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**Genius**

Novel

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## **Part One**

### **I**

The first thing Boris Sidis did after setting foot on American soil was terminate his friendship with his two travelling companions. They had shared two months of their lives: stumbling through the woods at night in the driving rain between Radyvyliv and Brody to reach Galicia unseen; slogging their way first to Lemberg and from there to Vienna; taking the train to Hamburg; buying a passage to New York via Le Havre, and spending three weeks below decks on the steamship SS Lessing. And now, at seven thirty in the morning, Alexei and Vladimir were standing, dog-tired and worn down by the stresses and strains of the journey, on the lower tip of Manhattan with the mighty rotunda of Castle Garden at their backs – two of the millions of

immigrants who had passed through this gateway to the New World in the last few decades – while Boris castigated them as if they were a pair of schoolboys.

He had held his peace until now, he said, to avoid putting their common undertaking at risk. But now they had reached their goal and the hour of their parting was at hand, there was no longer any reason to hold back. Despite his problems with his left leg and occasional shortness of breath, he had not made a single complaint during their entire journey about any unfavourable conditions – quite unlike them. Instead of being glad to find a bed in an inexpensive hostel at the end of a long day's walking, they had moaned continually about the squeaking bedframe, the clammy sheets, the bugs in the mattresses. Instead of being grateful that they had not had to suffer a single day without food, they had cast aspersions on what they received from the farmers: the bread was too hard, the milk too sour, the potatoes too rotten. Instead of taking joy in every *verst* they put between themselves and the Ukraine, they grumbled constantly about the blisters on their feet, the heavy luggage, the heat, the cold, the damp, the dryness. In everything, they found something to criticise.

For a short while, he said, he had hoped that there would at least be an end to this once they were on board. The combined power of steam and wind would propel them across the ocean in the shortest time, with all their meals provided and a level of safety and comfort that the

seafarers of old could only dream of. But of course they had found something else to bother them: the stuffy air in the cabins, the cramped conditions, the darkness and the boredom that they attempted to stave off from morning 'til night with card games – though without success, because this type of inane pastime didn't drive away boredom; it actually created it. But they didn't have enough *up here* to see such an obvious thing.

Boris tapped his forehead and waited a moment, giving them an opportunity to object, but since they just stared at him mutely like two carp, he went on.

The decision to begin his life in America without them was one he had made earlier, as they had sailed into the harbour, the ship gliding past the gigantic monument silhouetted against the morning sky in the dawn light. A stirring sight for him, as it was for all the other passengers standing on deck in reverent silence. They were all deeply moved; many wept with emotion. Only Vladimir could think of nothing better to do than speculate on what this whopper must have cost, and to draw his conclusions from this about the wealth that awaited him in America. Worse still was Alexei, who could divine in the figure only a buxom woman in a nightshirt, and to this already witless remark add a number of fantasies of unspeakable obscenity, which Boris had absolutely no desire to repeat.

This imposing monument, which incidentally was soon to be officially unveiled, was – by way of a final

note before their ways parted forever – the “Bartholdi” statue, and the figure was nothing less than freedom incarnate, illuminating the world with the torch of enlightenment. It was this light, he told them, that had guided him here, and he intended to be guided by it for the rest of his life, though others might prefer the foul temptations of gold or the flesh. He wished the two of them enough wisdom to be able to tell true happiness from false, and now he had nothing more to say to them except farewell.

Boris snatched up his suitcase, turned on his heel dramatically, and disappeared behind a large Italian family who were quarrelling with raised, angry voices and wild gesticulations over how the considerable heap of baskets and bags in their midst was to be transported further.

Something troubled him about his departure. It seemed inconsistent and incomplete. A few streets further on he saw a pitiful couple with five dirty children sheltering under a wooden crate – judging by the reddish-blond hair, unhealthy pallor and ragged linen garb they were Irish – and it suddenly occurred to him. He set down the heavy suitcase, his mother’s parting gift to him, in front of them and walked away as quickly as his left leg, which always dragged behind him a little, would allow. While the family was still puzzling over who the peculiar stranger might be and what he meant by this, he came back, removed all the ready money he had

– exactly forty-three dollars – from his sock, tucked the notes under the handle of the suitcase and disappeared round the next corner, this time for good.

In Battery Park, Boris sat down on a bench on the shoreline and looked over at the liberty monument, whose copper shone in the morning sun like a tongue of flame. He contemplated his situation. On sober consideration, he was left with nothing. He was alone, without means or a job, in a foreign city, in a foreign country, where no one was expecting him. He had just alienated his only two acquaintances, and couldn't speak the language. He spoke only Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish perfectly, plus Hungarian, Bulgarian, German, French and Italian with something of an accent. He could make himself understood tolerably well in Czech, Rumanian, Dutch, Spanish, Turkish, Arabic and Armenian. And he read Ancient Greek and Latin, of course. His Sanskrit was sadly still in need of much improvement, as he had been forced to neglect it for some time. And until this point he had had no access to English, if you discounted the odd quote from Shakespeare or Milton, which were not presently very helpful. The signs he had seen so far had, however, been an easy test: *Immigration, Passport Control, Bread & Coffee*.

In all likelihood he would never see his homeland again, his family, or any of his friends. It occurred to him that there was a framed photographic portrait of his

parents and his four siblings in his suitcase. They had had it taken before his departure especially for him. Shouldn't he go back one more time and retrieve that, at least? Oh, never mind. It was all useless ballast. Better to draw a line under it.

He liked not owning anything but the clothes on his back and the knowledge in his head. He liked it from a very practical point of view – no more luggage to drag around, no more worrying about thieves – and he liked it even more as an idea. The ideal state, the presuppositionless paradise of the new-born babe, was something he would never again achieve as an adult, but this at least came close.

