

Slava Brodsky

Twenty-Seven
Short Love Stories



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Manhattan Academia

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authorized by Slava Brodsky

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Chapter I

A Prenup

He had been married for fifteen years. And by the time this landmark date had come around for all his close friends, something had happened in each family. His childhood friend was divorced and had long since been dating some young girl. Similarly, everyone else's family relations had, at the very least, undergone deep cracks. As a result, their wonderful group, which had existed for many years, had now practically dissolved. And so, on the threshold of the New Year, he had absolutely no idea where and with whom they could celebrate. Of course, he would have loved to meet his childhood friend and his new passion. But when he told his wife about this, his proposition was met with sharp rejection. She had always been very close to his friend's wife and did not want to offend her.

In the final days of December, he suddenly found out that the management at work was setting aside a conference room for New Year's Eve celebrations. Those who had previously attended advised him to go. He suggested it to his wife, and she agreed. That's how they ended up ringing in the New Year in the company of people many of whom they did not

know. Overall, he liked being with this group, and they stayed long after midnight.

Since many were sharing their life stories, he realized they did not know each other very well. Towards morning, when everyone was ready to depart, someone recounted a simple story of his first childhood infatuation. And that's when he also felt the urge to tell a certain tale he had almost completely forgotten. Five or six people, including his wife, turned to him, and he began to narrate.

He was only nine years old. That summer, he and his mom rented a room in a house in Ukraine. Mother felt that her child needed to breathe fresh air. Mom would go to the farmers market for groceries. He helped her carry whatever she bought there. The few items she handed him, she divided into two parts, so that he could carry them in both hands – mother was making sure her son would not be afflicted with a curvature of the spine.

One day at the market, his mom met a woman who also happened to be renting a room for the summer, not far from them. She lived there with her daughter, Ellie.

That morning, Ellie was not at the market with her mother. She went there later and met them when everyone was already on their way back. Walking up to her mother, she whispered something in her ear. Her mom immediately rebuked her and yelled at her to be quiet. Then Ellie said she'd heard it on the radio. And when everyone started asking Ellie what she had been whispering about with mom, her mother shouted, "Hush! Be quiet! I'm telling you!"

But Ellie kept repeating that she'd heard it on the radio. So in the end, her mother allowed her to tell everyone about it.

That's how they found out that Beria was a spy and an enemy of the people. And that's how he met Ellie for the first time.

He was friends there with boys who were older than him. One day, one of them told him that Ellie was very pretty and asked him whether he liked her. He didn't know what it all meant and confessed this to his friend.

"What? Don't you know what a beautiful girl is?"

"No."

"Ok, let me teach you."

He agreed.

"So for example, Valya," said his friend, "she is not pretty at all. Sveta - not bad, cute. But Ellie, of course, is the most beautiful. And if you like her, that means you are fond of her." The friend looked at him and asked, "Got it?"

"Got it," he replied.

They shaped the fingers of one hand in a semicircle and placed the index finger of the other hand in the middle of this arc. This formed the letter "E". When they saw Ellie, they always showed each other that letter "E" on their fingers and smiled knowingly.

He started thinking about Ellie all the time. And suddenly he understood that she really was beautiful.

He also realized that he loved her terribly.

One evening, he and his friends found themselves outside a dance hall. They peeked through the window to see who was dancing with whom. And he saw Ellie. She was dancing with her mother. He was stunned at how grown-up she looked and understood the depth of the chasm that lay between them. This was very upsetting.

His wife took in the tale attentively.

“So, how did this story end?” she asked.

“At the end of August, everyone started returning to their towns, and one of our guys told me that Ellie and her mother would be going back home the following day. That’s when a sense of dread washed over me. I realized it was imperative that I find out her last name and where she lived. But I couldn’t even imagine how I would do this.”

“And so, did you find out all that you wanted to know in the end?”

“Yes.”

“Of course, you no longer remember it now.”

“Why not, her name was Ellie Kotova.”

“Unbelievable!”

“She lived in Dnepropetrovsk with her parents – 16 Pushkin Avenue, Apartment 4.”

His wife started to interrogate him about how he could possibly remember the address. In response, he just shrugged his shoulders. Then she asked whether he had sought out his Ellie. To this, he replied that he had never even intended to look for her.

“Why not?” asked his wife.

"Because she was nothing compared to you."

"No, I meant before we met?"

"But I knew I would soon meet you."

"Very funny."

Everyone began to get up from their seats and head home.

"You never mentioned anything about this to me," said his wife. "How come?"

"Because there was nothing about it in our prenup."

"You had a prenup?" someone asked.

"No," she replied. "That's just one of his jokes. He is fond of joking."

Tusya

It was the late eighties. Our moonlight brigade, which previously consisted entirely of refuseniks, now began to transform. Some of our kind were permitted to emigrate, and we were joined by those who had only very recently applied for exit visas. Like us, they were also forced to leave their jobs. In the meantime, the moonlight brigade earnings made it possible to put bread on the table and to prepare for imminent departure.

Our foreman was Cyril. In winter he rested. In early spring, he scoured rural areas and negotiated with the heads of Soviet farms regarding the construction of machines for the vitamin fortification of flour. Then, from mid-spring until Autumn, we – his brigade – carried out all the work, erecting buildings and installing and adjusting equipment.

That year we worked in a village near Ryazan. We lived in a tiny room inside the club of the farm. We bought our vegetables and milk from the local people. Sometimes we were lucky enough to obtain a bit of meat from the farm.

The milk was brought to us by Natasha, a young

girl known in the village simply as Tusya. She was seventeen years old. At first, she just brought the milk at her mother's request. She carried it over, put it on the table, and left. But then, over time, she became more inclined to stay with us for a bit. She tried to come in the evening, when we were finishing up our work, and endeavored to help throw together a small meal. She would explain the best ways to make farmer's cheese from sour milk and how to soften and fry dried bread. Eventually, she even started coming in the middle of the day, proffering cold apple cider, which she made at Cyril's request.

Gradually, we began to realize that she had developed a rather keen interest in our team. And at a certain point, it became obvious to everyone that she was head over heels for Cyril. Even he himself began to comprehend this. And whether he considered this completely frivolous, or he was deeply absorbed in his work, or perhaps because he understood the enormity of the chasm between them, he regarded her with warmth but purely as a friend.

And so we worked that summer under Tusya's supervision. She was a bright girl. None of us was averse to exchanging a few words with her. She kept us abreast of local news, and we found her Ryazan dialect charming. In the meantime, she took in everything we uttered with eager attention.

One day I told her I would like to go fishing and asked whether anyone in the village had a dragnet. She replied that her elder brother had one and that he could undoubtedly assist in this matter.

"And have you ever fished with a dragnet

yourself?" I asked.

"Ye-es."

"Well then, is there any fish?"

"Why not?"

"What kind?"

"Perches, bream, pike."

"Big ones?"

"Three kilos' worth at times."

Another time, before this fishing trip, I asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up. And in all seriousness, she replied that she had already grown up. That in their parts, people her age were already getting married. I tried to object and reminded her of twenty-year-old laws. But she insisted that they had their own ways here and that anyhow, she was almost eighteen. I asked her again what she wanted to become. And she replied that she wanted to become a good wife and to bear children. Then she added that she wanted to live where we lived and to learn to speak the way we spoke.

She and I agreed we would go fishing that evening. None of the others signed up for this. I only managed to persuade Cyril to join us. And so the four of us set out, along with her and her brother.

It was obvious this was not her first time fishing. She, rather than her brother, was the one ordering all of us around. From time to time, she would yell at us if we made a mistake.

She waded through the water without removing any of her clothes. And when she came out onto the shore, drenched, with her dress clinging to her body, she looked magical in the moonlight. There was a moment when even Cyril's gaze lingered over her.

And she, of course, noticed this and became even more animated. She hurried him along cheerfully and kept puzzling over why it took him so long to pry the fish out of the net. In the end, she took over the task herself and ordered him to pile the fish into the "ba-ag."

This was her finest hour. Her eyes gleamed with such joy that it pierced the heart.

Tusya found out that our brigade had arranged to come to a neighboring farm the following year and was overjoyed to hear it.

At the end of September, on our last day there, she asked Cyril if he would come back next year. A tense pause ensued, and then Cyril said that we had to live to see next year. After this episode, I observed that Tusya's mood darkened noticeably.

Tusya went home. Soon I followed. I needed to settle up with her mother for the milk. When I was leaving, I heard Tusya sobbing bitterly in her tiny room.

The following day we were leaving the farm. First, we set out for Ryazan. From there, each of us went his separate way. This was Cyril's last time moonlighting. Two weeks later, he was leaving for Vienna and hoped to be in New York by the end of the year.

Joke

A good friend of mine ended up in the hospital with acute abdominal pain. It turned out to be appendicitis. The operation was successful, but his heart started to play up. They did a cardiogram that showed a massive heart attack. He was transferred to the cardiology ward. The attending cardiologist broke the news that the situation was serious.

At the time, I was successfully moving up the ranks at the First Medical School. Although cardiology was not my field, I knew many doctors of the highest expertise. I contacted one of them – a well-known St. Petersburg cardiologist – for a second opinion. And he confirmed all the local doctor's fears. When asked whether it was worthwhile to transfer my friend from the current hospital, he replied it was not at all necessary. He stated that although his situation was serious, it was not life-threatening and that everything was under control. He added that he knew the attending cardiologist, had complete trust in him, and would call him from time to time to inquire about my friend's condition.

The hospital appeared to be reasonably good but not first-rate. The patients were not monitored at night, and we were told it would be best for us to set

up an all-night watch of our own. And so we – my buddy’s friends, along with his wife – established a roster to monitor him throughout the night. If we were to notice that something was wrong, we would raise the alarm and call for medical assistance. Fortunately, none of us ever had to summon the doctor. My friend was getting better, and we canceled the night shifts.

Eventually his health improved so much that he was able to start going for walks in the hospital garden. And then one day, during one of these walks, he said he wanted to show me something.

He took me to the rear of the hospital where we stumbled upon a low fence. Then I realized he was intending to climb over it.

“Are you allowed to do this?” I asked.

“I am,” he replied. “Now, I’m allowed to do anything I want.”

We hopped over the fence and continued our trek further still. And that’s when I saw the monuments of our former mustachioed General Secretary stacked in a concreted field, surrounded by a fence. There was a selection of large and small busts, full-length sculptures, and a variety of broken arms and legs.

He started wandering around, flicking the GenSec on the nose, which was quite amusing. Then he asked me whether I wanted to chip off a piece of the GenSec’s nose as a souvenir. I declined, but he decided he would chip off a piece for himself. This idea really appealed to him. He declared he would take the nose with him to Israel and show it to everyone there – let them guess what it is!

“Aren’t you concerned that you might need to get

a special permit?”

“For the export of a work of art?”

“Precisely. You’re lucky that this particular nose is clearly less than 50 years old.”

My friend felt that it was imperative for him to emigrate to Israel. And as soon as possible, at that. He was more determined than anyone else in our group on this matter. However, his wife opposed the idea with equal determination, largely because their departure would put a spanner in her dad’s career. In fact, her father considered their intention to emigrate to be a dishonorable act towards his person. So it was clear to all of us that the situation in their family had become quite tense.

Nonetheless, my friend presumed that one way or another, he would indeed end up in Israel. His preparations for that day were quite diligent. He managed to obtain a Hebrew textbook, and even made a copy for me as well. Bit by bit, we began to be able to read the Bible. Prior to this, we read the entire Pentateuch in Russian poring over many sections repeatedly. As a result, we navigated through all the biblical stories quite easily.

The task of chipping off a piece of the GenSec’s nose fell to me. From the outset, this did not promise to be all that easy. For that reason, I did not want my friend, with all his heart problems, to partake in the venture. But when I started to implement the plan, things turned out to be even more complicated than I had expected. In the end, I managed to get the job done after all. My friend put the nose in his pocket,

and we made our way back to the hospital. And that's when he told me he was intending to get a divorce.

It always seemed to me that when this sort of thing happened to my friends, I usually took it harder than they did themselves. I became upset now as well.

"So that you don't get too depressed, let's take another look at what we managed to break off," my friend said.

But I was still digesting his announcement.

"Hang on, so you quarreled again over leaving the country, or..."

"Or," he replied.

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

"Wait... you mean..."

"Yes. That's what I'm telling you."

"My goodness! I would never have expected that of you."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You know," I repeated, "I wouldn't have expected something like this from you. I believed in you, well, as in..."

