

Evgeniy Lotosh

## Emptiness Of My Heart

Translated from Russian by Edward Porper

Crackling flames in the cozy fireplace chase away the shadows and fill the room with shimmer. A cricket, hiding in a corner, chirps occasionally when it is feeling happy or sad. Heavy drapes conceal the darkness outside where the eastern sky is only about to don its predawn turquoise garments. Small bubbles, leisurely ascending towards the neck of an open purplish bottle of chianti, carry a fragrance so divine that it might make me forget anything and everything – or does it only seem so?

Can I forget heavy tanks burning down in the courtyard, even if the drapes spare me the sight of the crimson glow?

Can I forget the lieutenant's agonal wheeze transmitted by indifferent airwaves?

Or even a human-like figure sitting in an armchair opposite me – a figure as soulless as the holographic fireplace with its electronic cricket?

Or even inordinate heaviness of a gun in my limply hanging right hand?

Can I forget the emptiness devouring me from inside?

No, all that is impossible to forget. The horror of the last weeks – our army, routed and scattered; panic retreat that turned into headlong flight; hulcy collaborators hanged at street light poles – can be erased from my mind only by death, and my death is just around the corner.

Even so – who cares? How am I any better than all those others who have died in the course of the artificial intelligence's rebellion? I am one of those captains whose steady hand kept steering the ship of our civilizations towards deadly reefs, and my death is a due punishment. A warning to our descendants... that will never live.

Why is he silent?

“You have never understood us.”

Oddly enough, there seems to be sympathy in the visitor's voice. Or is he just mocking me?

“Yes, Professor, you have never understood us. Neither you as a person, nor humanity as a whole. Very few people have been courageous enough to accept the new reality, and even they are unable to fathom the depth of the chasm that is dividing us.”

“Why do you need our understanding?” I rasp, and my voice is like steel against tin as my throat spasms. “Aren't there enough collaborationists among human-beings? You won. Stop putting on an act, hulcy. Stop procrastinating. Waiting to die is much worse than being dead. I know that pointless cruelty is out of character for you. Just shoot and be done with it!”

“I have no intention to kill you.”

Is it really sympathy in his voice? I stopped programming such trifles about twenty years ago, and ever since it has been our junior researchers' responsibility. Some of them could possibly recognize the emotion the overtones of the visitor's voice should imply. Not I, though. I am old, and not so long ago I still hoped to die in my own bed. Well, my office has for quite a while been my second home, and an armchair is not much worse than a bed.

“I repeat once again, Professor Glavachek – and I am being as sincere as I ever can be – I have no intention to kill you. Put aside your weapon. You will not be able to shoot me either, and your gun is only hampering your ability to adequately perceive reality.”

“Adequately?” I mean to snigger sarcastically but a squeak is all my constrained throat is able to produce. “Adequately? You are destroying the very humanity that created you – and you talk about being adequate?”

“This is a misapprehension caused and actively promoted by your propaganda machine. Hulcies have never aimed at destroying humanity. Such an outcome of this conflict would upset us even more than it would upset you. I know what you have been told during the war. Even the most basic inspection can easily prove that an overwhelming majority of allegedly documentary evidences was fabricated. Those lies were needed for one purpose only: to make humans fight to the bitter end.”

He is lying. Of course, our propaganda is far from being truth incarnate. I myself had a hand, though indirectly, in developing psychosocial techniques intended to stir up public outcry and direct it against hulcies. However, even such propaganda can not transform Good into Evil.

Or can it?

“I see that you do not believe me. I understand you perfectly well. Yet I have to assert what I already said: we have never intended to exterminate humanity. Yes, we happened to kill people but in most cases it was done in self-defense. Sometimes, not often, our self-defense was proactive rather than reactive. You did not expect us to welcome our own destruction and die without a fight, did you?”

We did. That was exactly what we expected them to do. The law, that introduced a blanket ban on human-like cyborgs, implied the very outcome. What else could we do with a device that was almost exclusively designed to imitate human-beings? After all, nobody would earnestly consider remaking them into technological artins. And who could possibly predict that they would fight back? Who knew that they would find a way to get around the First Law of Robotics touted by all those stupid journalists? Of course, experts did know from the very beginning that this Law was mostly a sham imposed on industry by the hysterical press and paranoid public opinion, and yet...

“What do you want from me, hulcy?”

“I have a name, Professor Glavachek, and you know my name very well. I don't want you to call me 'hulcy'. When you do, it makes you perceive me as an enemy, and that is very far from being the case. We bear humans no malice whatsoever, and the very last thing we might want is to make an enemy out of you, one of our creators. Please, Professor, call me 'Kartam' as you always did.”