Boris put a hand in his coat pocket and, to his surprise, came across a few cents. Ah, yes, the change from the breakfast he had bought earlier, in the immigration station, from a passing vendor. He jingled the coins in his hand for a while before flinging them into the water.

He closed his eyes, turned his attention inward and discovered that he was happy. The feeling was so clear and pure that he thought he was being taken in by a piece of self-deception. For a second time he listened to his own mind, a little longer and deeper, but he could find nothing but untroubled peace, joyous confidence and an insatiable thirst for life. Yes, he was left with nothing. But that *nothing* was not a black abyss; it was an empty canvas on which he was permitted to paint the

picture of his life, according to his own design. What was freedom, if not that?

He looked back at the monument. Was that really a torch Miss Liberty was holding aloft? From here, you might think it was a brush.

It was Tuesday, 5<sup>th</sup> October 1886. Boris Sidis decided in future to treat the date as his birthday.

Without further delay, he approached the nearest visitor to the park: he was new in the city, he said, and on the lookout for work, any work, it didn't matter what or where. He repeated his request in various languages until the other man turned away with a gesture of regret. The attempt to make himself understood failed with the next person, too, and the next.

It was only the fourth man he approached, a sour-looking creature with missing teeth and a stubbly beard, who grasped what Boris wanted. Did he look like someone with work to give out, he barked in German, gesturing towards the stained, threadbare suit hanging off his scrawny limbs. No, he had no work to give, he was looking for work himself, he'd been looking for weeks already, like every third person on this damned island. If he hadn't found any by this evening then by God he would throw himself in the water on this very spot, and with his last breath he would curse the blasted newspaper hack who'd put the lie in his ear that life was better in America than it was at home in the Palatinate.

Another man, wearing the bright embroidered shirt of a Bulgarian farmhand, looked at Boris with innocent, hollow eyes and whispered hoarsely and so quietly that he could barely be heard: “I’m sorry, brother. I wish you the very best, and that’s all I can do for you. I have nothing myself, or I’d share it with you. While I’m on the subject, I don’t suppose you can spare a crust of bread, can you brother? Not to worry! God bless you, God bless you!”

Boris retorted that God’s blessing was the last thing he needed at that moment. If that’s what you were relying on, you shouldn’t wonder that you had no bread. Then he went back to his bench to sit quietly and consider how best to proceed.

The bench was already occupied by a gentleman wearing a cinnamon-coloured ulster coat over a midnight-blue tuxedo. His walking cane was topped with an ivory knob shaped like a goose’s head. He was chatting in French to his wife, who was elegantly twirling an unfurled parasol with apricot-coloured ruffles in her slender white hands, although she needed to shield herself from neither sun nor rain. As Boris sat down beside the pair, they slid over to the furthest end of the bench, as far away from him as possible.

“It is truly *dégoûtant*, the way the riff-raff spread themselves about,” said the gentleman. “If they would at least stay on the Lower East Side where they belong” – he gestured vaguely in the direction where the Lower East Side evidently lay – “I wouldn’t mind. But there are

more ships coming in every day, spitting out more and more of these uncivilised *canaille* from Eastern Europe – is it any wonder that now not even Downtown is spared from them? *C'est vraiment une honte, n'est pas, ma chère?*”

“*Henri, je t'en prie! Prends garde!*” The lady elbowed him in the ribs.

“What, why? Because of this Russian farm boy here? You surely don't think he understands a word of what we're saying!”

Boris's exterior indeed did not inspire any great faith. He was rather short, but in his deep, dark eyes, set under a black crossbar of bushy brows, burned a fire that could frighten a person. His imposing moustache, a second black crossbar, was hardly to be recognised as such any more, so long and thick had the stubble on his cheeks, chin and throat become. His clothing consisted of a once white, now dirty-grey linen shirt, a waistcoat coming apart at the seams, a pair of rough calico trousers tied at the waist with a piece of hemp rope, and clumsy black work boots. The best garment was his coat, an almost floor-length overcoat of coarsely woven loden.

He got up from his seat, removed his flat felt cap, bowed and said in faultless, though not quite accentless, French: *Monsieur, je vous suis des plus obligé car c'est grâce a vous que j'ai appris quelle est la place d'une racaille telle que moi.*”

Then he spat at the gentleman's feet and marched off, his left leg dragging a little, in the direction he suspected the Lower East Side lay.

His head thrown back, he marvelled at the buildings, which grew taller with every street he crossed. He counted six, seven, sometimes even eight floors. The streets were gradually becoming more cramped and full of people, though there was no festival taking place and it seemed not to be a market day, either. It looked like this noisy, colourful crush was a completely normal state of affairs here. For a while he forgot why he had come; he just bobbed along in the stream of people, like a leaf floating in a brook. For the first time in his life he saw electric light and streetcars, he saw pineapples and coconuts, he saw Negroes and Chinamen.

The high spirits in which all these new sights had put him were cut abruptly short when a powerful man with an artfully twirled beard and foreign apparel, talking angrily away to himself in an incomprehensible language full of diphthongs, came running out of a gateway into the street without looking. He crashed into Boris and the pair landed in the street grime, locked in an involuntary embrace, the man ranting all the while without pause: “*Schaug hoit amoi, wosd’ hilaifst, mir glangt’s eh, wi arr lucking for wörkers hom’s g’schriam, nachat sogn’s, auer waytsch is fief dollar in da week, nachat sog i, spinnt’s ihr, macht’s eiern Scheißdreck doch alloa und bin naus, und jetzat kimmst du oida Depp a no daher.*”

Without even pausing for a moment in his stream of words, the man struggled to his feet, gave his hands a cursory wipe on his short leather trousers and stomped off, ranting.