"...as in yourself?" he finished for me.

I was going through a difficult, confusing period of my life at the time. So his joke seemed to me to be rather mean.

Sonny

Nikita volunteered to be the cook at Cyril's moonlighting gig. The moonlight brigade was modest in size, and Cyril kept pondering over whether or not he really needed a cook. But he knew that Nikita was quite handy, so he could be of some other use as well. That's why he agreed to Nikita's offer.

Just before his arrival, Nikita asked if he could bring his son with him, said it just so happened, that there was no one to look after him back home, and promised that he would not be a bother to anyone. So Cyril gave the green light for this as well.

It turned out that Nikita's son was just eight years old, while he himself was all of sixty-six. So when Cyril expressed a bit of surprise over how he ended up deciding to have another child at that age, Nikita related his somewhat unusual story.

His last job was in chemical engineering. He designed pilot plants for the production of herbicides. A friend of his worked at a lab next door. They often went to lunch at the institute's cafeteria. His friend's lab assistant, Nina, usually joined them.

She had never been married and had no children, or anyone else, for that matter. One day, Nikita got into a conversation with her. She said she was on the brink of forty and was living all alone. If she didn't have a child in the next year or two, she would never have one at all.

That's when Nikita told her it wasn't necessary to get married in order to have a child. There were plenty of men around, and surely there would be those among them, who would be ready and willing to help her with this affair. At that point, Nina asked him whether he himself would be willing to help her.

Nikita never expected the conversation to take such a turn and refused to take part in this type of venture. But Nina did not let go of this matter. She kept coming back to him and telling him that he could make her so very happy. In the meantime, he would be under no obligation to her. Furthermore, he would face no responsibilities regarding the child, and no one would ever even find out about it.

In the course of all these intimate conversations, they became friends. They often went to lunch unaccompanied - just the two of them. They found pleasure in spending an hour or two together, chatting about this and that. And although there was no special intimacy either occurring or planned to occur between them, Nikita started to ponder whether it would really be so bad if he were to help Nina. In the end, after much internal debate, Nikita told her that as a caring friend, he was willing to help her with this predicament.

Nina gave birth to a baby boy. She was simply overjoyed. She thanked Nikita profusely. And she really never did burden him with any requests.

Nikita's wife knew nothing of this. In fact, no one but the two of them had any inkling about it. At least not initially.

Very shortly thereafter, Nina happened to meet and marry another man. In no time at all, they had a baby girl. By then, the boy had already turned two years old. And as it tends to happen, he received less and less attention, although Nikita believed that the mother's attitude towards her son had not changed.

Then Nikita's wife passed away. Their children had long since gone their separate ways. So Nikita started to visit his Sonny. At times, he brought him back to his home. He even went so far as to resign from his job in order to feel free.

With the passage of time, Nikita looked after the boy more and more often. And gradually, everyone got used to the idea that his son was living mostly with him.

At school, things weren't going so well for Sonny. And Nikita once hinted to Cyril about this fact quite openly. After that, Cyril himself began to notice that not everything was quite right with the boy. But the way this manifested itself was perhaps merely through some sort of an excessive obedience to Nikita. The boy rushed to act at the mere mention of a word from his father. He looked at Nikita with unconcealed adoration.

In the brigade, Sonny helped Nikita by washing the dishes. And when everyone sat down to dinner

late at night after work, he carried the food to the table alongside Nikita. And although the boy did not look unhappy, everyone was overcome with a feeling of pity for him. Each of them tried to do something nice for him. To this end, everyone always kept a supply of unassuming candies or cookies. However, before accepting anything, the boy always cast a questioning glance at his father in order to ascertain what he was, or was not, allowed to do. Even when someone praised him in some way, he still first looked to his father, and only afterwards at the person dishing out the praise, and as if accepting this approval, smiled timidly.

After Nikita quit work, he survived off odd jobs. He could take off on a call-out at a moment's notice. Sometimes he welded new underbodies to old cars. On occasion, he renovated houses. In no time at all, he mastered the art of plumbing. And he frequently helped moonlighters when urgent or unplanned work befell them.

And ever present at his side was his Sonny.

For Life

He met her on a kayaking trip. She was devilishly beautiful. Besides being quite clever. She behaved rather arrogantly, ridiculing each and every person for the slightest oversight, real or imaginary. And no one even dared to approach her.

He took an immediate liking to her. Being with her was interesting. No matter what subject he brought up, their conversation would head in an unexpected direction. They could chat about everything under the sun for hours. Nonetheless, he wasn't about to set his sights on her. And it's not that she wasn't his type, but he had always imagined his girlfriend a bit differently. In addition, he knew that she had a fiancé at the Academic District of Novosibirsk and was intending to move in with him at the end of the summer. Besides, he had recently decided it would be a while yet before he tied his fate to another's.

All that aside, when she started to show in no uncertain terms that she was interested in him, he was flattered. He certainly liked the way they communicated. Not only did they finish each other's sentences, but also each other's thoughts. And it started to feel as though he had known her his entire life. No matter how hard he tried to cool

down their relationship, it gained momentum rather quickly.

From his earliest childhood, he lived in Moscow. He took his physics studies seriously. While still in high school, he got through all three volumes of the Landsberg textbook. He won several physics Olympics. Yet he knew that he would not be accepted into the university. Like many of his talented peers, he studied at the less impressive Oil and Gas College. After graduation, he couldn't get a job anywhere for several months. Then, finally, he got into the institute where medical and biological problems were studied. His superiors were somehow connected with one of the academic institutions of St. Petersburg where they were going to start developing a medical diagnostic system. In Moscow, they pieced together a group of programmers, tasked with helping the academy. For this purpose, smart young graduates were recruited. And his uncle, who was on familiar terms with the entire top echelon of the Moscow institute, helped him get a job there.

"It would take you more than ten years to write a thesis in your petrochemistry," his boss announced to him at their first meeting. "Whereas here, the semaphores are green, as Solzhenitsyn once said. So you will defend your thesis at the academy."

His first year at work, he never went home before ten at night. He really didn't want to let his uncle down. At this job, everything was new to him – both the overall problem statements and the tools with which the problems were to be solved.

At first, he was not taken seriously at the institute.

But it didn't take him long to master all the tricks of programming. By the following summer, he had advanced nearly to the levels of the best programmers in the group. What's more, he quickly grasped the entire system as a whole and was now irreplaceable at all the meetings with senior managers.

By the end of his first year, he realized he had reached a stage where he could catch his breath. He asked for a week off and was really looking forward to a kayaking trip with his friends. Clearly, he had not at all expected how it would turn out.

On one of the final days of the trip, they left the main campfire and took their time wandering through the forest.

"This is not just a summer fling for us, is it?" she asked him.

"No," he replied.

"Think carefully. This is very important to me. Are you sure you love me?"

"Yes."

"And you will never stop loving me?"

"No."

It seemed to him that she was thinking about something intensely.

"So this is for life, then?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

The trip was over. They were returning to Moscow. He asked her whether she was going to say anything to her fiancé. And she replied that she

would send him a letter as soon as they got home.

Later, when they were back in Moscow, he learned from her that she had sent the letter to her fiancé. She'd written to him that it had all been a mistake. Although she still thought he was a really good person. She wrote that she had gotten married.

"But you haven't gotten married yet," he said.

"What do you mean? You and I had worked everything out. That we are together for life. Are the formalities really important now? I consider myself your wife. And you have to consider yourself my husband."

Over time, the direction of their conversations changed. They no longer talked about abstract topics as often. They spent more time discussing everyday issues.

They had both been renting a room. Now they realized they could join forces and rent an apartment together. She initiated the search, called all her friends and acquaintances.

"Listen, darling," she once said to him. "I've been wanting to ask you something. My Daddy... Well, when I was still living with them... Well, every evening, when he came home from work, he would sit in an armchair, unfold his newspaper, and read it for hours. It was so awful! Mom and I would get so mad at him. You won't do that, will you?"

"No, I won't. I don't like reading newspapers. What other awful things did your father do?"

"Oh, lots of things. Mom and I were simply going crazy because of him. He would do everything

wrong. You know, he would take bites out of a whole slice of bread.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, instead of breaking off a small piece first, he would take a bite of the whole slice. You see?”

“What a nightmare.”

“But I haven’t told you the worst part yet.”

“Well, what’s that?”

“He wore sweatpants around the house. And they were worn and stretched at the knees. It looked so funny. Mom and I kept trying to explain to him how funny it was. But he wouldn’t listen to us. Please tell me you’re not going to wear sweatpants around the house! Right?”

“Right. I will walk around the house without any pants at all.”

One day she took him to meet her parents, who had invited them to tea. She introduced him to her mother, father, and younger brother, Connie. When introducing him to her father, she said, “And this is my Daddy.”

Her father nodded in agreement, “Yep, Daddy.”

She and her mother laughed at this. They started chiding the father that he shouldn’t have called himself “Daddy.” After all, he is “Daddy” only to his daughter. With other people, he should just use his name.

“Anyway, it’s not important,” she said. “Our Daddy often muddles everything up. Don’t mind him.”

And right there, in the hallway of their apartment, her mother reiterated that none of it was important and said she would tell them a story about Wilty, at

which point everyone laughed – she, her mother, Daddy, and Connie.

Her mother started recounting stories about her work. She said that these days, people didn't understand the significance of a situation and that she worked with a guy who was particularly clueless in that respect. She called him Wilty. Although he realized later that his real name was Whitley. So she thought this Wilty was a total idiot. She started explaining the particular situation, the significance of which had gone right over this Wilty's head, what idiocy he was guilty of, and why it was all so comical. Then she said that actually, it was not comical at all, but rather quite sad.

"Oh!" suddenly remembered her father, "Didn't we invite you to tea?!"

"Oh!" her mother parroted him. "And we wouldn't have remembered that without you!"

Everyone laughed again, while her mother complained that their Daddy always tended to interrupt a conversation at the wrong time.

At that point everyone finally moved out of the hallway into the room and started fussing over tea. When they sat down, her mother remembered Wilty again. She started mimicking the way he poured sugar into his tea, how long and how loudly he stirred it with his spoon, the way he squeezed in the lemon, and the terrible whistling noise he then made when he finally drank it.

In the meantime, her father began to ask him what he did at work. And he started describing the system they were developing.

"Ahh, so you are a medic," her mother interrupted

him. "In that case, I'd like to ask you..."

"He is not a medic," her father remarked. "He deals with medical computer diagnostics."

"Daddy," said her mother. "You have mixed everything up again. I wasn't asking you, was I? How amusing you are!"

"Daddy got everything mixed up again!" chimed in Connie.

The following day he woke up with a feeling that something in his life needed to be changed. He himself couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was that he didn't like about his life. On the contrary, everything had been going well for him lately. And not just well, but actually great. Nevertheless, he was alarmed by the fact that recent changes, though very positive, had occurred as though of their own accord, without much participation on his part. Somehow, he thought, my life went on autopilot. I need, he thought, to regain control over it.

He rushed to work and burst into his boss's office.

"Alex," he exclaimed, "Weren't you looking for someone to go to St. Petersburg for an extended period?"

"Well, yes, I was."

"Why don't you send me?!"

Alex spent a long time trying to pry out of him what had occurred. But he never did divulge anything specific to his boss. In the end, Alex gave up trying to understand what had gone awry. Instead, he said he could start working in St. Petersburg as soon as tomorrow, since the situation there was quite critical at the moment. And they have arranged

everything with the management there, and even reserved a small room for the programmer from Moscow. He immediately gave Alex his “go-ahead” on this. And his boss ordered everyone to get together for lunch to commemorate his departure.

The next morning, he found himself getting off the train at the railway station in St. Petersburg. With a small suitcase in his hand.

The Ethics of Snitching

Roman was hired by the institute where his older brother had been working for many years. He knew Roman's future boss very well. They were looking for someone to fill the head of laboratory position, and Roman had all the necessary skills.

It was a top-secret rocket research institute. Roman disliked everything about it from the very start. In the personnel department, he was interviewed by a man with small, shifty eyes and the demeanor of a retired military man. During their conversation, he received a phone call, which he answered with brief retorts: negative... will do... yes sir.

The personnel officer called Roman's boss, who took him to his laboratory to get acquainted. The pathway from the entrance to the lab made a dismal impression on Roman. There was not a single tree or even a shrub. Not a blade of grass in sight. Just cracked pavement, covered in holes that were filled with water. And even that water possessed some sort of an ominous tinge.