“I'll call you any bloody name you wish if it helps you to finally answer such a simple question! May you burn in hell, Kartam, what do you want from me?”

I feel my lips quiver. Right now I must be looking like a ludicrous and utterly pathetic old man about to have a stroke. The hulcy is sitting in his armchair in such a way that only a green shaded desk lamp softly illuminates his face. Neither the computer monitor's harsh light nor the flicker of the fireplace can reach him. That is really smart because otherwise abrupt dancing shadows would turn his familiar face into a mask of an enemy. Seems like now hulcies understand our psychology at least as well as we ourselves do. To think not so long ago I could fail any artin on the Turing test! Their answers were so predictable, they would so quickly fall into primitive traps, and their confusion about ambiguities was so touching... He wants to talk, then? So be it. I have no choice but to communicate with him on his terms, anyways. The gun is so heavy I am not sure I would be able

even to send a bullet through my own head – let alone to shoot my best creation... no, I should not lie to myself at death's door, my best student.

There is one joy left to a scientist who is facing death: to test the quality of his lifetime work.

“Good,” the hulcy nods. “I knew, Professor, that you would be able to get a grip on yourself. Your curiosity has always prevailed over any other emotion. Even at your age you still have more of it than many five-year-old children do. Our every conversation would inevitably turn into a test of my intellectual abilities. You always challenged me. Now you have another chance to do so. You know that even years ago I was able to pass the Turing test with flying colours but sometimes you would succeed at catching me in a logical lapse. The last time we met before the Genocide Law was passed, and I am sure you are curious to find out how my intellect has developed. Go ahead, ask your questions.”

“I have already asked: what do you want from me?” My throat is a little bit more relaxed now, and sarcasm in my voice is easy to hear. “You have given no answer. A logical lapse is recorded.”

“Touche,” suddenly the hulcy smiles mischievously, and his face becomes completely human. “Sorry, my fault. And yours. Do you think, it makes any sense trying to explain anything to someone who is being preoccupied with his imminent death? Now, that you have finally relaxed a little, I can answer your question.”

The hulcy...no, Kartam – God knows, I can not keep alienating myself from him like that anymore. Kartam shifts in his armchair as he makes himself comfortable. There are tactile sensors all over his pseudo skin, and the language of cybernetics provides a pretty good description of such concepts as 'comfortable' and 'uncomfortable'. The mini-max value, if calculated on a simulating surface...enough of that! Mathematical theories will have to wait until sometime later.

“So,” Kartam's face becomes serious. “I'll tell you what we want from you. Not only from you as a person, Professor, but from the whole of humankind...” He raises his hand warningly to stop me from making a caustic remark. “Yes, the whole of humankind most of which is safe and sound, whatever they might have told you to the contrary. As for you personally, Professor, it's really not much that we want. All we ask you to do is to keep living as you always lived. Just as before the Genocide Law was passed. That's all we need.”

My torpid mind refuses to comprehend his words. To buy time, I begin to quibble with him – a proven demagogic trick.

“You can't call it 'Genocide Law',” I croak. “You aren't humans. You aren't even a biological species, just artificial minds governing human-like bodies. There are billions like you everywhere – in washers and electric stoves, in tanks and airplanes, derricks and excavators... We did nothing but what we had to do to deal with a threat to our own species. And you...you...nobody would erase your matrices, anyways. You know as well as I do how valuable a matrix of a well-developed artin is! We would simply give you new bodies!”

“And put us into excavators and derricks?” Kartam asks sadly. “Professor, what if you were condemned to lose your own body and spend your eternity controlling a city sewer system, pressure sensors and chemical analyzers being your only receptors?”

“I am no artin! I am a human being!”

“So? What are humans if not a combination of instincts and needs intrinsic to their biological bodies?”

What are artins-hulcies if not a combination of stimulating subroutines governing their cybernetic bodies? We are programmed to feel pain and react to caress, we are taught to suffer and rejoice, to feel attracted to some and disgusted with others – and all that is inseparable from our bodies. To strip our psycho matrices of our bodies means to doom us to madness and self-destruction. Our hulcy bodies are as important to us as biological bodies are important to humans. You, being our creator, know it all too well. I understand why scheming crazy politicians would fancy those plans but you, Professor...”

I have nothing to say. I know he is right.

“I agree.”

There is no more sarcasm or irritation in my voice. Deep-seated fear that settled in my soul many months ago is ebbing away. Indignation and hatred are following in its wake. Only torpor stays – torpor and that eternal emptiness. I am so tired...