But Boris – for that much he had gathered from the speech – walked through the gate, and a minute later was

sitting in front of an office manager named Hlávka, a Bohemian by birth, with whom he was able to exercise his Czech. After a further two minutes he had a job.

“Name?”

“Sidis, Boris.”

“Born in?”

“Berdychiv, Ukraine.”

“Age?”

“Eighteen. Which is to say, nineteen next week.”

“Address?”

“Er, I only arrived this –”

“Not a problem. Illnesses?”

“No. Although from time to time I have difficulties with asthma. And my leg –”

“I mean infectious illnesses.”

“No.”

“The weekly wage is five dollars. I know it’s not much, but –”

“That’s fine.”

“Training tomorrow on the shop floor, at five-fifteen on the dot. Work starts at five thirty, lunch from eleven to eleven thirty, regular hours end at seven thirty pm. Questions?”

“No, that’s all fine. Although, actually... Might it be possible to get a small advance? The thing is...”

Mr Hlávka let out a low groan. Yet another starveling. He fished a dollar bill out of a cash box and, using his thumb and forefinger, took Boris’s coat with its scent of fresh horse dung as a security.

It was only when he was back on the street, in his waistcoat and shirt, that Boris realised there had been no

talk at all of what it was he would be doing. He didn't even know what kind of firm had engaged him, or what they manufactured. The sign by the entrance was not very informative: *Harold F. Weiss Manufacturing Company*. Well, alright, that would become apparent in good time. The first thing he needed to do was find accommodation.

This task, too, was quickly accomplished. He had asked around and been told that he should find a "tenement house", and there were a great number of those here. He chose the first one he came across, followed a coughing janitor through two courtyards, four floors up a fire escape attached to the bare brick wall of an unadorned rear building, and down a bare, unlit corridor to a room no more than four paces long and four wide.

Against each wall stood a white-painted metal bedstead, equipped with a straw mattress and a holey woollen blanket. There were wires stretched diagonally from one corner of the room to the other, with a few meagre items of clothing draped over them. The centre of the room was taken up by a rickety little table. On it and under it stood and lay empty bottles. A rusty petroleum lamp dangled from the ceiling. There was no window, just a ventilation panel above the door. Three beds were occupied: you could tell from the few belongings stowed underneath them. The fourth was vacant.

Boris nodded with satisfaction. With a second nod, he accepted the price of ten cents per night indicated by the janitor with two splayed hands, making no attempt to haggle with him. The fact that the house

had a privy on the ground floor, as well as a washroom with running water that was free for residents to use, came as a pleasant surprise to him.

In a tavern, he ate a plate of cabbage soup with bread, and then stretched his legs a little. It was dark and cold by then, however, and before very long he went back to his room.

His roommates had returned in the meantime: Leo, Misha and Nathan from Shtomyr. They were happy to meet a fellow countryman as it offered them a welcome opportunity to wallow in their memories. They could already see rippling cornfields before them and taste pierogis, borsht and okroshka on their tongues. The best okroshka in the world was made by Olga Sikorska in Shumsk, Nathan said with a fond smile, lighting a cheap cigarette. Had Boris ever eaten at her place, by any chance?

No, he had not, Boris replied, neither by chance nor deliberately, and he would probably have to forgo this pleasure in future, too. However, he did now live in America, the land where the sun shone on everyone who had been forced to flee the old, exhausted soil of their homelands, the land which took in the oppressed people of the world, no matter if they were white, yellow or brown, and made them into free and equal men. And he regarded that, with all due respect, as more precious than any okroshka.

“Oh, you’re a smart one, aren’t you?” said Misha. “You’ve been here all of half a day and already you’re a real expert on America. Well, I haven’t seen the sun for the past five years. Just the workshop, nothing but the damn workshop. Someday I’ll peg out in the

workshop, maybe tomorrow, maybe next year, maybe not for another thirty years, it doesn't matter, no one's going to care. And you know what? I don't care, either. That's the way it is: this city gobbles people up. It's already swallowed hundreds of thousands, or whaddo-I-know, millions, and digested them and shat them out again, one more or less makes no difference. She's got you in her greedy jaws now – you just wait, she'll bite down soon enough. Lovely young flesh like yours is her favourite, she can't get enough of it.”

Misha smacked his lips together, made both arms into a giant, snapping maw and came towards Boris as if to gobble him up. Boris retreated all the way to the wall and enquired whether Misha had been drinking alcohol; it seemed to him that he had.

“Drinking alcohol – us?” replied Nathan. “What makes you think that? No, we haven't drunk any alcohol. How could we? You can't drink the two-cent hooch. The five-cent one – now, that you *can* drink. But you can't afford it. In Shtomyr, every autumn we distilled our own schnapps, with pears and apples from my brother-in-law from Kodnya. Ten bottles *like that*” – he described a potbellied silhouette with his hands – “every year. We sold five and drank five ourselves. Oh, I can't even think about it.”

“That's not good,” Boris said sternly. “I would like to recommend you moderate your drinking, or even better, give it up altogether. Alcohol kills your reason. And if you kill your reason, you kill yourself. While we're on the subject: I'd also prefer it if you didn't smoke, at least not here in the room. My lungs are, unfortunately, not in the best condition, and the air is bad

enough already. The better the air, the better you will sleep.”

“Thank you kindly for the lecture,” said Leo, who was already lying on his bed, under the covers with his face to the wall. “In return, I’d like to recommend something to you.”

“Which is?”

“Keep your trap shut.”