The laboratory itself was no less gloomy. The wooden floor had missing floorboards in places. The

dirty walls appeared untouched for many, many years. The boss showed Roman his would-be desk, which looked ancient. One drawer was fully stuck. The other creaked open, emitting a gust of stale air.

The boss proceeded to introduce Roman to his colleagues, or to be more precise, to his subordinates. They were young, which cheered Roman up to some degree. Out of the group, one young woman – Vera – caught Roman’s attention. She was the only one who smiled when greeting him. Obviously, he liked that.

From the very start, Vera fell for Roman firmly and as it turned out later, hopelessly. Over time, her feelings for him became so obvious to everyone, that she didn’t even try to hide them from him or from the others.

Roman and Vera became very close friends. So much so, that those who did not know them well were sure that something had clearly happened between them. However, their closest friends knew that Vera didn’t stand a chance. Although she said that she could wait as long as was necessary. And if all her waiting was in vain, then such was her fate. As to how seriously she meant this, no one could say for certain.

Another colleague, who worked in Roman’s laboratory, was Boris. He was very fond of Vera. She never hid from Roman the fact that Boris was hitting on her pretty intensely.

“Boris admitted to me that he may have problems with women,” she said one day. “Why would he tell me this?”

“And why are you telling me this?” Roman asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, well, I also don’t know why he would have told you this.”

Roman always felt he could act quite freely with the Jewish guys. And at first, he didn’t mind being friendly with Boris. One time they even went mushroom picking in the woods together. But then something odd happened. Boris threw a party at his home. When the guests started to disperse, he went to see off one of them. He was walking back along the railway station square in a great mood. There were two porters there with a cart. Boris asked them to give him a ride on that cart. He meant it as a joke, but the porters didn’t think it was funny. A fight broke out and everyone ended up at a police station. A report was drawn up, in which Boris was listed as the instigator of the fight. The case was referred to the court.

As was standard in those days, the police reported the incident to his workplace. And as expected, a meeting of young communists – a Komsomol meeting – was immediately scheduled, where the question was raised about expelling Boris from this organization. A petition to the administration of the institute was also drawn up regarding dismissing him from work. Although he knew it was completely useless, Roman stood up for Boris at the meeting. He stated that prior to the court’s decision, it was impossible to determine who was right and who was to blame for the incident.

To Roman’s surprise, his arguments were taken into account. Boris was not expelled from the Komsomol, nor kicked out of work. Eventually, the court found Boris guilty and sentenced him to

probation. But at work, nobody reacted to this in any way at all. And Roman started to suspect that something was fishy. When he discussed it with Vera, she thought his suspicions were unfounded and could not believe Boris would ever be involved with the KGB.

In the mid-eighties, Roman left his rocket job. He decided that he should not be associated with anything secret. He hoped that someday he would be able to emigrate to America after all. In the summer of '91, he realized that his time had come. He applied for a visa to emigrate from the country. In the forms, he omitted his rocket institute, and listed only his last place of work. At the time, the country was submerged into a complete state of chaos. No one caught him out on this "inaccuracy," and just a few weeks later he was granted permission to leave.

After setting out for distant horizons, Roman started calling Vera from time to time. One day, she told him that in '92, some KGB lists had been declassified. And it turned out that he had been right - Boris had been ratting the entire time they were working there.

"There you go," he said, "Good thing nothing happened between the two of you."

"And what makes you think that something could have happened between him and me?"

"Didn't you tell me that you wouldn't be so indifferent to Boris if he was a bit smarter?"

"But I said that to you. Do you understand? To you."

“Well, that was too subtle a hint. And anyway, I was otherwise occupied then.”

“As if I didn’t know!”

“So, who else snitched?” he asked Vera.

“Oh, almost every second person.”

“On our team as well?”

“No, on our team, Boris was the only one.”

“Mikhalych obviously ratted as well?”

“Obviously. But you know, he saved me once. I got into an unpleasant situation, and they wanted to kick me out from work. So, he defended me for a long time and finally won. I had always considered him a jerk, but he ended up being so attentive towards me. He fought for me as if for his own daughter.”

“So it wasn’t for nothing then, that I helped him?”

“Do you think there is some sort of a connection here?”

“I definitely think so now.”

In the same department but different laboratory, worked a war veteran. Everyone called him Mikhalych. He spent the war in the KGB troops. Everyone knew this. And he made no attempt to hide it from anyone. Obviously, they all understood that he was informing on everyone. For some reason, it appeared to Roman at the time that he was ratting without putting his full heart in it. He was friendly with everybody. And with Roman, as well. He didn’t understand much about his work-related tasks, and Roman sometimes helped him in a neighborly way. Roman had always liked friendly people.

Mikhalych really appreciated his help. And thanked him. Roman was certainly fully aware of what his gratitude meant. But he understood that it

had its limits. And at the time, he could not even imagine that this gratitude could extend to Vera as well. Now, Roman suddenly realized that the informants could have their own ethical ratting principles.

He and Vera talked a bit more about this and that. Roman complained that his pregnant wife was already three days overdue. He wanted to add something else, but the conversation slipped on to another topic, and he never told Vera everything that was on his mind. And they said their goodbyes.

A couple of days later, Vera got a call from their mutual friend in Philadelphia. She gave Vera the news that Roman's wife had finally given birth and that Roman had called his daughter Vera. She asked whether he had told his Vera about this. And he replied that he was about to. But was too embarrassed. And then he added that he would certainly call her.

The next day Vera arrived at work. At the very place where she and Roman once worked together. She sat down at her desk. She had no pending tasks. She sat for a long time doing nothing. Then she started to cry. And she sat there and cried for the rest of the day. Softly. So that no one would see.

Zinaida Sergeevna

She was married. So was I. At the institute, we worked in the same department. We started working on a common project and somehow, suddenly, became very close.

She was Russian. And her name was Zinaida Sergeevna. Her father held a fairly high position in our Ministry. The institute embraced puritan morals, and it was assumed that no one knew about our bond.

We worked on the calculation of parameters and characteristics of semiconductor devices for electronic equipment. She was well versed in what I was doing and considered me almost a genius. This really pleased me. I knew what she was doing and was proud of her achievements.

She and I rented a small room in a communal apartment. It was very convenient for us to get to work from there. But the overall environment was quite gloomy. The entrance was always filthy and smelled of cats. When we were moving into our tiny room, it was in a state of considerable neglect. The apartment was on the fourth floor, and we had to

walk up a steep staircase. The solitary window overlooked the roof of the neighboring building, which brought little joy. Although if you looked out the window at a certain angle, you could see a small part of the street where we lived.

We were pondering over what to do next. We wondered where and how we could buy a cooperative apartment. Our financial situation was very tight. But we worked out that we could borrow the money needed for the first installment. However, we had absolutely no idea where to queue up for an apartment. She mentioned that her father could help us with this. But she was afraid even to approach him with such a petition.

Despite everything, we were happy in our communal apartment. We had a lot in common. She liked and disliked the same books and movies as I did. We had the same favorite artists and writers. We both loved playing tennis and were not fans of skiing. The only major difference was in our musical abilities. She had an excellent ear for music, while I had a very mediocre one. We both adored summer kayaking trips down quiet rivers. And when it came to campfire songs, I loved being able to pick out her soft but very clear voice from all the rest. One day I asked her whether my ear for music was really that bad. And she replied that I had a good ear and that I should take advantage of that. Since I have a good ear, I should do more listening and less singing.

We judged the people we knew almost identically. And even had similar food preferences. We both loved salted herring with fried potatoes, both were not lovers of vodka, and both enjoyed drinking Becherovka liqueur and cocktails with Cuban rum.

Being with her was so effortless as it had never been with anyone else. She understood me without my having to utter a word. And she appeared to be very happy with me as well. One day she said to me, "You know, I'm so happy now. Every single day for me is a celebration."

One morning, I was at a different institute. I had to do a presentation there, and the audience's reaction to it was very important for me. The presentation was quite a success. I knew she was eagerly waiting to hear from me. But I couldn't call her right away. The people surrounded me, and discussions about my presentation went on for at least another hour. Finally, I managed to escape outside. I dialed her number from a pay phone. Michael, the guy who assisted her, picked up. He said that Zinaida Sergeyevna had started feeling unwell and was taken to the hospital in an ambulance. Her close friend Natasha had volunteered to accompany her.

Michael couldn't give me any more information. He only told me the name and address of the hospital. I rushed there immediately. Everything in the hospital was organized very oddly. It took me half an hour to find the reception desk. They searched for her for an interminable time, asked for her name repeatedly, and finally told me she was not registered there.

I called work again. Asked for Michael. He didn't come to the phone for a long time. This really made me nervous. Finally, he picked up. He ignored my questions and started telling me what he and Natasha

had just talked about over the phone. I listened to him and waited to hear something terrible. And this terrible something was finally uttered.

I don't know why, but I went to work. Everyone there was just crushed. We were gathered somewhere. I cannot remember what happened to me. I cried. Probably more than cried. So much so, that one of my friends told me I needed to pull myself together.

I went to the morgue. But they wouldn't let me in. I insisted. I asked to be allowed to be with her. I said that I was her husband and that I needed to say good-bye to her. The guy who had opened the door for me finally told me to wait and went away. He did not come back for an eternity. Then he returned and told me he couldn't allow me to go in after all. And he added that even if his supervisor permitted me to go through, he felt it would not be very good for me.

I went to our communal apartment. Began to sort through our things. Her things. It was terrible. Only recently, I could not even imagine that any kind of misfortune would befall us. And now it really happened. Now, I began to understand that nothing could be changed.

Then there was the funeral, a wake. Her father was there. I was told that he had been reprimanding our managers angrily while casting sideways glances in my direction.

I was given some kind of strong pills, and I no longer had any understanding of what was happening to me. All I knew was that everything was over for me in this world.

One day they must have stopped giving me pills. A week later I went to work. There, I was summoned somewhere where they appeared to be sympathetic but said it would be best for me to write a letter of resignation. This was a relief. I could not stay there any longer. I signed all the necessary papers. A girl was assigned to me to help me get all the required signatures on the clearance form. When I said that I couldn't deal with all this any longer, she offered for me to just have a seat. And she started arranging everything herself on my behalf.

When I was ready to leave, people reached out to bid their farewells. They shook my hand, patted my shoulder, said something. I managed to reply something to all of them. I thanked them for their sympathy. Then I said it was time for me to go. Everyone left me. I collected my things and walked out into the street.

It was a clear spring day. The sun was shining. The street was crowded. Everyone was engrossed in their own affairs. And it was as if nothing had happened to anyone.

I walked slowly along the street, crushing the remnants of icicles and chunks of melting snow that had fallen from the snowdrifts. I was thinking that maybe I would suddenly wake up and all this would turn out to be just a bad dream. And all the while it seemed to me that there, in the crowd, somewhere on the other side of the street, in the iridescent reflections of the sun's rays, walked my Zinaida Sergeyevna.

Construction Crew

The summer after our second year in college, Cyril and I ended up having to work on a Soviet farm in a village. Summer jobs on such farms were essentially mandatory in those days. We assisted the locals with some construction work and were branded the “construction crew.” Some big shot from our Party committee was in charge of us.

Alina, a college classmate of ours, was also part of this construction crew and worked as a cook. She had a boyfriend, Art. He was studying at another college, but we were all well acquainted.

We all planned to go on a kayaking trip together after our farm stint. But then this plan got derailed. Alina and Art said they wanted to go to Crimea for a couple of weeks. The previous year, Alina had spent some time in the vicinity and really liked it. So now, she and Art decided to spend their summer break in that area.

Cyril had a girlfriend – Natasha. But she appeared on the scene only a short while before all this. I knew about her from Cyril but had never met her. The rest of the guys didn’t know about her at all. Neither did Alina. When something sparked between her and Cyril during our summer project, we didn’t give it

much thought. And we could never have even imagined how it would all turn out.

By the end of our stay on the farm, it was clear as day to everyone that Alina had fallen in love with Cyril. And he, while always keeping a certain distance between them, behaved somewhat frivolously. They would go for an occasional stroll on their own. Or would spend a long time talking to each other. And when we were all together, Cyril often aimed all kinds of jokes at her. It was obvious that she got a kick out of this. And apparently, she started to imagine that he, too, was developing feelings for her.

A bit over a month later we all returned to Moscow. And Cyril finally realized that the situation he ended up in was somewhat dubious. Alina kept trying to continue being around him. Her efforts became more and more persistent. And when it dawned on Cyril how seriously she had fallen for him, he was afraid to upset her. He used a range of pretexts to avoid meeting her, kept postponing the moment of truth, from which, he was beginning to understand, there was no escape.

