end of the week, I, Motu, embraced you, Uvering, gratefully.

“We’ll drop by to see how you’re doing often,” you promised.

Uvering, in your publicly shelved report of alleged wrongdoing, you described the defendant’s actions as ‘vile,’ ‘depraved,’ and ‘flagitious.’

I, Iyznik, consequently felt obligated to minimize and to mitigate the offense.

The climactic scenes of a famous play were that afternoon being staged downtown on location. Uvering, you and Iyznik patrolled unwarrantedly the wellbehaved crowd assembled round city hall.

There emerged two beautiful actors, arguing eloquently and volubly by both voice and hand. They descended fleetly the marble perron and strode away through the passage formed by the persons ranged on each side.

Uncraning your neck, unbating your breath, you, satisfied, smiled.

Then, frowning again already because you didn’t like crowds, you said, “Can we go now?”

flagitious: extremely wicked.

Closing your eyes, you, Uvering, filled and emptied your lungs.

I, who every day badly wanted to strangle everyone, threw my lunch at the strangler's housefront.

You warned me not to continue, Uvering.

"Stranglers ought to be killed!," I angrily shouted. "Letting them live puts children in danger!"

Reading my lips, you told me that there was little if any danger as long as stranglers were closely watched. "If you're really worried, then volunteer for a shift. The night ones are underpopular in particular."

"Oh?"

The day passed without a single request for advocacy. We, Iyznik and Uvering, were dissatisfied.

I, who every day badly wanted to strangle everyone, skulking midnightly past the house of the strangler, sometimes discovered no one on watch.

"Your uniform's filthy," Uvering said, removing a smutch from Iyznik's lapel.

Said Iyznik, "Most thanks."

"You make us look unprofessional."

The defendant countercomplained.

"I forgot to announce," you, Iyznik, that night at supper announced, "I've made up my mind."

Your smile of uneasy, hopeful decisiveness said the rest.

We leapt to our feet and, gathering round you, hoisted you by the armpits aloft; we circled the table, staggering, laughing, tickling your feet, and singing the Ode to Parents of Infants thrice.

midnightly: every midnight.

You hated pregnancy, Lairn; you hated the stupid baby.

This made you feel like a monster. Searching the public library, though, you found with relief that thousands of biological parents felt the same way.

“Are you really finally sure?” you, Uvering, asked me, Iyznik. “Or are you going to change your mind?”

“With your help,” I said, “I intend to bring up this bloody baby impeccably.”

I outheld my elbow for you to clasp, which you, sighing meltingly, did.

One clement morning downtown, a car, parked and empty, suddenly started honking its horn repeatedly.

Persons passing by stopped and, dumbfounded, stared, while others emerged from doorways or craned round corners to see the cause of the din. The windows that lined the boulevard soon were crowded with faces puzzled or angry. Farther away, the noise, though perceived but dimly, aroused sensations of angst, resentment, dismay, and generalized dysphoria. Altogether, the happiness of a thousand persons was negatively affected.

Your bicycle wasn't where you had left it.

Someone had moved it, maybe? You looked around at the other racks, but it wasn't there to be seen.

Your groceries' weight seemed suddenly greater.

Asked Iyznik, shouting, “Are you in charge of this car today?”

The defendant nodded. “And every other day too. I own it; it's mine. It's beautiful, ain't it?”

“No. It's defective. Can't you turn off that damnable honking? Please?”

Unaffected, Uvering chuckled.

The grocery storehouse manager was bemused. “There's a warehouse filled with unriden bicycles not two throws from here.”

“That,” the defendant grinned, “is my car’s protection. Should any lowlife so much as finger a door or window, their touch will trip the alarm. This honking alerts me instantly—while deterring the wouldbe thief as well!”

Hands cupped over your ears, you, Iyznik, cried, “Turn it off!”

The defendant did so. “Ingenious, ain’t it? My partner owns the design. Do either of you have cars?”

You hated to leave the spot whence your bicycle had gone missing. Someone had only borrowed it, surely; surely, they’d soon return it.

“There must’ve been an emergency,” you supposed. But why then take yours, and not one of those nearby in the Share A Bicycle rack?