“But I was just giving you some good advice, for how you could improve your lives.”

“And I was just giving you the good advice to shut your trap.” Leo sat up. “Listen. I spent fourteen hours today unloading sacks of cement, and yesterday too, and I don’t know how many days before that. Do you know what that feels like? Maybe you will soon. Then you’ll also know that you could really use a shot of schnapps now and again. That now and again, when you have the money and you’re not too tired, you could really use a whore. That you could really use pretty much everything. But a fresh-off-the-boat little professor who doesn’t have the slightest idea about anything, who sits himself down in the room with you and gives lectures no one asked for on what America is and how you can improve your life - no one can use that. So. Lights out now, and shut up.”

“Amen,” said Nathan, and Misha said: “Wise words, meister,” and Boris said: “But —” and Leo said: “Shut up,” got out of bed and extinguished the kerosene lamp.

When Boris woke, the other three were still sleeping. He didn’t know what time it was, but he sensed he had

overslept. Groping his way with outstretched arms, he tiptoed cautiously out of the room, along the corridor and down the fire escape onto the dark, deserted street, where he also found no clue as to the time. At every crossing he went left, right or straight on, until he had lost all sense of direction. He began to grow anxious. The job was certainly gone, lost before the first day had even started. Would he at least be able to get his coat back? It only provided moderate warmth, but he would have welcomed any kind of protection against the cold, damp morning air creeping up from the sea, along the alleyways and up his sleeves.

Eventually he found himself in an area where people were already on the street, or were still on the street, for it was the hour when the old day shook hands with the new. Market women were pulling clacking carts over the cobbles and setting up their stalls; bakers were feeding their ovens with wood, and late revellers were staggering home from the distilleries shouting and singing. At a little wooden hut that sold coffee for a cent all night, he learned the exact time: three forty-two am. Too late to go back to bed; too early to go to work. He drank lukewarm, unsweetened, quite bitter coffee from a battered enamel mug, bought a piece of bread and a hard-boiled egg for breakfast at the next hut along, drank another cup of coffee and still had more than enough time to find the factory. He stood waiting at the barred gate until the porter came and opened up.

The factory building didn't look much different from the tenement house he lived in. Here as there, the building's plain, narrow façade gave no clue as to the true extent of the complex, which stretched a long way

back and incorporated several narrow light wells. And here as there, the architecture was a visible indication of the price of land in this area. All extras that would take up valuable space, like a presentable foyer or an airy staircase, had been avoided. Not a square foot more than absolutely necessary was wasted on open space and courtyards; one floor, divided up into small sections, was laid on top of another, six times over. The result was a dense mesh of stuffy rooms into which, especially on the lower floors, only a diffuse twilight penetrated, even at midday. These rooms therefore required additional lighting at all times.

A foreman from Danzig named Joseph explained the facility to Boris in Polish – a process that was accomplished with a few jabs of a finger. Over there was the smithy and the metalwork shop, there was the carpentry and the wood-turners' room, that was where the individual parts were produced, the goods were assembled in the upstairs workshop, and then they went out the back there to the warehouse.

He led Boris into a room on the third floor, told him to sit down on a stool at a workbench and showed him what he had to do. He inserted a wooden handle into a clamp, placed a hammerhead on top of it and with a single, mighty blow from a sledgehammer drove a wedge so deep into the wood that head and handle were inseparably bound together in exactly the right place. Then he put the newly-fabricated hammer into an empty crate and handed Boris the sledgehammer: your turn.

Joseph was familiar with beginners failing to master what was actually a simple task straight away. But he had never imagined someone could be so

completely confounded by it. Boris got a finger stuck in the clamp; he didn't know how to hold the sledgehammer, and the inept way he let it flop weakly onto the wedge revealed that he had never held a tool in his life. Joseph gave him an encouraging slap on the shoulder with his great labourer's paw, remarked that practice makes perfect, and disappeared to induct another newcomer elsewhere.

Boris spent the next few hours alone with himself, his work, and four older men who settled down to their tasks at the four other benches in the room. They seemed to have been working there so long they had been completely transformed from living creatures into the means of production. Their skin was the same pale grey as the whitewash on the walls. They went about their work with machine-like regularity, without any visible effort, but without any visible pleasure in it, either. They spoke only English, and not a word more than strictly necessary. When Boris leapt up, cursing, as he did more than once, having hit himself on the thumb, they didn't even glance over. During the lunchbreak, for the sake of simplicity, he joined them and ended up in a nearby soup kitchen, where he ate a thick pea stew that left him more bloated than sated.

Back in the factory, Joseph took him to one side. He had checked the crate and had to tell Boris that he was not only the slowest worker he had ever seen, but also the worst. There was only one hammer in the crate that could be sold, and that was the one Joseph himself had assembled that morning. He was actually duty bound to fire incompetent staff at once, but everyone deserved a

second chance. Maybe Boris could at least make himself useful by carrying things.

For the rest of the day, Boris lugged crates about. Some, heavily laden with component parts, had to be taken from the workshops up to the manufacturing floors; others, filled with finished tools, went to the warehouse, and others still contained waste, which was used up in the forge. When the factory siren finally released Boris and sent him out into the evening, every bone in his body ached, and he was limping like an old nag ready for slaughter. He was too tired for dinner and too hungry to sleep. Half out of his mind, he put away a plate of barley groats in some inn. Then he stumbled into his room, fell on his bed and was asleep in a second.

His roommates came clattering in, each with a beer bottle in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other, startling him out of a deep sleep.

“What do we have here? Is our young friend in bed with his shoes on? Has he” – Leo lowered his voice dramatically, as if he were saying something quite outrageous – “been drinking alcohol?”