None of us knew whether Alina still had any ties to Art. Then one day, I accidentally ran into him in the street. He looked completely lost. Foolishly, I asked him about Crimea. To which he replied that the Crimea trip “went down in flames.”

A few days later, one of our classmates was having a birthday party. Alina knew that Cyril and I were going there, and she asked me to fix it up so that she

was also invited. I deflected, since I assumed that Cyril would be going there with Natasha.

Nonetheless, when I showed up on the night, Alina was there. She was extremely animated and constantly hovered over Cyril. He, on the other hand, appeared quite gloomy. Someone asked him whether Natasha was coming. He replied that she was running late but was on her way. Alina heard this exchange but didn't seem to attach much importance to it. And Cyril understood that the moment of truth was inevitable and became more and more despondent.

Finally, Natasha arrived. Cyril walked up to her. They hugged. And although I was under the impression that no one except me was really aware of the situation, the moment was still punctuated by complete silence. Everyone stopped talking and merely cast their eyes in Alina's direction.

She had been standing by the window. Now she turned pale and faltered. The plate and wine glass she was holding began to tilt. To help her I headed in her direction. She'd managed to steady herself, half-sitting on the windowsill. Still, I kept moving quickly towards her. And then she sank to the floor. Her plate and wine glass shattered with a crash, announcing the calamity that had suddenly befallen our poor Alina.

Everyone rushed towards her. Her fainting spell was brief. When she came to, she said she wanted to go home. One of the guys offered to accompany her. But she refused anyone's help. Ultimately, she left alone.

After this incident, Alina became afflicted with some sort of an illness. She ended up having to spend considerable periods of time in the hospital. Art was constantly by her side. She lost her strength, was unable to continue her college studies, and had to go on academic leave for a year.

I found out from someone that she had taken a whole packet of sleeping pills at the hospital. Art noticed it in time, and she was revived.

The following year, she transferred to the college where Art was studying. After that, we never saw each other again. And I lost touch with Art as well.

I inquired about them with our mutual friends. They told me Alina lived alone. And although Art never left her, they were no longer in a relationship and most likely never would be. When I asked whether Art had a girlfriend, I was told that this, apparently, was out of the question. And that he also lived alone.

Nearly ten years elapsed. I learned from another friend that Alina had finished her studies about five years ago. She tried to work. Then realized that she could not handle an intense work schedule. Someone helped her get a job teaching at the college from which she'd graduated. Her workload was moderate, which suited her perfectly. And just recently, she had married one of her former students. Art got married soon after that. To a girl next door who had never had a husband. There was something wrong with her leg. She had a bad limp.

One day, around five years down the track, Art and I met at a mutual friend's home. He introduced me to his wife and then went off somewhere, leaving us alone. His wife began to tell me she'd heard lots of good things about me from Art and was very glad to finally meet me. She turned out to be not quite as homely as all our friends had described her. And when she smiled, she actually looked quite sweet.

I asked her how her life was going. And she suddenly began to cry. I didn't know what to do and just waited for her to respond in some way. And after she had calmed down a bit, she said that her tears were brought out by my question. And that she was so happy with Art that she simply couldn't understand why God had decided to reward her and for what.

"It seems to me," I told her, "that God himself often does not know whom he rewards and for what. Nor whom and why he punishes. So relish your happiness before God changes his mind."

She looked at me with fear in her eyes.

Jack of Clubs

She came to my lab from her college as a summer intern. I placed her under the supervision of Vlad, one of my young programmers. We were working on calculations and modelling of electromagnetic fields. And Vlad began to bring her up to date. More precisely, he began to tell her various funny stories that happened in our department from time to time. He showed her how an analog computer works. And she was just amazed that it was possible to simulate real electromagnetic fields using various resistors and capacitors. Then I heard Vlad telling her that analog machines were far from flawless. He used simple examples to demonstrate how unstable their solutions were. She was surprised by this as well.

It appeared that she really liked being one of us. And Vlad once told me she wanted to work in our lab after completing her studies. She interned under Vlad for a month. Then went back to her college. To finish her studies.

The following year I ran into her outside the personnel department. She said that as a recent graduate, she had been accepted to work here on a permanent basis and assigned to my laboratory once again.

She was young and very beautiful. And when she happened to smile, all our men just melted. Again, I handed her over to Vlad to be his assistant. It was pretty clear to me that he really liked her. It was also obvious that he was afraid so much as to hint at this because he couldn't even dream that she might take any notice of him.

I did not expect great achievements from her. However, thanks to her arrival, the overall mood in my lab went up several notches. And I figured that even for this reason alone, her presence with us was justified.

The lab workers were young. The environment was easy-going and friendly. But we hardly socialized with her, except during special meetings in my office that she attended. I did not supervise her work at all, fully entrusting her to Vlad. And when a year later, he told me that she had started to make some progress and even to benefit our work, I was very happy for her.

One day she asked me whether what they said was true - that I was very good at card games. And that I could win at "Russian Fool" many times in a row even if I didn't have a good hand. I replied that this was true. She said she didn't believe me and suggested that we play a few games.

"Didn't they explain to you in Personnel that card games are not allowed in the workplace?" I asked.

"What about during lunch breaks"?

"You shouldn't play cards during lunch either."

"Well, how would anyone find out?!" she said.

I agreed to play with her at lunchtime. And one of

our guys suggested that we play for kisses.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

They explained to her what that meant. At first, she flatly refused. But then, almost immediately, she changed her mind and announced she was willing to play for kisses.

We played around five or even more games of “Russian Fool.” She lost every single one. When the last game was over, she thought for a moment.

“How can it be?” she said. “I believe I had all the trumps except for the Jack of Clubs.”

“Didn’t you know that the Jack of Clubs is the most important card?” I asked. And added that if she wants to beat me, we should play a game of chance rather than a game of skill.

We played one such game, and she finally won.

Over the next few days, she acted strangely. She was distracted, her thoughts elsewhere. One of our guys asked her whether she was trying to figure out why the Jack of Clubs is the most important card. But she ignored the joke.

At the very end of the week, on Friday, after everyone had gone home, she asked me whether I intended to pay up.

“Pay up?” I asked.

“For the game I won. Don’t you know that a card debt is a debt of honor?”

“But I beat you.”

“So that means I have to kiss you?” she asked.

“No, you don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I forgive you.”

“But I don’t forgive you,” she said. “I won one game, didn’t I?”

And she started explaining that it was my right to forgive her for all the games I won. But she had won one game and wasn’t intending to forgive me.

She was considerably younger than me, and I tried to turn the whole thing into a joke. But she kept talking about the card debt. So in the end, I told her to give me her cheek.

Her cheek was proffered immediately. But when I tried to kiss it, she twisted around cunningly and stole a proper kiss. And then catching me by surprise, whispered with a sigh, “Finally!”

This touched me.

And she apparently presumed that something definitive had happened between us. But when she tried to approach me once more, I went to great lengths to evade her.

“You only won one game!” – I still tried to turn the whole thing into a joke.

“Well, that’s that,” she said. “I will never come near you again in my entire life.”

And in that moment, either because I felt some kind of guilt towards her, or for some other reason, I was mortified that I had offended her, and walked over to her myself. From that day forward, our romance progressed at lightning speed.

It was difficult to hide our liaison. And since my relationships with many of our guys had cooled substantially, I realized that almost all my friends at

work were secretly in love with her.

The more time passed, the more I understood that she was becoming much more than incidental for me. But at the same time, I felt burdened by our connection. My already complicated life was becoming even more complex. And one day, after we quarreled over something minor, I did not seek to reconcile. We didn't speak for a few days. And then I had to go on a week-long business trip. When I returned, she tried to make up. But I rebuffed all her attempts emphatically.

At first, she was upset over our breakup. But over time, she cooled. And it seemed to me, she even began to respond to the displays of attention from some of the other guys.

She worked with us for a few more months. Then, suddenly, announced that she was leaving.

After her departure, one of our guys kept in touch with her. I found out from him that she had gotten married. She had two sons. Her husband started to make pretty good money in the '90s. But at some point, he went to Novokuznetsk on business and did not return. He was killed there.

She remarried and moved to her husband's native Estonia. They worked in a fishing village and lived poorly.

One day she happened to be in St. Petersburg and called me. I did not expect this and was unable to speak to her freely. She was very irritated by this and said goodbye to me dryly.

After that, I lost all trace of her.

* * *

On her last day at work, when all my guys had gone and we were alone, she said, "Well, we'd better say goodbye."

"Ok," I said. "I wish you all the best in the new place. And good luck with everything else in your life."

"And that's it? Is this how you say goodbye to me?"

I walked over to her. We kissed and stood like that for a while, hugging.

"Will you remember me?" she asked.

"Of course," I replied.

She walked over to the door. Then looked back and made a vague movement with her lips. Then she walked out and carefully closed the door behind her.

Everything inside me was torn to pieces. I wanted to howl in despair. I was ready to race after her. But I did not know what I would say when I caught up to her. And I stood there, covering my face with my hands.

Chapter II

Birthday Necklace

That year, the end of July was suffused with an extreme heat wave. The asphalt pavements were melting. All the windows were wide open, which created cross-breezes in the apartments. This was the saving grace for everyone. In some windows there were fans, which drove warm air inside.

It was her birthday. He left work earlier than usual. They had agreed that she would cook something, and they would celebrate at home. And then they would go and buy her that necklace, which she had spied somewhere a long time ago and which she really loved.

But everything turned out quite differently.

They argued over something. He lost his temper and was rude to her. She wilted and sat in silence. And then said that she had recently spoken with his mother, who had made it clear that their strained relationship of late could be because of Veronica.

“Is that true?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied, unexpectedly for himself.

Her shoulders slumped.

They were silent for a long time. Neither could utter a word. She kept trying to make sense of what had happened but couldn't. And he kept thinking in horror about the plunge he had just dared to take.

"There you stand, no longer mine," she said.

He walked over and embraced her. She hugged him back. They stood like that for a long time, holding each other and crying.

"Let's go somewhere," he said. "We were going to buy you that necklace, weren't we?"

They wandered the streets for a long time. He kept talking because he understood that during any pauses they would be haunted by the same thoughts. And he couldn't bear it. She also kept speaking, for fear of silence. And when brief pauses did creep into the conversation, she became terrified.

They went into shops. In one of them, he bought her that very necklace she had spied. And it almost seemed as though nothing had happened. Yet they both knew that this was not so.

They split up. She stayed where they had initially lived with her mother and later, on their own, after her mother left. He moved in with Veronica. But shortly after that, everyone was surprised to learn that he had rented a small apartment for himself, not far from work. And everyone started trying to guess what this meant and what would happen now.

Some time ago, they bought a small painting that apparently was attributable to the brush of Konstantin Korovin. The asking price for it was quite small. But even that was problematic for them at the time. Besides, she did not actually like the painting. Some small house was depicted in it. She said that the painting was gloomy and dark. She started calling it "The Night Shed." But he still persuaded her to buy it. He was certain that one day it would be twenty times the price. When they parted, she convinced him to take "The Night Shed" with him. Jokingly, she would tell her friends that this was her sole consolation. That finally, this dark, nasty painting would no longer be around to annoy her.

To friends, their split did not seem unequivocal. Everyone knew they called each other almost every day. He might pop over to her place after work. They would often visit their mutual friends together. Sometimes they even came together. They could recline on the couch with his arm around her in a friendly manner. And when she looked at him, her eyes sparkled. Each time they left, their friends would try to surmise what all this could mean. And would hope that eventually they'd be back together again.

They remained very close friends. But when they were alone, they were somewhat more restrained. He did not embrace her in that friendly manner, and her eyes no longer sparkled as brightly.

One day he came over to her place and tossed a huge pile of money onto the table.

"What's this?" she asked?

"I sold 'The Night Shed'."

"Oh, no! You were so fond of it. Did someone really buy it?"

"Imagine that!"

"But not for twenty times the price?"

So he told her that he'd sold "The Night Shed" for forty times the price. And that he'd brought her share and her mother's share. And she said that she'd always known she could expect just about anything from him, but this time he had topped all surprises. To this he replied that he had another surprise.

"Well, what is it?" she asked.

"I want to marry you off."

"And to whom do you wish to marry me off?" she asked.

He named his closest friend.

She laughed.

