Excerpt from the novel *Ruin* by Vladimir Zarev
Translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

The heat was unbearable. The swelter sucked me in and numbed me, the headstone burned my hand. A pack of dogs crouched nearby. Dulled from hunger and sloth, they were waiting for the funeral to end so they could feast on what family and friends had brought to the graves. Strange looking thanks to accidental interbreeding, these mongrels replayed the whole inexplicability of nature. With elongated snouts and short legs, with guilty eyes and shapeless ears, ugly and sunk in the general misery, they fed on human grief. The sun lit up the crushing desolation of the Malashevtsi Cemetery, the crestfallen weeping willows, the dilapidated benches and lamps, the headstones with their photos pried out, the plastic cups and paper scattered by the wind, the endless rubbish of this final resting place, which, rather than solemnity and peace, emanated only exhaustion. The two priests chanted at cross-purposes, sweating beneath their faded cassocks. I got the feeling that mom, too, was sweating in her formal suit, which she hadn’t worn in ten years, since she had nowhere to go in it except to her final rest. The drapery in her plywood coffin was askew, her make-up had gotten smeared, and she had the unhappy look of a person begging to finally be left alone. I struggled not to think, to close myself up in my fear, but I couldn’t. I noticed the details, they called to me, seized my attention and forced me to be present.

Our lives seem to consist of details, which we must forget in order to perceive and make sense of them. What we don’t forget, we have, in fact, invented ourselves. Life is weighed down by details, forgetfulness and our own fabrications, which we naively call “memories.” Human existence is nothing but the anticipation of something happening, which we must then forget, in order to adorn it, to heap it with meanings. Memories are our ultimate fabrication of ourselves, hence our desire to cling to them, to stay within them, while adding something of our own intelligence and sorrow. The rest is biological expiration, our getting lost in time…

The heat was stifling, I felt my bodily fluids coming to a boil under my black suit, moderately thick so that I could wear it in the winter, but also in the summer. I was soaked, if someone had licked me, they would’ve realized that I was salty, too. I had overdone it with the deodorant, the smell of Gillette mixed with the sluggish sighs, the mawkish scent of the wilting flowers and human fear. I was afraid of mom, of that expression of severity, of irrevocable estrangement, which had taken her away from me forever. I wept for her with abundant
perspiration that morning, a morning which was so motionless that every twitch demanded effort, while every effort induced dizziness. I was painfully attached to mom, but I didn’t feel grief, because I wasn’t sad for myself as well. Every death of a loved one is part of our constant dying. With the end of a beloved person, a part of us perishes as well, a part of our love, our openness and certainty. A void is left, which cannot be filled with anything. Like a board torn out of a fence meant to hide and protect us. While mom withered away in that dump of a hospital – they didn’t even have money for sheets and medicine – the details poured out around me. I was forced to think them out. Someone flushed the toilet in the shared bathroom, mom’s slippers jutted up absurdly on her feet, but she was already gone. I felt an inhuman loneliness. I looked towards the window, but there was no one there but the sky. The faded sky, threadbare to the point of tearing, crashed down on my shoulders.

I kept thinking and that was what did me in. I didn’t dare even sigh, because I had drunk two “Men-Know-Why” beers at Ivana’s little bar and yet another at the bus stop in front of the cemetery. My wife leaned towards me and whispered in my sticky ear: “How could you? How could you…”

“How could I what?” I asked.
“You’ve been drinking.”
“I’m sad about mom.” I tried to worm my way out.
“You started in already this morning… on today of all days.”
“I’m sad about mom,” I repeated, but I wasn’t sad, because I didn’t ache for myself, too. I was afraid of her, of her half-closed eyes, with which she seemed to be watching me, of the waxy arrangement of her fragile body, of the distressing fact that she herself was not there, even when she was right there before my eyes. The stench and indigence of the Malashevtsi Cemetery overtook me, the patience of the street dogs scratching their fleas, all the oppressive details which forced me to transform this moment into a memory. Several of the old women from my mother’s building, her last living friends, were sobbing. They clutched kerchiefs in their gnarled finders and wiped their eyes, they were crying for themselves. It is edifying to go to graveyards, because only in such a peaceful place can one understand the whole fragility of life, its absurdity, make sense of one’s vanities, the defeat of one’s foolish ambitions. What a fantastic muscle life is, yet what patience must death possess?