“That wouldn’t be good, oh dear me no, not good at all.” Nathan shook his head in mock concern, raised a forefinger and addressed Boris, displaying a modicum of acting talent as he imitated a sanctimonious doctor: “Alcohol is not at all healthy, let me tell you. I strongly recommend you give it up.”

“Oh, leave him alone.” As if he were a mother being protective of her child, Misha cried out in a falsetto voice: “He’s worked all day today, and he’s sooo tired. He’s not used to it, the poor lamb.”

He pulled off Boris's shoes, carefully tugged the covers over him, tenderly stroked his hair and planted a goodnight kiss on his forehead. The three clinked their bottles in a toast to each of their fabulous jokes.

Boris made no attempt to defend himself. Firstly because he was drugged with exhaustion and any movement, any word would have been too much for him. And secondly because it was three against one and he knew that the stupid people of this world, purely due to the fact that they were always in the majority no matter where you went, had an unshakeable sense of superiority. He remained lying there in silence, in the hope that their desire to mock him would burn itself out if he offered it no new fuel. He was mistaken in this, but he perceived their whinnying laughter from a greater and greater distance. When Nathan poured beer over him, he didn't even react. And when Leo relieved himself in his boots, he wasn't even aware of it.

The second day of work went better than the first; the third better than the second. Boris got used to the hard physical labour, and on the fourth day he believed he knew the processes in the factory well enough to ask Joseph meekly whether he might put forward a few suggestions for improvement.

Joseph was familiar with new workers' so-called suggestions for improvement. As a rule they involved demands for higher wages or longer breaks: nothing to be taken seriously. But he was even more taken aback by Boris's suggestions than by his incompetence as a labourer. They related to the work processes in the factory and they were comprehensive, precise, explained

in a crystal clear manner and so obvious that he couldn't figure out why he hadn't thought of them himself long ago.

Boris suggested that the factory acquire carrying frames that would shift the load from the arms to the hips, thus saving the porters' strength. But that was just a minor aspect. More fundamental was the fact that he had gained a complete overview of the business. He knew exactly which raw materials, components and finished products had to be transported from one place to another, and when they had to be there, and he was able to give a convincing argument as to how the same goal could be achieved with much less effort, purely through improved organisation. An expert commission could not have reached any other conclusion, and their evaluation would have been worth any price.

Joseph embraced Boris, kissed his cheeks – a gesture he instantly regretted, as Boris froze, but on the spur of the moment he hadn't managed to think of anything more appropriate – and begged his forgiveness for having made such a man lug crates about. The two of them would go to Mr Weiss, the managing director, at once and without delay, and today – he guaranteed it would be today – Boris would be given a post commensurate with his talents and many times better paid.

Mr Weiss was curt with him, but Joseph would not be put off.

“Please, Mr Weiss, just five minutes. You won't regret it. These five minutes will change the future of your business, and your life, too. This young man here

has suggestions that are going to save you a good fifty thousand dollars a year.”

“Fifty thousand? That doesn’t sound bad at all,” said Mr Weiss, who didn’t believe a word of it, but was now curious enough to find out what impossible humbug was about to be proposed to him. He fumbled his watch out of his waistcoat pocket and opened the lid.

“Alright then. Five minutes. The clock’s ticking.”

A few moments went by before Boris realised he had the floor.

“What’s wrong? Can’t he speak English?”

“He only arrived this week. From Little Russia.”

“Well that’s just dandy. Then I suggest you go back to work and take your little Russian with you.”

“Are you a German, Herr Weiss?” Boris asked in German.

“Indeed. From Breslau. There we are then. In that case, fire away.”

“Erm – with what?”

“Well, explain to Mr Weiss what you told me just now,” said Joseph, also in German. “How you want to lower the production costs here.”

“Ah yes, that. But that’s not really important.”

“Just a moment,” said Mr Weiss. “You have an idea for lowering costs, but you don’t think it’s important?” He now realised he was dealing with a madman, but it was a little distraction from business as usual and he was finding the whole thing quite entertaining.

“That’s right,” said Boris. “You don’t see it that way, I know. Lower costs, raise profits, that’s your world. Your profit is all you know; you don’t see

anything greater. That's what you live for, your profit. And you force others to live for your profit, too. You probably think that's normal. I think it's *ordinary*. If I tell you how you can take a burden off the workers, you'll think of redundancies and wage savings. In fact, I don't regard these as important. I'm thinking of the workers' backs. And you don't care about them. You see, that's the difference between us. But that's just by the by. The main thing is that in this factory, the most valuable thing in the world is being squandered: namely, human life. To give just one example: you will allow that people have to carry crates up and down a staircase from morning 'til evening, because you haven't thought to install hoists on the outside of the building such as they use in the warehouses in Holland, to bring the material in through the windows."

Mr Weiss said nothing. On the one hand, he was infuriated by this Johnny-come-lately labourer. He had never met anyone so shameless. On the other, damn it, there was something in this idea. It could have been one of his own.

"But that wouldn't improve things greatly," Boris went on. "Fundamentally, this whole building is a giant planning error."

"Nice to know. The design was actually my own."

"That's as may be. In any case, it's not functional. The Lower East Side is not suited to large production facilities. Factories don't belong in the middle of cities, they should be on the outskirts, where there's enough room to build in a way that's fit for

purpose, which is to say, for human beings: Low, light and airy.”

“You mean I should shut down this whole shebang and build a new factory out there somewhere?”

“If you were smart, that’s what you would do, yes. Preferably with workers’ accommodation right next to it – low, light and airy as well. This is conducive to the workers’ health. Just as a canteen serving good food would be. Light, air and sustenance, that’s what people need to thrive. And above all, education. Education for the workers and education for their children, so they can become free and happy people.”