"You don't understand anything. I can't even imagine myself with another man. And you know what? I will never be able to see you with another woman. Never!"

Their friends kept hoping that something could bring them back together. Especially after he and Veronica split up. But this was not to be. Two years later, he re-married, while she married his closest friend. In a year's time, she had a son, and a year later, a daughter. He attended all their birthdays. And

everyone was happy. But he always came alone. She never was able to get the better of herself, and each time she called to invite him, she apologized, but asked him to come alone.

“I’m sorry. I can’t just yet,” she would say. “Maybe next time.”

Anya Sokolovskaya

It was the evening of our class reunion. The organizers wanted everyone to attend. So the restaurant they chose was not fancy, and the menu was modest. We ordered a bit of wine and naturally, brought our own vodka.

The evening was moving along quite sluggishly. My classmates joined me at our table and talked interminably about their post-school life. They inquired about me as well only to interrupt me and continue talking about themselves. Someone became a well-known boxing coach. Someone else was involved in a secret nuclear project and was even exposed to a small level of radiation, which was deemed honorary at the time. One guy won the favors of our classmate, considered by all to be the most beautiful. Two others got their PhDs. Finally, our very own Igor Kharitonov, who was perhaps the worst student but held the distinction of sporting enviable biceps, secretly told everyone that he had been admitted into the KGB after army. And that he held a senior position there. So, we were all very happy for our Igor. After all, it was widely believed at school that he wasn't going to get far.

Happiest of all for him was I. One time he really

helped me out. We were in the ninth grade. Some little punks started bullying me. They were not particularly fond of my Jewish-themed physiognomy. And during our latest encounter, when two of them began harassing me in earnest, Igor suddenly turned up. Without much hesitation, he came to my aid, and we clobbered the two. When the third one joined them, we beat up the lot. None of them ever came near me again.

At the reunion I walked over to Igor, and he started filling me in about his KGB gig. He didn't say outright where he worked. But by the time I began talking to him, everyone already knew about it. And he knew that everyone knew. And to my surprise, I felt no ill will towards him over his connection to an organization that I abhorred. Moreover, it was only after talking to Igor that I was able to relax a bit and stop feeling out of place. Even though the whole event made me pretty sad.

I kept wanting to go over to Anya Sokolovskaya. In fact, I had come that night mainly to see her.

She was in our class for only two full years. Then, at the beginning of the third, she got into a fight with one of the girls, right there, in school. That girl happened to be the daughter of some big shot in the Ministry of Education. And Anya was transferred to another class. Then the whole bigwig family moved away. Their daughter left our school. Shortly after, Anya's family moved to another part of town, and I heard no more news about her.

When our reunion was being organized, I kept asking about Anya. And I found out that she had refused to go to the other class reunion. And that she

was going to join us. Before she arrived, I kept looking around in the hope of spotting her.

And at last, there she was. But she joined a table at the other end of the room. She didn't even seem to notice me. In the meantime, I kept glancing over to her table. Finally, I got up the courage to walk over to her. I asked her to dance. It seemed as though she'd been waiting for this and readily accepted my invitation.

We headed to the dance floor. Only three musicians were there, but they generated a fair amount of noise.

I was still possessed of a childish fear of Anya, and we danced almost without touching each other.

I don't remember what we talked about for the first few minutes. Then she asked, "Well, what have you become?"

By that time, I was a fairly well-known surgeon. And I thought everyone knew about that. But apparently, she didn't.

"What have I become?" I echoed her question.

"Well, what have you achieved?"

And perhaps because by then I was tired of hearing about others' achievements in life, or maybe because I had not expected her question, I told her that I hadn't achieved anything special.

"No way!" came her surprise. "When everyone was expecting so much from you. After all, you were a genius. My mom always set you as an example for me."

We danced in silence for a time.

"You know, I was in love with you at school."

"Really?"

"Yep. Head over heels."

"Wow! Why didn't you tell me this before? You should've told me."

She started to say something else. But it was very noisy. I didn't hear her and asked her what she'd said.

"You should have told me this," she repeated.

The musicians took a break. They were served their dinner. Then they returned. And when they resumed playing, I went back to Anya's table.

We started to dance again. When the music ended, we remained on the dance floor. And when the musicians began to play again, I almost immediately suggested to Anya that we leave the restaurant. She agreed without a thought.

The day had been very hot, and when we walked outside, the passing rain had suddenly stopped. The heat subsided. And it was devilishly nice for me finally to be alone with Anya, wandering through the spring streets without rushing anywhere or fearing, as previously, that at any moment she might disappear.

She began to tell me that she had divorced her husband ages ago and that she hadn't really been with anyone since. That her son left a lot to be desired. And that for some reason she often compared him to me - to the previous, long-ago me. And that the comparison always upset her. And I listened to her and shared almost nothing about myself.

I walked her home. She offered for me to come in. She did this without much confidence, which made it

easy for me to refuse. We kissed. Or rather, we kissed goodbye. I wrote down her phone number and promised to call her to set up another date.

I thought about our meeting over the next few days. I examined the piece of paper with Anya's phone number. But I never called her.

Anya and I never saw each other again. But occasionally, I heard about her from our mutual friends.

Many years later, when we were all much, much older, we would call each other and talk about who was doing what and facing which problems. But over time, the phone calls became less and less frequent. And then, there was almost no one left to talk to. And I didn't know whether Anya Sokolovskaya was still living somewhere in this world.

* * *

When Anya and I were still in the same class, we all liked to write all sorts of notes to each other. And my closest school friend, with whom I had always shared a desk, showed me his notes to Anya. He had written to her that she'd been looking over at his friend far too often. And she had replied to him that she had someone better than his friend. This little note upset me terribly.

Around six months later, when we were already in different classes, my mother came home one day and said that she had run into Anya Sokolovskaya and her mother in the street and that they had asked about me. This thrilled me immensely. And Mom

looked me over and asked why I was blushing. It felt like her question made me blush even more. And I replied that I'd remembered making a mistake in a school essay and was now unsure whether our teacher would notice it.

When Mom left, I took out a photo of our class, which had been handed out to each of us at the end of the previous school year, and started examining it. Anya was tall and was therefore standing in the last row. Next to me. The photo was of pretty bad quality. All the faces were tiny and blurry.

I tried to peer deeply into Anya's face and felt something constricting very hard inside my chest.

Mayakovsky Poker

Cyril and Daniel had been inseparable ever since their student days. And although their names weren't all that similar, for some reason people mixed them up. Their biggest bond was their shared love of poker. And during their studies at the college, they played almost every day.

After graduation, their paths diverged. But they kept on playing poker. Though now only once a week, on Thursdays.

Cyril had always intended to leave the country and paid no attention to his academic career. But he had been denied permission to emigrate and for the last few years, lived as a refusenik. He got kicked out of his job, and his life was far from easy.

Daniel, on the other hand, defended his PhD thesis soon after graduation and then his doctorate as well. In the old days, after the defense, people were expected to throw a celebration at a restaurant. All the friends and relatives of the newly minted Doctor of Sciences would be invited. Anyone who had a direct and even a not-so-direct connection to the defense would be graced with an invitation as well. This included the opponents of the dissertation, the

secretary and other leading members of the Academic Council, and numerous colleagues. But by the time Daniel was going through his defense, everything had changed. Dissertation celebrations had been banned. And the authorities threatened to cancel the results of the defense for the violation of this prohibition.

Daniel's solution to this problem was very simple. It so happened that the defense was scheduled for the week before his birthday. So, he invited everyone to his birthday party the following week. All those who were supposed to, got invited, including his opponents and members of the Academic Council. Naturally, Cyril was on the guest list as well.

At the restaurant, he seated Cyril at a table next to their mutual classmate. There was a time in the past when she had showered Cyril with distinct signs of attention. And he also seemed to be slightly in love with her. But then something slipped between them. Something that Cyril didn't really like at the time. And while he was pondering over this, changes occurred in both of their lives.

They didn't see each other for a long time. Then he ran into her a couple of times at Daniel's. She'd come with her husband and little daughter. And now Cyril was sitting next to her at the celebratory dinner.

The event was plodding along tediously and incongruously. Everyone felt this. They tried to liven it up with their speeches. But words that appeared apt to the speaker induced even more boredom over everyone else.

"What about you? Why are you so quiet?" she suddenly turned to Cyril when the evening had

crawled past its midpoint. "Why don't you say a few words as well?"

"As you wish," he replied. "There was a card game..."

"...a card game at horse-guardsman..."

"...at horse-guardsman Narumoff's. Right. How did you guess?"

"Well, what else can you possibly talk about? I know everything about you."

A silence ensued.

"I know about all your problems," she said. "I empathized with you all this time. But I never dared to call."

"Thank you," said Cyril.

They were silent for another while.

"I know everything about you as well. Only I'm not sure whether I empathize with you or not."

"And what is it that you know about me?"

"You split up with your husband for political reasons."

"Oh, if only! The whole point is that there were no, as you put it, political reasons."

"Is that so?"

And she began to tell Cyril about herself.

Her husband was a pretty good up-and-coming mathematician. He worked at the Mathematics Department of Moscow State University where a very unpleasant situation befell him. She was telling Cyril things that he already knew. She went on about how the former secretary of the department's Komsomol branch Viktor Sadovnichiy and his assistants dealt

with applicants of Jewish descent during the entrance exams. They drove them into separate classrooms, which were popularly known as gas chambers, and flunked them using sadistic techniques – gave them problems that they would hardly be able to solve themselves. And her husband was part of that process.

She was half Jewish. One day she asked her husband what he would say when their daughter grew up, applied to study there, and was also assigned to a gas chamber. He replied that this was unlikely to happen, since few people knew anything about their wives. And since she was Jewish on her mother's side and went by her Russian father's last name, there was no way anyone would find out. And even if someone did dig it up, he had no doubt that they would cut him some slack and give his daughter the opportunity to take exams on standard terms.

He told her that he himself was disgusted to participate in all this. But he was between a rock and a hard place. It was necessary to wait until he defended his doctorate. That's when he would feel independent from the whole gang and would be able to refuse to work on the Admissions Committee.

He also said to her, "Look, they get your votes in the elections, after all. And not because you like them. But simply because you don't want to ruin your life."

"Well, maybe it really was best to wait until he defended his doctorate," said Cyril. "To fit in the defense around his birthday, get through the celebrations, and then everything would go smoothly. So it turns out then that you didn't have any disagreements after all..."

“No, that’s not it! That wasn’t the point at all by then.”

She paused for a moment.

“Well, maybe it was, to some extent,” she said.

Cyril really had a terrible urge to be alone with her after the restaurant. He was all set to walk her to the metro station.

“May I call you sometime?” he asked.

She made no reply, and he didn’t know whether she had been trying to figure out what to say or if she hadn’t heard what he had asked. It was awfully noisy there. But Cyril decided he would not repeat his question.

People began to disperse. They also started saying their goodbyes. She said she was in a hurry because she had to pick up her daughter from a friend’s place. Cyril liked this remark. He took it as a form of an apology for the fact that she could not spend more time with him. They hugged goodbye. Then she touched a button on his jacket and said, “Will you forgive me for not replying to you? “It was so noisy there... Of course, I would like you to call me.”

On a Thursday a couple of weeks later, Cyril went over to Daniel’s place. They played poker late into the night. As always, they played for small stakes, so that no one would ever incur big losses. From time to time, they would swig a glass of moonshine and chase it with small cubes of rye bread sprinkled with salt and dried in the oven.

They played Mayakovsky poker with a deck of 52

cards without jokers. Actually, none of them knew for sure whether Mayakovsky the poet played such poker or not. But someone told them he was fond of playing like that, and they all believed it.

At the very end of the evening, something absolutely incredible happened. During the second round, Cyril collected a jack, ten, nine, eight, and seven of spades. This was one of the strongest poker combinations. They had a rule that a five-chip bet was the highest possible. And he put all five into the pot. Everyone immediately threw down their cards, while Daniel matched with five chips and raised five. Cyril matched and raised five once more. Daniel did the same.

Cyril's hand in the game without jokers was very strong. But he couldn't be sure of winning until the very end. Nonetheless, he continued to match the bet and raise five. Eventually, with the words "All right, I'll spare you," Daniel called the last bet and slowly began to lay out his cards on the table. He had an amazingly strong hand - four queens. When he showed first of them - the queen of spades - Cyril realized he had won. But he still waited until Daniel laid out all his cards. No one doubted that Daniel had won this round, but everyone was curious as to what Cyril had collected.