You, Iyznik, quivered with stifled rage. “You intend to sell that obnoxious nuisance for gold?”

“That’s right!” The defendant savored the thought. “We’re planning to manufacture these “antitheft systems,” as we call them, in factories by the thousand.”

You booked to your spouse, ‘I think that my bike’s been stolen.’

‘What?! Why?!’

You couldn’t imagine why, and you laughed aloud at the sheer absurdity. But a catch in your laugh betrayed your dismay.

The local bad news reported that I, the strangler, had been attacked in the night outside my own home, but safely was now recovering in a sickhouse.

Although the violence was execrated, some wondered what I’d been doing out in the street so late, and unwatched.

The clerk at the warehouse urged you, whose bike was missing, to register a complaint. “We mustn’t let thieves run round stealing bikes.”

A thief! Were there really thieves? Were there really persons who thieve?

The cynical clerk was sure of it.

Uvering, smirking, placed a reproving hand on your shoulder, Iyznik. “Well, after all, the important thing is that no one here has been hurt. Right, partner?”

Said Uvering, “Why would anyone steal your junky old bicycle?”

The complainant shrugged.

“There’s a warehouse just down the street that’s filled with new bikes.”

“It puzzles me too.”

You’d live with the pain, you’d live as the pain, for life was, however painful, worth living, Exodi.

“Can you describe your bicycle?” Iyznik asked. “Was it special? Somehow unique?”

“I’d painted it pink and red. And the seat was cushioned to ease the pain in my back: I suffer from chronic back pain.”

You, Uvering, made a honking noise. “Small surprise that someone resolved to steal it, then!—standing out as it did like pox on a snowbank.”

Iyznik, you said my, Uvering’s, name reprovingly.

Meanwhile, the thief, on bicycle, huffing, crested a hill, and, whooping, sailed down the slope.

Often, Uvering, you were glad to be deaf, and proud of your differentness.

Because thieves are rarer than swimming kangaroos, I, the writer, will give the bicycle thief no more of this story’s space.

You, Iyznik, wrote in Pamoj’s memorybook that lately requests for advocacy came frequentlier and frequentlier from goldworkers.

Mireez sat dharna, and watched the trees shed their leaves.

‘Some useless oldperson ought to suicidebomb the strangler to death,’ opined a presumptive youngperson.

Sometimes, to get an hour to yourself, you, Iyznik, would waken early and slip upstairs to the rooftop garden, and there, in privacy, watch your mind, like the sky, take light.

I, Uvering, started looking at babies, toddlers, and children scrutinously, imagining they looked sad, soiled, and underloved.

For a while, although there were many volunteer watchers watching the strangler’s house round the clock, there also were many protesters, shaking placards and crying shame upon strangler, watchers, and one another; so, many advocates, too, were needed to keep an eye on the throng.

I, Uvering, hated crowds, though; so I and you, Iyznik, stayed away.

I, the strangler, appreciated the crowd that followed me everywhere—for I feared, since being attacked, aloneness.

To get a moment alone, you, Uvering, sometimes lingered beyond necessity on the toilet.

Niceties being onerous, persons tend to see other persons as either villains or heroes.

Stranglers are even rarer than thieves. Forgive my, the storyteller’s, undue attention to this one.

“What,” I, Iyznik, said, “would you like us to do, exactly?”

“Discover who is to blame and publicly shame them!” cried the complainant.

Uvering said, “That sentiment ought to shame you.”

The crowd outside my, the strangler’s, door, to my consternation, grew nightly smaller.

I’d have to do something soon.

Coming straightaway from the teleportation station, I, Uvering, and you, Iyznik, laden with presents, knocked upon Lairn’s door gently, and gently entered the room.

Without knowing why, Lairn burst into sobs.

I, Kazhmi, called through the door.

Uvering, you and Iyznik showed Lairn some drawings of where you lived, and with whom.

Tearfully beaming, Lairn, you thanked everybody for everything.

You, Iyznik, chaptermeal read a novel to Lairn—and also to me, your baby unborn.

“Would everyone please just leave me alone!” howled Lairn.

In whispers, Uvering, you and Iyznik, and we, Lairn’s family and friends, reminded each other soothingly that emotional volatility was, among all young biological parents, perfectly natural.