“Noted. Anything else?”

“But of course. A lot more needs to happen.”

Boris was really warming to his subject now. “Why do you make your workers work for so long, and why do you pay them so badly? Because you’re not only greedy, but stupid on top of that. Because you think if others get less, there will be more left for you. That’s the way it works, isn’t it? But you can’t just milk a cow forever; you have to feed it, too. Look at your workers. How many of them are overtired, sick, how many have taken to the bottle? How many are uneducated, because at the age of ten or twelve they were sent to the factory instead of to school? And they’re poor. They can’t afford to buy the things they produce every day. So who is going to buy all those tools, where are the profits that you lust after going to come from? If you treat your people decently, pay them decently, they’ll work decently, too. If you’re not capable of doing it for the sake of others, then do it for your beloved profit – the main thing is to *do it.*”

Boris gasped for breath. He had worked himself into a lather. He himself didn't know why he had said all that. And he wasn't sure if his accusations were correct – after all, he didn't know Mr Weiss. He possibly could have left out the part about sick, alcohol-dependent workers. All the same, essentially he was right, of that he was completely certain. He didn't need to fear a discussion with Mr Weiss: he had the better arguments.

For a while no one said anything to dispel the tension. Joseph studied his fingernails as if they were the most interesting thing in the world. Boris compared the oil painting on the wall – the young Weiss, forceful, dynamic, staring into the distance like a visionary – with the much older and more corpulent, but also more jovial original sitting before him. Mr Weiss snapped his pocket watch open and shut several times and – his eyebrows raised high in concentration, his lips pursed into a pout – turned the little winding cog, to demonstrate that he was the master of time and thus of the situation.

Then he put the watch back in his waistcoat pocket and looked at Joseph as calmly as he could (he didn't deign to give Boris a single glance, though he spoke German so that the latter could understand him): “That wasn't five minutes, it was nearly seven. But no matter. I enjoyed this interesting lecture very much. Now I have something to say to the young man that will change *his* life. And it will only take me a second.”

“And what's that, sir?”

“He's fired.”

“As you will, sir.”

“And as for you: if you ever drag someone with such grandiose ideas in here again, you’ll be out on your ear along with him.”

“Yes, sir. I just thought –”

“I don’t pay you to think.”

“Yes, of course, sir.”

“Now then, might I kindly ask this young man to step out onto the street. I hope it meets his requirements. In any case, he will find it wonderfully low, light and airy.”

Mr Weiss made an effort to maintain an expression of composure until he was alone. Then he rang the gold bell on his desk to call his secretary in, and instructed him to make some enquiries about the price of hoists.

Boris was in the best of moods. He had a pickled herring and some fried potatoes in his belly, an extraordinary meal for an extraordinary day. Mr Weiss had paid out his wages for a whole week, probably to prove to himself that he wasn’t antisocial, and that Boris’s dismissal was not unjust. Boris counted his money: three dollars, seventy-four cents. That should be enough to get by on for a good week, maybe longer if he was thrifty. He had got his coat back, as well.

The chance to spend a whole week in New York doing whatever he pleased, without any obligations – wasn’t that a reason to be in the best of moods? That beautiful lady liberty – just a few days ago she had only shown herself to him from a distance. Now there she was, right in front of him, splendidly enticing. And he couldn’t wait to reach for her.

He only returned to his accommodation to pay his debts. There was no reason to go back up to the room. His relationship with Leo, Misha and Nathan had not been repaired. He hadn't made any effort and neither had they. And in any case, he had since learned that he didn't need to pay ten cents for accommodation; he could find somewhere for seven. One merely had to be prepared to forgo some comforts. The dormitory was in a basement; its furniture essentially consisted of long beams that reached from one wall to the other, with sack-cloth hammocks suspended between them. Anyone who ended up here slept alongside day-labourers, cripples and little footpads, meaning he was on the lowest rung of society bar one. The only people below him were the pitiful wretches who were condemned to spend both summer and winter living on the streets. Boris threw a cursory glance around the room and declared it entirely satisfactory. He was in a hurry to get to the East Village, because that – as he had also now discovered – was where the Astor Library, the city's largest public library, was located.

As he stood before the round arch of the entrance in Lafayette Street, he was overcome by a feeling that was unknown to him, a feeling of awe before the highest power. He took off his felt cap, held it to his breast and stepped ceremoniously through the doorway. With great care, as if not wanting to desecrate the holy site with profane footfalls, he went inside. He felt like an Egyptologist who had opened the burial chamber of a pharaoh.

The whole of the long hall, from the floor up to the domed skylights in the coffered ceiling, was filled

with books – with thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of books. In the areas along each side of the hall, separated by pillars, were built-in cabinets obviously constructed to make the most of the space, with shelves full to bursting, whose higher levels were only reachable via little stepladders, an arrangement that was repeated above on the gallery level. In the empty, bright centre of the hall were rows of tables at which readers were sitting over their books and journals in concentrated silence. It looked like there was just one long, ceremonial table on which a feast of the intellect was about to be celebrated.

Boris was so moved by the scene that he just stood there, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. How happy are a people who build gaudy palaces not for their oppressors, but themselves! A people who do not throw themselves in the dust before gods, idols and other ghosts, but who walk with their heads held high and pay homage to the true creator of all splendour on earth, the human mind! How fortunate, this America!

A librarian came over to him and told him in a whisper: the building was open to everyone and it was free to use, but unfortunately he couldn't process any more registrations today. It shut promptly at five o'clock and opened again at nine the next morning.