He began to lay out his straight flush on the table. And when he put down the last card, he said to Daniel, "Your queens are beaten."

Everyone jumped up from their seats. Someone was slapping Cyril on the shoulder approvingly. Someone was offering words of consolation to Daniel, although he didn't seem to be the least bit

upset. He expressed his surprise along with everyone else at such an incredible concurrence of the two strongest card combinations and congratulated Cyril along with all the others.

Later, when everyone had already left, Daniel told Cyril that their mutual friend had called and complained about him.

“What’s the matter?” asked Cyril.

“She said that you disappeared somewhere. That you haven’t called.”

“Well, I called her once, but her daughter was sick,” said Cyril. “So, I took it as a sign from above. And decided not to call her again.”

“What nonsense! What do you mean, ‘a sign from above’? This isn’t poker. You don’t need to think too deeply here.”

Then Cyril told him it wasn’t just that. It was also that she had grabbed him by the button. Over by the restaurant exit. And at that moment he remembered the time many years ago when she had also grabbed him by the button of his jacket. And when she talked to him, both long ago and at the restaurant, she kept twisting and twisting that button in her hand.

“You see, that time long ago, I kept thinking, what could this mean. And while I was thinking... Well, anyway, then, long ago, that’s when everything fell apart for us.”

“Ah, so it was because of the button?” asked Daniel.

Cyril did not say anything, and they sat in silence for a while.

“Well, the button is another matter. Maybe you are right. Here I pass.”

They said nothing a while longer.

“The button is a completely different matter,” said Daniel again.

Mice

I had no money whatsoever and I didn't really know what could be done about this. For over five years I had been working in emergency care, and the hopes of entering a medical school diminished with each year. Every once in a while, I would decide I needed to change something dramatically in my life. Unfortunately, however I did not know exactly what I should change.

By then, I had already split up with my wife. Almost all my earnings went to her. How I managed to get by on my meager salary was difficult to comprehend. In the meantime, I needed to find an apartment to rent. And I had absolutely no idea where, how and with what means I would rent it.

At one point, I was hoping to emigrate from the country. But after the divorce this would entail completely cutting ties with my children, and I was forced to abandon the idea.

Then, at the very moment when I was trying to figure out what to do, it turned out that friends of my friends had gone to Paris for two years. They had not wanted to rent out their apartment. Instead, they had asked a teacher who had been tutoring French to their

children to live there and look after it. He, in the meantime, had a room in a communal apartment. And he was willing to rent this room out to me for a very modest fee.

The room turned out to be tiny. There were mice living there. And I spent several days just battling them. When I finally sorted everything out, she began to come. She'd come for just a few hours. Then she'd leave. And then she'd come again.

Each time she left I would have been able to go see my children. I really missed them. My ex-wife wouldn't even have minded if I stayed the night with them. But I was afraid she might perceive this the wrong way. And I really didn't want that to happen. So I ended up staying in my tiny room. And listening to mice rustle through the night.

And during the day, she kept coming.

What ever happened to her? Why did we split up? How did it all end? I don't remember anymore.

Krasnovidovo

The winter university term had just ended. My friends and I decided to go on vacation at a student holiday retreat. The place belonged to Moscow State University. It was located on the bank of the Mozhaisk reservoir, 120 kilometers from Moscow, in the village of Krasnovidovo. Those who had been there said that the air in those parts was so clean that one's head would start to spin.

We were given a nice room, to which a likable kid was also assigned. Like us, he was studying in the Mathematics Department but was two years younger. We quickly became friends. I started telling him all about our professors, the department's traditions, and lots of quirky stories about university life. I upset him a bit when I told him that he would never again have a semester as happy as the very first one when he had nothing but math subjects.

In response to my "happy semester" claim, he said that many of his classmates could not cope with the math and either were in limbo or had already been expelled from the university.

We went on this vacation as a company of men. Our new friend was also on his own, without his

girlfriend. She was intending to go with him, but at the last moment something happened and she had to stay in Moscow.

We spent all day skiing. Before dinner, we would break out the cards and play Preferans. While we were at it, we would also share a bottle of a Russian semi-sweet. One for the entire group. We brought several bottles with us. Since we knew they could easily go sour, we kept them cool between the window frames.

In the evening we went down to the dance hall. Those who had lost in Preferans had to invite someone to dance, chosen by the winners. I was the one who came up with the penalty – one dance for every 100 whists lost.

During our entire stay, our young friend avoided taking part in the card games. And only the day before we were due to leave Krasnovidovo did he decide to join in. We had kept our dance agreement a strict secret. But he knew about it. Doubtlessly, he understood that he played very poorly and was sure to lose. That's why he got up the courage to play with us only after making me promise that we would choose only attractive girls for him.

That evening, when we went down to the dance hall, I pointed him to perhaps the prettiest girl there. She looked really lovely. On top of that, she was wearing a tight-fitting dress, which aptly emphasized her great figure.

He was pleased with my choice and even shook my hand in gratitude. When the dance was over, he walked over to me and asked about my next selection. I pointed to the same girl. He invited her to

dance once more.

As I kept choosing the same girl again and again, he no longer shook my hand. On the contrary, he asked me to change my selection. But I kept insisting.

She no longer hid from him that she really liked him and obviously thought he was attracted to her as well. And she kept asking why he hadn't opened up to her until the last day and never invited her to dance before.

He got a bit angry with me. But in the end, apparently decided that even though I had played a joke on him, everything was still more or less within the bounds of justice.

He said he'd exchanged phone numbers with the girl. And although he knew for certain that he would not call her, he promised they would definitely meet back in Moscow.

"What else could I have told her?" he asked me.

Back in Moscow, she called him several times. But he used various excuses to evade the meeting.

One day, actors from Moscow theaters were performing in the large auditorium of the Biology Department. She knew he would be going there. So she got a ticket, and without giving him any warning, also showed up. He noticed her in time and was able to sneak away before she was even able to spot him. The following day he related this to me, looking quite confused.

Another time he ran into her in the corridor of the Mathematics Department. Apparently, she had come

up with some plausible excuse for being there. He skipped the second half of his lecture and sat with her in some empty auditorium. As he later confessed to me, he felt really happy with her. And he wouldn't have even minded if this accidental date of theirs had lasted for a much longer time.

At the end of the second hour, they came up to me together, and he said he was ready to go to the meeting. There wasn't any meeting to go to. But needless to say, I played along with him and replied that they were waiting for us and that we had to get going.

At some point she invited him to her birthday party. Evidently, suspecting that something was wrong, she said that she would really be looking forward to seeing him and that if he didn't come, she would never call him again. He promised to be there, although he knew very well that he would not be going.

One day he called me and said that tonight, at this very moment, the guests would be arriving to celebrate her birthday. And that he was suffering terribly. He was imagining how long she had been preparing for this evening. And how she is jumping at every ring or knock on the door, running out to greet the guest, and getting more and more upset.

First Class Compartment

Cyril had to make an urgent trip to Volgograd unexpectedly. There were no economy seats left at the train station ticket office, so he bought a first-class ticket. The padded seats of the car didn't look all that clean. But there were no upper berths in the compartment. For this reason, he had only one fellow traveler.

He spent a long time inquiring about Cyril's work and life in general. Cyril answered the questions patiently. The man listened attentively. At some point, it seemed to Cyril that he could disclose a bit more to his casual acquaintance than was customary to disclose on trains. And when he related to his traveling companion that he was being refused permission to emigrate from the country for almost seven years now, the man replied that they were fellows in misfortune.

"You are also a refusenik?" asked Cyril.

"No. But just like you, I too had the misfortune of being born in this country."

Cyril assumed that his new acquaintance would also share something about himself. But he remained silent for a long time and kept looking out the train

window.

"You know, I'm flying to America in two weeks," he said suddenly. "Leaving for good."

"Then what are you doing on this train? You should be getting ready for your departure."

"I'm going to Borisoglebsk. To see my mother. To say goodbye. As for my departure, I've been ready for a long time. For more than twenty years."

"How so?" asked Cyril.

And the man began his story.

He had a fiancée. They had already been planning their wedding. But when he met Catherine, he simply fell head over heels.

She came to Moscow from France. She held a minor position at the French Embassy. At the age of twenty, she was dazzlingly beautiful and dreamed of becoming an actress. She offered her services to a youth theater company. They weren't clear on how she would be able to fit in with the team but decided to give it a shot. They requested permission from the KGB. To everyone's surprise, a positive reply was received very quickly. Apparently, the KGB had their own plans for her, but things turned out differently from what they had expected.

He was twenty-seven, but already held the rank of associate professor in the Physics Department of Moscow State University. He was destined for a whirlwind scientific career. But all he could think about was how to escape from the Soviet Union.

He was a regular at the studio where Catherine had been accepted. That was where they met. Their

romance unfolded quite quickly. And when Catherine told him they were having a baby, they decided to get married. The ban on marriage to foreigners had been lifted long ago. Moreover, the worst of the period after the repeal of the decree had also passed. And yet the whole process was fraught with a great deal of stress.

As soon as their marriage was registered, he snapped into action. He started convincing her that she must give birth in France. And that they would seek permission to go to Paris supposedly to introduce him to her parents.

He told her that if she wanted to leave this country with him, they had to be extremely careful. She would need to hide all their plans even from her closest friends.

“Am I allowed to tell my mom about this?” she asked.

And he replied she would be able to tell her mother about everything once they arrived in Paris.

They started to prepare the paperwork for a trip to Paris. And he initiated a flurry of activity at work, wanting to convince the KGB, who he had no doubt were following him, that all his scientific interests were first and foremost linked to Moscow State University. He actively participated in all the affairs of his department. He started negotiating with the “Science” publishing house about the publication of his scientific monograph.

The KGB appeared to understand that if he failed to return, it would have significant and very undesirable repercussions for them. He was

becoming an increasingly prominent figure at Moscow State University. For this reason, they regularly sent their informants to him. Someone would offer to buy his car. He understood this to be clear provocation. Someone else would ask him to deliver a small parcel in Paris. Yet another someone would ask him to visit a friend to convey personal greetings. But he politely declined each time. He said that he was going to Paris for only a week and that he would have absolutely no free time.

Prompted by him, wherever she went, Catherine said that she really liked Moscow and that she was determined to stay in the Soviet Union forever.

One day he realized that uninvited guests had visited his apartment. From that point on, even at home they talked to each with the assumption that they were being tapped. He had to put in huge efforts to convince Catherine that he was not crazy and that all his fears were not unreasonable.

Three weeks before their departure, the local doctor monitoring his wife's condition ran a few blood tests and expressed some concern. He stated that it wouldn't be a bad idea for her to spend a day at the hospital for observation. Once there, they were told that they would not be able to complete all the tests in one day and that she would need to stay for another day.

He left to go to the university. That evening he returned to the hospital to check on her. When he entered the ward, a man in a white coat was sitting next to her bed and injecting some sort of medication into her vein. He asked what the man was injecting,

to which he muttered something and left.

Immediately after that, Catherine began to feel unwell. She was getting worse and worse by the minute. She went into premature labor and was taken away from the general ward.

He tried to find out what was happening. But he was told that a doctor would come out shortly and explain everything. The doctor did not come for a long time. When he finally came out, he stated that neither she nor the baby could be saved. The doctor conveyed this to him haltingly, all the while looking down at his feet, and then quickly left.

He was crushed by what had happened. He demanded an investigation and finally got an appointment with the chief physician. The doctor was very polite and assured him that he would be provided all the documentation on his wife's treatment. He was given a time when they were supposed to hand all this over to him along with an oral explanation in case something was unclear.

At the appointed hour, a man was waiting for him. This time, in civilian clothes rather than a white coat. He was also quite polite. But as it turned out, he had no intention of showing him any documents and did not even try to provide any explanations about what had happened to his wife. And when he insisted, the plainclothes man said that his questions seemed offensive to the medical staff who had been fighting for his wife's life. And then, using very ornate language, he hinted that if he were to persist, he himself might end up in the same place as his wife.

"At that moment, I had the urge to pounce on him and rip out his throat," he told Cyril, "but I restrained

myself. They could have easily finished me off as well. That's why I kept quiet all these years. But now, I think it's possible to disclose this ... to a random traveling companion, whom I will never see again in my life."

When he finished his story, they looked out of the carriage window in silence for a long time. The train stopped at a crossing. But they continued to sit in silence. The train started moving.

"Are you flying to America alone? With your family?" asked Cyril.

"I don't have a family. And I was married only once."

"So you've been living alone ever since?"