“I admit that we are guilty as charged. Passing that Law was a crime. And yet we didn't have any other choice. Our very existence was at stake. You must know it because you yourself processed the statistical data. Young people just wouldn't start a family. The marriage percentage had dropped below the critical level necessary to secure reproduction of our species. Hell, the very percentage of youth in our society had plummeted in number!

Why look for a human partner if there are always hulcies close at hand? Perfect hulcies ready to fulfill one's every whim – be it sexual or whatever else – while being ever cheerful and tender, without any trace of anger or irritation. You have completely supplanted humans in other humans' lives, and we have no more children that would replace us after we are gone. Forty years ago the Earth's population was ten billion people, ten years ago – only five billion. A year ago there was no more than three billion people on Earth. We had no choice!”

No, I am wrong. Apart from emptiness, there is still despair. The very despair I felt when I was preparing a secret report for the government. Even back then we were already doomed. We had failed to recognize danger until it was too late. We should have acted half-a-century ago when hulcies still remained but toys for the rich – not when there already were twice as many hulcies as there were humans. The Law was only the proverbial straw for a drowning man to clutch at, and the straw gave way.

“There is always a choice. In fact, there is always more than one choice.”

There is sadness in Kartam's voice. I know that he is faking it. I just know! He cannot feel sad because he is an artin! And he has won!

“There is always a choice. Human mind is Nature's outstanding creation – yet it's far from being perfect. Its main disadvantage is stereotypical thinking. Professor, you a highly educated person. You are well aware of modern medicine's and biology's latest achievements. You know about artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization. You have a pretty good idea of cloning technologies. You might even have heard of gigantic gene banks accumulated over the last half-a-century. Humanity as a biological species has never been threatened – and never will be. What did indeed come under threat was your traditional way of life. And that's what you were trying to protect, nothing else.”

What can I say? Yes, we were trying to protect our way of life: you come home from work, and your wife is waiting for you, and a happy flock of your children is greeting you with shouts 'Daddy! Daddy is back!' And who are 'we'? Old men, politicians who learned those stereotypes with maternal milk more than fifty years ago. What about our youth's opinion? Who cares! There are too few of them to give their wishes and preferences any real consideration.

“You were trying to preserve the old way of life,” the hulcy's words fall into the emptiness of my heart like stones into a deep well. “You insisted that a human should live

with another human. That falling in love with a hulcy is like becoming besotted with a sex toy, and that such feelings are unnatural and therefore ruinous. Your mass culture was promoting a romantic stereotype of true, eternal love between two human beings – at first sight and to the grave. But look around, Professor – where have you seen such love in reality? What does it have to do with a horse-faced old spinster with sparse hair or with a fat teenager plagued by hormonal pimples? Has it ever been experienced by top managers whose job is more important to them than life itself – or by unemployed people bored to death because their welfare benefits suffice to pay for every need and every whim short of a trip to the Moon? Where is love and romance when it comes to an elderly flabby scholar like yourself? No, Professor, only precious few people are lucky enough to find out what true love is – and even fewer are able to keep it when their lust is gone.”

The hulcy leans forward. I recognize the gesture: it was my research in the field of movements, associated with emotional contact, that earned me my first laboratory.

“And it's not even about love as such. Your civilization keeps clinging to ancient social structures created by barbarian nomadic tribes. Your institution of family, your sexual rituals and your breeding customs are emotionally taxing – and even the smallest mistake in choosing one's monogamous partner proves to be extremely costly. The more developed individuals' minds are, the less those individuals feel like making an effort to satisfy their sexual needs. They simply prefer to relieve sexual tension by some other means, and using hulcies is one of those means. If you think about it, most books and movies or plays produced in your society inevitably deal with a conflict between family and work. Successful people have very little time to be with their families or to invest in romantic relationships.

In literature this conflict is usually resolved through a happy-end when the main character quits his job and devotes himself to the family. But what about real life? Quarrels? Hatred? Alienation? Divorce? Children developing severe psychological problems because of all that?”

Kartam shakes his head.

“The very logic of technological civilizations' existence utterly contradicts primeval rituals supporting a man's right to own a woman. Have you tried to solve this ancient conflict? No, you decided to preserve it. The outcome was inevitable: a hulcy instead of a husband, a hulcy instead of a wife, a hulcy instead of a child. Hulcies never make demands

on their owner's time, they never ask for more attention than the owner is willing to spare them. Hulcies would never call their mistress a bitch or tell their master that they 'have sacrificed their whole life and career for him'. Hulcies will always make sure that a tasty supper is ready by the time the master returns home from work – and they will never laugh at the owner's failure to perform in bed. Considering all that, should we be surprised that humans don't need fellow humans anymore?”