To kill time, we, Iyznik and Uvering, through the wintry streets of Remote-land wearily trudged.

You, Lairn, were in pain.

chaptermeal: chapter by chapter.

Exodi didn't answer.

Iyznik and Uvering and your friends and family, Lairn, sang the Psalm for Successful Childbirth.

“Shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up!” you shrieked.

Efficient, precise, and nimble, the nurses heartened and helped you, Lairn.

Uvering, you received from your boombi Kazhmi a note announcing your boombi Exodi's death.

I, the baby, drew breath to scream.

A child placed its tender neck in the strangler's hands.

Uvering, you, not wanting to miss the funeral, teleported back home alone, while I, Iyznik, slowlier with the baby returned by airbus.

You, Uvering, sipped the soup of your boombi's bones.

I, Iyznik, stared at the baby's sleepwrinkled face for hours.

You, Uvering, held the baby.

You held up various objects, Iyznik, so that the baby could see them, each for the first time ever.

You, holding the baby, Uvering, coughed, congested with love.

In desperation, I, Iyznik, dandled the screaming baby.

Uvering, even when in the babypark it was you who cradled the baby, everyone seemed intuitively to know who the parent was, and bestowed on Iyznik

their questions, praise, and advice.

“I’m sad that Grambi is dead,” Marjoey, you said, “but happy that there’s a baby!”

Uvering, at the sight of the baby tremulously asleep in its bassinet, you were overcome with protective rage at the foolish, dangerous, vicious world.

Iyznik, you watched, enrapt, as the baby guzzled its pabulum.

For two days, you, Uvering, brooded, speaking to no one, paying to nothing any attention.

Iyznik was worried.

You, Uvering, felt that Exodi’s death had paid, in a way, in part, for the baby’s birth.

That the baby already knew how to yawn astonished you, Iyznik.

Uvering, you were angry at Exodi—both for having died, and for having done so in such an utterly useless way.

The baby wakened you early, Iyznik; but Uvering was already up.

From the kitchen, clamor and odors came.

You, Uvering, waved me, Iyznik, away. “I’m trying to bake a cake of conciliation.”

I’d never known you to act conciliatorily. “But for whom?”

Ignoring me, concentrating, you sifted sugar and cocoa powder together.

Marjoey, seeing the sugar, offered to help.

The cake emerged from the oven, gleaming and plump. Meticulously, you, Uvering, transferred it to a cooling rack.

Loneliness hurts because there is love.

You frosted the cake and topped it with sprinkles, jujubes, and fruitdrops, Uvering. Finally, you allowed Marjoey to lick the spatulas clean.

The pavement sizzled with sunshine.

Uvering, ceremoniously you carried the cake outside to the frontdoor porch where Mireez for months had been sitting dharna—but was no longer.

The billboards said, ‘Shame on Thieves.’

Uvering, you and Iyznik found me, Mireez, in a sickhouse, lying abed, surrounded by friends and family.

“I’ve come,” you said, “to apologize. It was wrong to push you. I’m sorry.”

Woozy with malnutrition, I clasped your head and forgave you.

Everyone, grinning weepily, ate a piece of the undernourishing cake.

Lairn, you went for a grueling backcountry hike, alone with your lissome, sunheated body.

The clerk at the storehouse asked what you planned to use it for, Uvering.

You said, “Suicide.”

“May my book identify you?”

You gave your permission.

By the baby, Iyznik was wakened early; but Uvering was already gone.

You, Uvering, waved the crowd on the strangler's doorstep away.

They paid no attention—till you revealed the suicide bomb.

Motu, eyes closed, you let out a breath, unclenching your fists a little.

Uvering, in a frightened, hateful embrace, you clasped to yourself the strangler.

You selfforgetfully, Sozu, played in the dirt and laughed with your friends.

There were some who called you a villain, Uvering.

I, Mireez, had a bellyache.

Because your, Uvering's, bones could not, in the heap of gore, from the strangler's bones be discriminated, the soup we sipped at your funeral was symbolic only, containing nothing of your quintessence.

I dabbed from the baby's little pursed mouth a bubble of spittle.

You relaxed your grip on the safety lever.

We at the songpark sang.

I countercomplained.