"Well, not really 'alone'. There are many beautiful women in the world! They do not leave me 'alone.' A bitter grin appeared on his face. "But you are right, in some sense I live alone and most likely will never get married again..."

The train jolted to a stop. The door of the compartment slid open. The conductor appeared.

"Gentlemen! Which of you is getting off at Borisoglebsk?"

"Borisoglebsk! Goodness! That's me! I'm coming... getting off..."

Philadelphia

My friend married a woman from my new workplace. I was the one who introduced them one day when we met quite by chance at a concert.

Her mother had never worked while raising her three daughters. And her father was the deputy director of the Energy Department at one of the Ministries. This position was not all that grand, yet not insignificant. Her father was not overly proud of his rank. At least that's how it appeared to me the one time I met him. He didn't speak much. Yet his words appeared to be imbued with deep meaning. And I kept thinking that his silence was also replete with significance, as if he knew more about things than others did but was not keen to talk about it.

My friend thought her parents were nice people. And one day he said they could have been totally great if they lived in some other country.

One time he invited me over to their place to share a bottle of Georgian wine. When I arrived, her mother was there. She refused to join us, saying that she didn't drink wine at all and that she was not hungry since she'd eaten recently.

Our conversation kept revolving around the same topic the entire time. We were talking about how difficult it was for us, with our Jewish physiognomies, to count on achieving any level of success in anything without being members of the Communist Party. And we were also talking about the phenomenal accomplishments of our friends who had moved to America.

Her mother kept bringing us snacks from the kitchen and avoided taking part in the conversation. But snippets of our discussion reached her ears. After I left, she told my friend, "I don't like what you were talking about just then. We've given you so many opportunities. And you are all still dissatisfied. That's just wrong."

When her mother left, she rushed over to her husband with tears in her eyes.

"My God! You must be mad at Mom. I'm so ashamed! Please forgive her."

But he reassured her, saying that she could put it all out of her head.

A year later, I was departing for America. I knew I would be living in Philadelphia. My friend and his wife attended my farewell party. I told him that this was their second send-off and that, based on the well-known omen, they too would soon be leaving the Soviet Union forever. He smiled wryly and shot a quick glance at his wife.

He spent a long time trying to convince her to emigrate. But she was heavily influenced by her

parents. And in the end, he understood his efforts were leading nowhere. Their split was not amicable. In the course of the divorce, she made several moves he didn't like. And he flew to America without even saying goodbye to her.

* * *

At first, he ended up in Boston. He found a job there after a few months. And a couple of years later, I helped him get quite a decent position in a financial firm in Philadelphia although I myself worked in a different field. And when he climbed a considerable number of rungs in their corporate ladder, he pulled me over there as well.

We lived in the same neighborhood and visited each other often. Many people in Philadelphia knew him. He liked to have people over. Bustling feasts appealed to him. He entertained all sorts of people, not only close friends. And at some point, he put up a sign in his living room that read "It is not customary here to show YouTube videos, tell old jokes, or raise toasts to America, to the hosts, or to the ladies present." This sign garnered many discussions in our circle, among the Russians.

When he had already moved to my state, his ex-wife decided to spend a month in America. First, she was going to go to New York, and then to Philadelphia. Her friends tried to talk her out of it. They insisted that it would seem ridiculous. But she kept saying that she specifically wanted to go to Philadelphia. That she had long dreamed of visiting the Rodin Museum and the Barnes Foundation. As

for meeting up with him, she had no intention of doing anything of the kind.

Her very first day in Philadelphia, she called him. She said she'd brought over a parcel from their mutual friends. Initially, he tried to get out of meeting her, saying that he was not currently in Philadelphia. But she kept refusing to believe that.

"How is that possible?" she queried. "I'm calling you on your home phone number."

At first, he tried to argue that this didn't mean anything. But in the end, considering the immense journey she'd had to make, he agreed to meet her at the Rodin Museum in a couple of days.

At the museum, she chattered incessantly about New York. She related the terrible situation she got into there. She'd decided to take the subway somewhere. To her surprise, the train sped through the station she needed without stopping. She got out of the car, decided to go back, and got on the train on the opposite platform. As the names of the stations flashed by, she realized she was going in a completely wrong direction. She got out again and started asking people how to get to the right train. Based on where they were pointing, she seemed to understand that she needed to take the passage over the tracks. But when she took that passage, she suddenly found herself in the street. There she realized that she had to buy another ticket in order to get to the trains and that she was clueless as to which train she needed to take and in what direction. That's when she burst into tears. A police officer walked over to her. She tried to explain to him where she needed to go. But they kept

failing to understand each other. So she decided she needed to backtrack, and tried to convey this to the policeman. At last, he seemed to understand her. He accompanied her down the street to another train station and walked her to the platform. There, waiting for the train, he kept saying something to her. Then he wrote the name of her station on a piece of paper, which made her very happy. After that, he proceeded to describe to her something she should never, under any circumstances, attempt to do. As she understood, not ever! And he kept insisting on it until she agreed she would never do it.

The train that the policeman put her on took her back home. But after this incident, she decided she would never again take the subway anywhere by herself.

She conveyed all this to him with great excitement. However, he didn't find her story engaging. He couldn't help thinking that he probably shouldn't have agreed to meet her.

She started inquiring about his life. Asked whether his job was interesting. He replied that initially, they offered him a very modest salary. And that he hadn't expected anything different. But over time, work became more and more interesting.

She fired more questions at him. He answered in monosyllables. Finally, she said, "I can see that your life here is not all that great."

A couple of months later, one of his Moscow friends called him.

"Your ex complained that you had turned into a

completely different person. That your gaze had become lifeless. That your eyes had lost their luster. That you couldn't engage in conversation."

"What was I supposed to talk to her about?" he replied to his friend. "About my wonderful job? Or should I have shown her photos of my wife and son? Told her where we went on vacation this year?"

* * *

One morning back in Moscow, they had just woken up and were lying in each other's arms, not wanting to get out of bed.

"I know that someday you will leave me and move to America," she said to him.

"Maybe," he replied. "Maybe."

They both thought they were joking. And they were still quite happy together.

Boy

A friend's wife died suddenly.

They had two children – a boy of fourteen and a girl of ten. At the cemetery, the girl was playing with some flowers and acting as if nothing had happened. While the boy looked completely shattered. My friend told me that the boy had reacted with overwhelming silent hysteria, and he feared that the poor thing might actually have a mental breakdown. He also mentioned that when the boy was only six years old, he inadvertently got hit on the head with a swing at the playground. Ever since then, he often got headaches, and they were constantly worried about it.

A little over a year later, my friend re-married. To a woman with an eight-year-old child. Her son turned out to be quite sickly. And most of the family's attention ended up being focused on him.

As time went on, my friend's children appeared to be abandoned. I often visited them. The girl paid absolutely no attention to me. Whereas the boy was always happy to see me.

He and I spent a long time talking about

everything under the sun. When I left, he always made sure to see me to the door. And I always felt he was waiting for me to tell him when I would come again. I had a sad feeling that he didn't really interact with anyone at home.

At school he began to show an interest in physics. He would get awfully excited when I asked him witty challenging questions. At times we moved on from physics to mathematics. He was crazy about math problems that were difficult to solve but had very short solutions.

One time when I paid them another visit, he rushed over to me when I was still at the door and started telling me what had happened at school. It turned out that their physics teacher had assigned everyone a problem similar to one of those that he and I had solved together. The problem was difficult, but he worked it out quickly. When he started explaining the solution to the class, none of the other students could understand anything. And then the teacher ended up having to explain it to everyone himself.

When I was leaving their place, my friend told me that he had gone to the school and talked to the math teacher. And she told him that his son was barely getting Bs in her subject. But at the school Olympics, he was able to solve a couple of complex problems that even the most advanced of her students had not been able to work out.

And I told my friend that it all made sense to me. I'd noticed myself that the boy's mind worked admirably. But when it came to routine things, where it was simply necessary to concentrate and assert a bit

of patience, things appeared to be considerably worse.

During one of my visits, my friend started complaining that the boy often gets in bed in the middle of the day and lies like that for a long time, just staring at the wall.

“And he also told me something about you.”

“Well, what was it?” I asked.

“He wanted to find out whether you knew his teachers. He claimed that you were not just a regular person but could easily command other people.”

I tried to find out from my friend what all this could mean. But he didn't know himself what his son had been implying.

When I was talking to the boy later that day, it didn't appear to me as though he had changed towards me in any way. Everything was the same between us. We even ended up sitting together longer than usual.

And towards the end, he told me a story that he thought was very funny. The other day, when he was running out of the building, he saw an old woman sitting on a bench near the door. She said to him, “You keep *ruscheeng* and *ruscheeng*. Are you *schuur* you won't run out of gas?”

He laughed when he told me this, and kept repeating, “Are you *schuur* you won't run out of gas?”

One day, when I visited them again, the boy told me he thought his mother was alive. Only she was

hiding from everyone. And from him as well. I tried to convince him that this couldn't be true. I even started telling him that in fact, it wasn't very good to suspect his mother, whom he loved beyond measure, of such a thing. And the boy seemed to agree with me.

A month later, I found out he was no longer alive. He fell from a fourth-floor window and died. Was it an accident or not? His father avoided talking to me about it.

Fool

She simply couldn't understand how it all could have happened. She'd put a great deal of time and effort into their brief two-day hiking trip. More than anything, she had wanted to make it memorable for her guys, and she must have lost her guard when it was coming to an end.

This was her favorite class. She had been teaching English to these seventeen-year-old boys and girls and adored them all, although they were far from brilliant during her lessons. Except maybe for her teacher's pet, Svetlana. So when one of them came up with the idea of going on a short hiking trip with the entire class in order to mark the end of school, she embraced the idea wholeheartedly.

Once the decision to go was approved by everyone, she and Svetlana began to work out the details. For several days they sat together, designating what each person had to do and needed to bring.

They set out on Friday evening. Spent two magical days in the forest on the bank of a small river. They boys played soccer. Everyone competed against each

other in badminton, having lined off a field with ropes and hung a net between two trees. They happened to have two inflatable boats, on which they floated and fished. One of the days they even staged a full-on “battleship” game. In the evening they sat around the campfire, singing songs and baking potatoes in the hot coals.

Of course, there were many discussions about what they were all going to do after graduation. She was a mere eight years older than all of them. Everyone considered her as one of their own, pretty much one of them. And yet, when she began to speak, everyone fell silent and hung on her every word.

She knew everything, or nearly everything about each of them. Was always there to advise and guide them all. They were, after all, in the middle of preparing for their entrance exams.

Around the campfire, she shared various useful stories. One of her friends was enrolling in the Physics Department of the university. She got A’s in physics and math. When she felt certain that all the challenges were behind her and that she had passed everything, she took the English exam. She translated the phrase “a two-foot stick” as “a stick with two legs.” And got an F. Obviously, this was a big disappointment. Then they all argued whether it was appropriate to fail someone for such a minor oversight. And in the end decided that an F was undeserved. Nonetheless, they understood that even a tiny detail could result in a great deal of trouble and that therefore, they always needed to stay alert.

There were many more conversations around the evening campfire. And she was simply overjoyed at

how wonderfully their trip was going.

And now she was sitting in a hospital, waiting for the doctor to come out and announce whether or not Svetlana would live.

The doctor came out and told her they had done everything they could. And now it was probably fair to say that her life was out of danger. Although more surgery might be necessary. But she would never be able to have a baby.

The main fears eased somewhat. But she remained sitting on the hospital bench, unable to stand up. She recalled step by step everything that had transpired.

When these wonderful two days came to an end, they gathered up their backpacks and hiked through the woods to the train station. Their calculations appeared correct, and when they came out of the forest, they found themselves right in front of the small bridge above the sole platform. When they had arrived there two days earlier, no one wanted to walk over this bridge. Everyone simply jumped off the platform onto the tracks after the train had departed. She was opposed to this. But when one student jumped, everyone else followed suit. At the time, this seemed safe enough and she didn't bother to reprimand the group.

Doing all this in reverse was more difficult, since rather than jumping off, they needed to climb up onto the platform. For this reason, she decided in advance she would walk ahead of the others just in case, and lead everyone onto the bridge. And when she did this, everyone followed her.

When they were all nearly at the end of the bridge, the train appeared. At that moment, she turned around and saw that almost the entire group was walking behind her. Svetlana was the only one lagging far behind. She hadn't even started to climb up the bridge.