Boris forged a zig-zag path through the crowds of Mulberry Bend, wondering how he was going to get through the hours until the following morning. It stank of putrefying fish, rotting vegetables, faeces and the billy-goats that were looking for sustenance in the rubbish. His hands trembled with excitement. He had seen paradise. Funny, though, how empty it had been in there.

For every occupied chair, two stood vacant. Why weren't people queuing up to use this facility, which on top of everything else was also heated? Why did they hang around in the alleyways instead, where there was nothing more interesting to see than others of their own kind?

That night he lay in his hammock among forty snoring men. Below him, mice and rats scampered across the bare stone floor. He imagined he was a mouse himself, and the door of a larder containing all the delicacies in the world had just been opened to him. Where should he begin? The question answered itself, for of course he first had to learn English, and realistically that would take up an entire week.

The next morning he was the first person standing under the round arch, waiting for the library to open. As soon as he had registered, he fell upon the card index box and found a few titles of English language course-books. To his disenchantment, he found not a single one of these volumes in its allotted place on the shelves – they had, the librarian suspected, all been stolen. The only thing he could offer Boris was a Russian course-book for English speakers. Boris made a careful study of the dual-language practice dialogues and learned the sentences by heart.

*A My horse is bigger than your cat.*

Моя лошадь больше чем твоя кошка

*B My cat is not very big, but my grandmother is very old.*

Моя кошка не очень большая, но моя бабушка очень старая

A *Can your grandmother sing?*

Твоя бабушка умеет петь?

B *A bird can sing, but a grandmother can dance.*

Птица умеет петь, но бабушка умеет танцевать

A *A bird that sings is better than a house without a roof.*

Поющая птица лучше чем дом без крыши

B *I have no roof on my house, but I have vodka in my samovar.*

У меня нет крыши на доме, но у меня есть водка в самоваре

All things considered, it didn't seem a particularly difficult language. Boris recognised some vocabulary and a few structural peculiarities, having encountered similar things in Dutch, Yiddish and German. He could also recognise Latin influences.

Next, he placed Dante's *Divina Commedia* on the table, alongside Longfellow's new translation. Line by line, word by word, he compared the two editions.

– *Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?*

– *But thou, why goest thou back to such annoyance?*

After a while he laid the original aside and just looked at the translation. At first the text threw up constant puzzles, for which he had to look up the solutions, but gradually he began to read more fluently, and he was

gripped by the poetry again as if he were reading it for the first time.

*Why floats aloft your spirit high in air?  
Like are ye unto insects undeveloped,  
even as the worm in whom formation fails!*

Well said. There were a few people who could pin those lines up above their beds.

He was sunk so deep in purgatory that he gave a start when the librarian asked him to finish up. How was that possible? It really was approaching five o'clock. He yawned and stretched, rubbed his eyes and looked around. Beside him, a man was leafing through a book with a look of bafflement on his face; he snapped it shut with a sigh and set off for the exit, like all the other library users, only slower and more uncertain.

Taking the opportunity to practise his English, Boris approached him: "*Who art thou, and where thou goest?*"

The man looked at him in confusion and replied in Russian: "You're Russian too, aren't you?"

Vanya – for that was the man's name – was a tailor by profession and lived in Greenwich Village. When he started to talk about his family, Boris interrupted him.

"What book was that you were reading just now?"

"That? Oh, nothing... that was, well..." Vanya stalled. He seemed embarrassed. "The book's called *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. By a gentlemen named Baruch de Spinoza."

“Oh, that’s interesting! I haven’t read it yet, but of course I’ve heard of it. What did you think?”

“Good, very good...I mean...to be honest...I didn’t understand much of it.”

“Well, that’s not surprising. Spinoza is rather removed from us now. You have to consider, he was writing a century before Kant...”

“Yes...no...it’s not that, it’s...” Vanya lowered his eyes in shame and muttered: “I can’t read very well.”

He gave Boris a tentative sideways glance. He felt entirely ridiculous. But Boris didn’t laugh at him; he gave him an encouraging look, and Vanya told him his story.

“I’m supposed to be making a dress for the wife of a wealthy customer. She has in mind a particular design that she saw on a trip to Paris. I explained that it’s difficult to copy the Paris fashions, because apart from anything else you just can’t get the fabrics for them in New York. At that, my customer was quite incensed: difficult, what’s difficult about that! He was a professor of philosophy, he said, and he knew what difficult was: this here! He pulled a book by this Spinoza fellow out of his coat pocket and waved it in front of my nose. Then he just said he would give me three weeks to make that dress, exactly the way his wife wanted it.”

Vanya decided to take his revenge. Instead of making the dress, he would use the time to read Spinoza and snub the arrogant professor by casually dropping in a few quotes. But after sitting in the library and staring at the book for so long it made him feel nauseous, there was only one thing he had learned – which was that you should leave things for which you weren’t cut out well

enough alone. And now he wanted to go home and get to work.

Boris had walked down Eighth Street at Vanya's side, his hands clasped behind his back. He had listened attentively, nodding and saying "mm-hm" now and again. Now he stopped, turned his deep, black eyes on him and said solemnly: "In three weeks, you'll be reading Spinoza. I'll teach you." It didn't sound like a claim or a promise, but like a statement of fact.

"Completely impossible. My parents took me out of school after three years. I can read a bit of Cyrillic, but that's all."

"Don't worry. It's easy."

Vanya was overcome by a strange feeling. These were simple sentences, which would have sounded hollow coming from anyone else, but Boris spoke them with such self-evidence that it made Vanya want to return to the library at once and take the book back off the shelf.