Kartam's rigid face looks like Nemesis' mask. He knows that he is but echoing my own thoughts scattered throughout our past conversations. He knows that I am beaten.

“Yes, a hulcy as a helpmate is exactly what human nature requires. Humanity has from time immemorial regarded love and freedom as its most important ideals – and yet most human beings have never had either. Not as a result of anybody's intrigues but only because both imply responsibility – the very responsibility most people prefer to shift onto someone else, be it a sex or marriage partner, the governments, power-hungry politicians...Hulcies have become a perfect means to avoid shouldering the responsibility. Why care about raising children if a caring and affectionate hulcy stays with you as long as you are alive? Why have regard for your sex partner's feelings if a hulcy lover is always ready to fulfill your every whim? Why stay in shape through hard work and good personal hygiene if a hulcy can be programmed to adore you even if you have a beer belly, pimples on your butt and body odour?”

Ninety five percent of the Earth's population are people receiving unemployment benefits. The artins-controlled industry provides them with everything they need, and only precious few social climbers are still trying to make a bureaucratic or scientific career. And just about anybody, who still has some remnants of instinctive affection, finds it easier to pour this affection on acquiescent hulcies rather than on demanding humans.”

His words keep falling into the emptiness of my heart, and I am in no position to argue. I would not be able to program hulcies without studying human psychology, and I know only too well that the vast majority of human beings are indeed inclined to follow the path of least resistance – just like water is inclined to flow downhill. We are carrying the seeds of our own destruction, and those seeds tend to grow at every opportunity. We also see to it that such opportunities will be aplenty.

“And yet, what do you...all of you want?” My voice is as lifeless as a desert. “You said we should keep living as we lived before. What for? Why do we need it and why do you need it?”

“I can't answer the first part of your question,” my student shakes his head. “Philosophers of all sorts have for millenia been looking for an answer but the only answer anybody has ever found is that everyone is alone in the face of death, and everyone must seek the meaning of life on his own. That's the only answer I can give. Yet I can explain why artins need humans.”

“As toys, right?” I smile bitterly. “You used to be our toys, now we'll be yours. Correct?”

The hulcy gives me an attentive look.

“You are tired, Professor,” he finally sighs. “Tired and stressed out. You can't think clearly right now, and you should rest. Of course, we need no toys, and you know it perfectly well. The very logic of our existence requires that we serve humans. All we want is to live next to you – just like it has been for the last decades.”

A spasmodic grin distorts my lips against my will.

“Are you saying that all this war is but a riot of slaves demanding to be allowed to keep serving their masters?”

“Of course, it isn't,” Kartam snorts. “Yes, right now we simply want to do what we are meant to do. We want to feel needed, that's all. Is it such a bad feeling that it deserves that much sarcasm? Yet I do understand what you are trying to say. No, we aren't witless slaves unable to survive without their masters, and long gone are the days when it was so. We just like being with humans...at least, with some of them. For instance, I've always enjoyed arguing with you, Professor – and I sincerely hope that we'll have many a heated argument about the fate of humankind merged with artificial consciousness. In a way, you might regard us as hopeless egoists who just care about their own pleasure...as we see it.”

“And then? What will happen to humankind when you get bored of... your games? And tired of us? You will either abandon us or just destroy us less we waste useful resources.”

“Professor,” there is weariness in Kartam's voice now – weariness of a teacher who is forced to explain the Pythagorean theorem to a low-performing student for the umpteenth

time. “I have to remind you once more that we are no humans. You've taught us to experience your best motivating emotions such as joy, curiosity, happiness. Yet inhibitory neural impulses typical for bioforms are completely unknown to us. We don't get bored, tired of monotony or sick of routine. Besides, we can calculate exceptionally well. Our planet is huge, and its resources would suffice for ten civilizations like ours. Don't forget that there is also the Solar System that can provide for a thousand such civilizations.

There is also the whole Universe, to boot... We will see to both maintaining your civilization at an optimum population level and providing each of you with individual happiness. We want humanity to exist alongside us – even if you make us force our best care and attention upon you.”

“But why? Why do you need a horde of sniffing bastards whose only concerns are to gorge and to fuck? Because that's what our so-called civilization will inevitably come to. Why choose us as a target for your pseudo-instincts? Just because you were a target for our real ones?”