“She’s smiling,” my wife whispered.
“Just one beer,” I replied, “at Ivana’s.”
“She’s smiling peacefully.”
“I didn’t even drink the whole bottle…”

The bald priest’s censer was rattling like a chain, the elevating scent of incense thickened the air completely, making breathing intolerable. Mom hadn’t been a believer; however, depressed by the poverty of the funeral, the cheapest one Eternal Sleep Mortuary could offer us, Veronica insisted on seeing her off like a Christian. The undertaker had paged through the catalogue in front of us, starting from the pompous coffins with brass plating, magnificent and gleaming like grand pianos, then had hardly managed to hide his disappointment, wiping his forehead with peeved politesse and addressing Veronica as “my dearest lady.” “We insist that there be two priests,” my wife said, “there won’t be many mourners, but I want there to be two priests.”

A barefoot Gypsy woman was squatting with her baby twenty yards away, smoking. She was watching us, but she didn’t see death. She would beg from the mourners, or she, too, like the homeless dogs, was waiting for us to leave, so she could gather up the stale food brought to the dead in the nearby graves. There were thistles stuck in one of the priests’ cassock. He, too, did not see the mystery, the death, but instead the open bottles of wine. It is astonishing how much one notices when one doesn’t invent the details, but rather, as Buddhism presumes, is immersed in the emptiness. Most likely the emptiness is eternal life, since it is eternal death. I sensed slight pain and fear. All of a sudden I realized that I was afraid of myself and of my own life. I felt a wild desire to talk about politics and to drink another Men-Know-Why in the uterine coolness of the City Library.

“Not just one, not just one,” my wife said and began wiping away her suddenly erupting tears.

[...]  
Mom died amidst the horror of the other five women in the room, next to the rusty sink, swathed in the astringent smell of the toilet that seeped through the open door, in her own sheets – the hospital didn’t have money for that kind of luxury – gorged with the medicines I had bought for her, berated by the ward maids and the merciless nurses, whom I was forced to bribe to put up with her, carelessly examined by a pimply doctor, whom I got drunk with twice at Ivana’s. She died happy on the day of her discharge. She believed that they had cured her of the jaundice
which had befallen her, whereas she actually had cancer, which had metastasized to the pancreas and the liver, plugging up the gall-bladder. They refused to operate on her, but I insisted, sold my beat-up Lada and paid. The catheter didn’t work, mom looked like a yellowed photo of herself and as a hopeless case, they demanded that I take her home. I didn’t tell her, I spared her the degradation of fear, the brutality of the anticipation and according to Buddhism I committed a sin, since I prevented her for preparing for that mystery which we call non-being. I guess I believe in reincarnation, nature is sensible and economical, she wouldn’t allow herself to fritter away, to squander the uniqueness that is a human life. But I am also certain of something else, that even if we do continue to exist after ourselves, after our inevitable end, this will be only an insignificant part of us, so small and stripped of our personal feelings, of our vast destinies and commonalities, that this chipped out, surgically removed bit of life is actually the most serious evidence of our death.

I prevented mom from preparing herself out of love, I kept silent even when she, half-suffocated, groaned “help me,” I merely repeated “I’m here,” while the stunned women slipped out of the room, trailing their shabby nightgowns and their sympathy, something halfway between disgust and relief. At one moment, mom shuddered and went quiet, but this silence settled in me, it pushed all details, sensations and thoughts out of my consciousness, because I was suddenly left alone. So alone, as if I didn’t know anyone or anything, as if in her death she had given birth to me once again. Strange and murderous, the world pressed down on me, the weight of the summer sky along with the sudden responsibility for my errant life crushed me. I felt like I was shouting, and that was my final show of resistance to the unknown which had taken away my most beloved person, the last remnants, the crumbs of that generous love. I already knew that I was alone, because I understood that I had been changed, death had crippled me.

I sat there frozen for a minute or an hour. Then the noises in the hallway brushed against me, someone’s laughter, the rattling of the dishes on the lunch cart pushed by the ward maid, simple things, the shadows of the curtains and the heat. My fingers ached, I had been clutching the sheet. Like an empty glass being filled, my consciousness gradually brimmed with everyone I knew, even those whom I hated, I sensed that I was in no condition to contain the wonder that was my life, that squandering of days, which had gone so happily unnoticed until now. I felt so wise and perfect that I unwittingly smiled. Gradually and consolingly, the misery of the hospital seeped into my senses, I glimpsed the worn-out beds and the bed-pan which I had held under
mom just a half-hour earlier, and the title of the novel which I had been putting off writing for years flashed through my mind: Ruin. The pimply doctor finally appeared and, in a show of compassion, closed mom’s eyes, saying: “She didn’t suffer… Believe me, Mr. Sestrimsky, true hell was only just beginning, both for her and for you. You did everything you could. This was the best end we could hope for…”

“Mom never did me any harm,” I replied, and then: “Ruin… Of course, ruin.”