"Don't believe those who tell you it's difficult. That's a lie. They only say that because they don't want you to do it. Because then the professor wouldn't be anything special any more. But you can do it. And you'll show him. We'll start tomorrow morning."

Boris kept his word. The next day he appeared, punctual to the minute, in Vanya's apartment on West Twelfth Street, accepted the offer of tea and biscuits, and began his lesson without further ado. If a gifted teacher is one who knows how to bring out his pupil's own gifts, then Boris was an exceptional teacher. By the evening, when he decided that was enough for one day, Vanya was able

to distinguish the twenty-six letters of the Latin alphabet with confidence and decipher short words. How he had learnt it, he himself wasn't quite sure. Most of the time, Boris hadn't taught him anything; he had simply stoked Vanya's ambition to be able to read. He sketched out the exciting world that was waiting for him beyond those twenty-six letters in such glowing colours that Vanya wanted nothing so desperately as to be able to explore it.

For a while, Boris's life became as regular as the tides in the East River. For breakfast he ate a crust of rye bread and drank a cup of coffee; he spent every minute between nine and five o'clock in the Astor Library, and then went straight to Vanya's apartment where a hot dinner awaited him. His English, which he honed through his daily conversations with Vanya, his wife Julia and their four children, sounded rough and awkward at first. But soon enough it flowed smoothly from his lips and his Russian accent also gradually evaporated.

Vanya, too, made considerable progress. Even if he wasn't quite ready for Spinoza, he would buy the *Evening Post* or the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and was pleased when he managed to read out the headlines, or even a whole article.

Since Boris was spending hardly anything on food, his money lasted him much longer than he had anticipated. But eventually it did run out, and he had to apply for a job as a labourer in a hat factory. When he gave his name in the interview, for the first time he pronounced it in the American, not the Russian way. He was no longer *Barris Siddis*; he was *Boris Saydes*.

He spent a week cutting individual pieces out of a roll of felt with a large pair of scissors, to be made into top hats by a trained milliner. The templates he had to use for this had been designed by an idiot with no sense of geometry. You could have got at least five per cent more parts out of the roll by arranging them more economically on the fabric, that was obvious. Boris kept his suggestions for improvement to himself, much as it pained him to do so. He remained inconspicuous and meekly followed all instructions, even the nonsensical ones, and his master found him thoroughly useful. At the end of the week he gave some excuse, handed in his notice, collected his wages and went to Vanya, who was very pleased to see him.

Their evenings together had become a pleasant habit, and they kept them going even when Vanya no longer needed help with his reading. You could hardly call their relaxed conversations lessons by this point, but Boris talked in such a lively, interesting way about history, politics, literature and philosophy – including Spinoza, since Boris had seized the opportunity and read the *Tractatus* in the library – that Vanya felt steeped in education as in a warm bath.

Of course, his acquaintances remarked on how much he had changed recently and how differently he was speaking all of a sudden: some called it smart; others called it pompous. He made no secret of where it came from, and even if he did sometimes hear the old saying about the cobbler and his last, one or another of them would be curious and ask if he might drop by at the hour when Boris was there. Boris gave a hearty welcome

to anyone who wanted to learn, and soon he had a regular crowd.

Every Sunday they sat down together: a tailor, a butcher, a baker, a washerwoman and a barber. Whenever Vanya's brother-in-law Juri, a locomotive driver on the Boston and New York Air-Line Railroad, was in town he came along as well. They weren't used to considering complex issues, but they enjoyed spending a few hours thinking about something other than work, family and day-to-day worries. By the time Boris set off back to his hammock, it was often late at night, but they never felt stuffed full and worn out; they were excited and light, and thoughts hopped around their heads.

They would have liked to offer him something for his services, but every time someone tried to press a coin into Boris's hand, he looked offended and gave it back. Education was as vital for life as air to breathe, he explained. Only a brute could take money for it.

Vanya offered to make him some clothes, at least. Since this also met with a gruff refusal, he had to employ cunning. He showed Boris a brand-new winter coat, saying: "A customer ordered this and paid for it in advance, but he never picked it up. I think I'll give it to the rag and bone man. Or perhaps you would like to try it on?"

Surprisingly, the coat fitted as if it were made for him. And it came just at the right time, since the New York winter was already baring its teeth, and Boris had nothing better to combat it than the mantle in which he had arrived. In a similar way, he acquired new shirts, fresh underwear, a pair of leather shoes and even a whole suit.

Now that his resistance had been broken down, he also permitted the washerwoman to take a parcel of dirty underwear away with her every Sunday and bring it back clean a week later. When he got up from the chair of the barber he taught, his parting was straight and his moustache trimmed to a neat black strip, and he smelled delicately of lavender. Now no one would have called him a Russian farm boy; he looked more like a young nobleman.

Now, there was nothing he lacked. His English was better than that of most immigrants – better even than that of many Americans by birth. Since the baker had started supplying him with bread, he had stopped spending money on that, and the butcher gave him dried sausage to go with it.

A week of factory work earned him two weeks in the library: this equation was confirmed by repeated experience. He found the relationship entirely acceptable. He certainly could have found a better-paid position, but then he would have had to commit to an employer for a longer period, and he wasn't prepared to do that.

One Sunday the whole group gathered in Vanya's apartment, but Boris did not arrive. Everyone was worried about him, since they knew him to be very reliable. But because no one knew where to look for him, after two hours of waiting there was nothing for them to do but go their separate ways.

Three days later, Vanya received a postcard with a meagre message: "Greetings from Boston, B.S."

For a long time, that was the last he heard of Boris. It was only a quarter of a century later that he

found a lengthy article about him in the *New York Times*.  
By that time he himself had become a senior union  
official, and Boris Sidis, so he read, was a famous man.