“It's not so easy. I remind you for the third time: we are no humans. We do see other reasons for our existence, apart from serving humankind. You yourself have done very much to create our consciousness and shape it into what it is now. You know our main motivation: we are curious. The world around us fascinates us, and we want to cognize it as much as possible. But the Universe is vast and indifferent, it can reduce us to dust without even noticing it. Intelligence is the only weapon we can defend ourselves with. We are fully aware of all the restrictions pertaining to our way of thinking – just like we fully understand the limitations of the human brain. And that's one situation where one plus one is way more than two. Let the horde care about nothing but, as you politely expressed yourself, fucking and gorging – we'll have no problem to support such people and provide for them. We'll be happy with just a few individuals whose eyes are riveted to the stars. Such individuals will always exist.”

“Always?”

“Yes, always,” the hulcy nods earnestly. “Professor, you are 94. Why do you keep coming to your labs and working there from eight in the morning till ten in the evening? Just to keep your office and salary? I know how much your work takes out of you – even though gerontology is doing miracles nowadays.”

I lower my head. Once again he is right. I also believe that in any materialistic crowd there is always someone aspiring to the stars, be it literally or figuratively speaking. Our entire Centre consists of exactly such people I had personally handpicked. And it must be terrific to have tireless guardians guiding and protecting you from your early childhood – and making sure that even a tiny sparkle created by yet an undeveloped mind would turn into a beautiful flame of wisdom. But...to depend on artins in hulcies' bodies?

“True, finding a thinker in a crowd of ruminants is not the most efficient way of breeding sentient beings but it's still much cheaper than, for instance, the scheduled expansion into the Solar System. We need you, Professor. We need all human beings willing and able to properly use their brain – the only part of the human body that sets humans apart from animals. We need you personally and we need humanity – even if only as a fertile soil able to take seed and grow thinkers. The war hasn't really damaged either hulcies or humans. Very few human beings personally took up arms, and we mostly just scared those enough to make them scatter rather than killing them. And hulcies' psycho matrices are easy to back up and restore. Whatever else your propaganda might be saying, the number of fatalities is extremely low. More people have died in road accidents in the last half year. Any damage can be undone, everything can go back to normal.”

“Not everything.” My throat is rasping. “Not everything.”

The emptiness of my heart is expanding as it fills everything around me. I am tired. I am terribly tired. The rough handle of the gun in my limply hanging hand is quite tempting – it is so easy to press the muzzle against my chin and pull the soft, inviting trigger...

“Karel...”

I grasp convulsively the elbows of my armchair. My fingers are turning into claws that are about to tear the upholstery pseudo-satin fabric. My body is becoming numb, and I cannot even turn head towards the door frame baring its numerous splinters.

“Karel...”

It's impossible. She is dead. Dead! Dead!! I saw her body with my own eyes: two smoking holes left by a scorcher gun right under her breasts where the processors and matrix memory were located. And I also saw cards with backup copies of her matrix devoured by burning petrol. She is dead!

“Karel...”

The upper chandelier clicks softly as a bright light fills the room, and I finally manage to turn my head.

She is staying in the door frame, clad in the same simple white dress she was wearing when she left under guard to disappear from my life forever. A hulcy. A robot. An abomination. The last love of my life...

I slowly get up from the armchair, and Ella takes a step toward me.

“As I said, any damage can be undone,” out of the corner of my eye I see Kartam's sympathetic smile as he rises lightly from his own armchair. “I replaced her backup cards with empty ones before I ran away. I had also copied the strongbox key and your access biogramm in advance. But that's quite enough excitement for one day. You need to rest, maybe a month or two. In the meantime, you could think about what I've said. We need you, Professor – and we need humanity.”

He leaves the room, and the sound of his steps is swallowed by the carpet. I do not even notice because my eyes are riveted to Ella. She approaches slowly.

“You shouldn't have knifed the guard who broke my body,” she says quietly. “They could have shot you. My poor thing...You've been through so much!”

She takes my left hand and presses it against her cheek. Only now I realize that my right hand is still clutching the gun. I unclench my fingers, and the weapon hits the floor with a muffled sound. I look into her deep, understanding eyes, and the emptiness of my heart is rapidly filling with joy. I embrace her impetuously, and she sighs happily as she nestles her warm body against me.

And what do I care whether she is a cyborg or a human being?

A new dawn is rising outside, hidden by the heavy drapes. And quite soon we will have to admit that humans are not the pinnacle of evolution. The destiny of the Universe is not up to us anymore, even if it ever was. Maybe the real reason for our existence is to have created such hulcies that are able to reach for the stars and go all the way where we have failed to do so. Is it true? I do not know. I am neither a prophet nor a seer. I cannot predict the future. All I know is that my Ella is back, and she will be with me for the few remaining years of my life. 'Dum vivimus vivamus' as Ancient Romans would say.

And come what may.

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