Svetlana had also seen the train. And she realized she might not make it in time. She rushed straight across the tracks to the platform. Removing her backpack from her shoulders, she threw it up onto the platform and began pulling herself up on her hands.

The train was fast approaching, and the situation was getting more and more dangerous by the second. She shouted something to Svetlana, trying to stop her. For a moment, the girl froze in indecision. Evidently, she was debating whether to jump back onto the tracks. But she must have decided that this might be even more dangerous. She made a desperate lunge and was almost ready for the final life-saving push. But she was a fraction of a second short. And the train, frantically honking and grinding its brakes, moved in on her, leaving too small a gap between the cars and the platform.

Now, in the hospital, she thanked God that Svetlana remained alive. But she was in despair at the thought of how much more this young girl would need to endure. And it was difficult for her to chase away the thought that all this was her fault. She had been in charge of this outing and was therefore responsible for eliminating any risks or potential problems.

The next few weeks were very nerve-wrecking. The first couple of days, she and Svetlana's mother stood guard at her bedside throughout the night. And once the most acute period had passed, she spent all her free time at the hospital.

There they became even closer. Svetlana shared her innermost thoughts with her. One day she confessed that for a long time, she'd been very fond of Cyril, a boy from the same grade. And that she was under the impression at one point that he had an eye for her as well. But later she understood that he was completely indifferent towards her. Now, all her hopes were dashed. Now, when it became clear that she would never be able to have children.

She tried to reassure Svetlana, spoke words of hope. While to herself, she was wondering why she hadn't even guessed previously that Svetlana was in love with Cyril. She was also thinking that this complex situation, in which she found herself, was now becoming even more difficult and unbearable.

The following day after school, before going to see Svetlana at the hospital, she popped over to her apartment. She found a couple of free minutes to be alone and gather her thoughts. She sat at the kitchen table with her head in her hands and thought, "My God! What did this poor girl do to deserve all this? Why is it all happening to me? Why does everything in my life end up being so ridiculous?"

That's when she realized she had been doing everything incorrectly in her life. And that it could no longer go on like this. She had to change something. Maybe quit her job? No, that would make little sense

after Cyril's class had graduated. Maybe she needed to live on her own? Yes! She must go somewhere and be by herself. She would go stay with her mother.

At the thought of this, she burst into tears. Then she started thinking that her husband did not deserve all this. Did not deserve this at all. But still, she should probably go stay with her mother. She had no other choice.

And most, most importantly, tomorrow she would tell Cyril that she loved him very, very much, but that they needed to stop seeing each other.

She went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. She saw that the mascara had run from her lashes and smeared across her face. And she kept looking at herself and repeating in a whisper, "My God! What a fool I am! What a complete fool!"

She wiped the mascara off her face. Looked in the mirror once again. She imagined what would happen to that sweet, silly child when she told him they should no longer see each other. Tears welled up in her eyes. She walked into the bedroom and no longer holding back her sobs, collapsed onto the bed and kept repeating, "What a fool I am... What a miserable fool..."

Chapter III

A Banal Story

He had been refused permission to emigrate. His employer had long since kicked him out. And along with other refuseniks who didn't want to moonlight outside the city for long periods, he threw together a brigade. They did anything and everything that turned up. They repaired TVs and refrigerators. Sewed clothes. Converted standard radios to shortwave ones. Made transformers for household quartz lamps. Sold watermelons in the street. Could just dig holes and ditches or pack shelves in shops.

He met her by chance on the train. They had been riding in the same direction for about half an hour. They got to talking, exchanged phone numbers. He liked her. And she liked him as well. But at the time, he didn't want to talk about his life in detail to someone he didn't know. So he only told her that he'd graduated from the Moscow College of Chemical Technology and then worked at the Karpov Institute of Physical Chemistry, studying chemical kinetics and working on his dissertation. Which was certainly true.

They started dating. And he was on the verge of

telling her about his situation. But then he found out something about her parents. And it became clear to him that they would not approve of their relationship. So he decided to postpone the explanations for a while.

In the meantime, she considered everything between them settled. She told him that she loved him terribly. And that she was grateful to fate for bringing them together on the train.

She kept wanting to introduce him to her parents. But he used various pretexts to postpone this. And one time he suggested she tell them at least something about him beforehand.

“But my mom has already guessed everything,” she replied, “although she only got a quick glimpse of you once, in passing.”

“What do you mean, 'she guessed'?”

“Well, my hair has gotten darker.”

“Your hair has gotten darker? Is that some sort of a law of nature?”

“Didn't you know? It's because your hair is dark.”

He really didn't know about such a natural law and was entirely unsure that what she had told him made any sense. And at any rate, his mind was on something else altogether at the time. They had known each other for about two months now. And he thought it was time he told her all about himself. But he didn't expect anything good to come out of such a conversation, so he kept putting it off till the next time.

One day they were visiting her friends. There were quite a few people there. As it turned out, some of the guests knew his friends. To be sure, they had

heard of him and were aware of his movements. And he decided right then and there that he would tell her everything. But then it occurred to him that it would actually be better to tell her everything without the pressure of the current circumstances. So he decided to put it off for just one more day and hoped she would not find anything out in the meantime.

However, everything turned out quite differently. The following morning, she did not call him as usual. And when he called, she did not answer. He called again that evening. Same result. The next day he called her once more. She picked up the phone and greeted him coldly.

“Are you upset with me?” he asked.

“Upset is not the word,” she replied.

“Is it all because I didn’t take the time to tell you about myself?”

He fumbled and bumbled rushing to explain to her why he hadn’t done it right away. Why he’d kept putting it off from day to day. He said he was fully intending to tell her everything yesterday.

“And if you’d confessed everything to me, would that have changed anything?” she asked.

He didn’t know how to reply and kept digesting that word – “confessed.”

“And at any rate,” she added, “my parents already know everything. You know what my father said?”

He remained silent.

“He said that to kill you wouldn’t be enough.”

He quietly hung up the phone.

Tycoon

There was something special about traveling by train in the time before mobile phones. I simply adored those brief hours when a passenger was cut off from the entire world. The train keeps moving, the wheels keep tapping. And in these moments, you can gather your thoughts and contemplate everything for which you had no time before. You can peacefully reminisce about things that transpired recently or, conversely, long, long ago. Or you can just sit looking out the window at the procession of fleeting pictures and not think about anything at all.

The solitary fellow traveler sharing my compartment turned out to be a corpulent young man. When I got on, he had already ensconced himself in the top berth. He dropped off to sleep a few moments after greeting me. He napped for a bit. Then woke up and climbed down. And when I laid out some sandwiches on the table and offered to share them with him, he happily agreed, producing a bottle of vodka and two small plastic glasses from his leather briefcase - this was his contribution to our feast.

He told me he lived in Tashkent. But had decided to visit his brother in Nikolaev. And before that, he

spent three days in Moscow. We drank our first round. And as soon as our conversation touched upon the subject of our better halves, he started complaining about his wife. He said that always, even from the very beginning, he suspected she was hiding something from him.

He spoke Russian well, but I could still spot a slight accent slipping through his speech.

"You see, everything was a bit off. After all, I left my first wife because of her. And I had two children there. I wanted to be with her. Told her that she should marry me."

"Well, and what did she say?" I asked.

"She didn't want to marry me for a long time. Then finally did but didn't want to take my last name. I'd ask why. And she'd say, 'I don't want to - too much paperwork to fill out.' So she never changed her last name, and her friends didn't even know she'd married me."

"But that's not really all that important, is it?"

"Well, you don't understand. It was always one thing or another that was off. I'd say to her, 'Let's go out and eat somewhere today.' She'd say, 'I can't. I've got a headache.' And in the evening, she'd go out. 'My daughter asked me,' she'd say. She had a daughter, you see."

"Well, and did you call her daughter? Did you check?"

"I couldn't call her daughter. We didn't get along."

We drank another round. And then another. Our car was rocking pleasantly. My sandwiches were sizable, and we took our time finishing them off.

"Sometimes I'd get home when she was on the phone with someone. And if I walked in, she'd immediately fall silent. I had a bad feeling about the whole thing."

"Maybe it was a girlfriend of hers. Maybe they'd been having a conversation that she didn't want to continue in front of you. After all, who knows what sorts of things girlfriends talk about."

"Yes, of course, that could have been it... You know, one time she was planning to go somewhere. She said she had some business to attend to. I didn't really like that. I said, 'Let me walk you.' But she didn't want me to walk her. She said, 'What for?' And I said I was going in the same direction anyway. But I wasn't actually going in the same direction. Then she told me that if I needed to go, I should go by myself."

The train stopped at some small station. While it was still, we stayed silent. Then the train started moving again.

"I was a tycoon, you know. A big one."

"A tycoon?"

"Yes, I had all of Tashkent in here."

And he clenched his hand into a fist.

"I had a big business. A big serpentarium."

"A serpentarium? You bred snakes?"

"Yeah. You know how much money snake venom can fetch?"

"So, you made a lot of money?"

"Sure did. And with that money, I was making big deals then. Very big business. I'm telling you I was a big tycoon. Not like now."

Again, we fell silent for a while.

“What kind of snakes did you breed?”

“All kinds. But mainly gyurza. To get venom, gyurza is the best one to breed.”

I asked him whether he'd ever been bitten by a snake. And he replied that if you've been breeding snakes for many years, one day you were sure to make a mistake. And that could end badly.

“You see, the gyurza doesn't warn you when it attacks.”

He lifted his pant leg, and I got a glimpse of his massive leg, completely disfigured, covered in scars, and blue in places.

“See? When it bit me, I only had a knife handy. And I immediately cut off a big chunk. It was the only way.”

“Didn't you have some antivenom?”

“Anti-gyurza? Of course, I did. But it wasn't close by.”

He decided to pour out whatever was left in the bottle, but I said that I'd had enough, and he gladly polished it off himself.

We sat without speaking for some time.

“So... you managed to handle snakes, but not your wife.”

“They are worse than snakes,” he said.

“Well,” I asked, “did you find out in the end whether or not she was hiding something from you?”

“No, I didn't.”

“Maybe you should talk to her? Maybe you were just imagining it all?”

“I can't talk to her. She's gone.”

“Did she die?”

“No! Things went wrong between us, and I told her to leave. I told her things weren’t working out for us somehow. So she left. And when she left, I made sure she wasn’t lacking for anything. She’s gone, and I’m glad. Now I’m going to my brother’s. He told me that we were going to go fishing. That he would introduce me to a good woman. And I’ll teach him to do business.”

We sat a bit longer. Then he climbed back up into the upper berth and seemed to tune right out. And when I got off at my station, he was still asleep.

Sad Send-off

I met Cyril a long time ago. We were both in the sixth grade then. His father went to school with my uncle. And we ended up being introduced to each other at some birthday party, which we all happened to be attending. Later on, we graduated from high school and often got together at Cyril's place to ponder over what we would do next. No one appeared to be expecting us at Moscow State University, and Cyril started saying that we would probably have to enroll at Fish University.

I still don't know whether such a university existed in Moscow. I doubt if Cyril did either. But he started using the Fish joke so obsessively that I ended up doing the same. So when someone asked me what college I was planning to attend, I'd put on a totally straight face and reply that I would try to get into the Fish University.

They never did get to welcome us at Fish University. We decided to enroll at the Moscow College of Steel and Alloys. They created a department of cybernetics there. No one got flunked during their entrance exams. So all the Jewish boys

and girls with a penchant for exact sciences were drawn there. And for us boys, the key part was that they had a military unit. This meant we would not have to serve in the army.

That was where I met a schoolmate of Cyril's, about whom I had only previously heard in passing. Cyril and he lived in the same street from their earliest childhood. Then they shared a desk for almost the entire ten years of schooling. Both got B's in Russian literature and English during their final exams, which precluded their getting even a silver medal.

And so, the three of us ended up being friends through all our years at the college.

During his junior year, Cyril's school friend met a girl who was a sophomore. Her name was Sophie. They started dating. Sophie was very attractive. And Cyril felt that his schoolmate was very lucky. I didn't feel that way. Because from the very beginning, she appeared to me not to be very bright. No one shared my beliefs on this. And to be honest, we never had any real discussions on the subject.

Strange as it seemed to me, Sophie got quite decent grades. And even in math, in which I didn't exactly consider her to be stellar, she got straight A's.

"The most important thing in life is to attain self-fulfillment," she told Cyril and me one day.

"How is that?" Cyril asked.

"I mean to become someone. Well, to do something outstanding."

I asked her whether she wanted to attain self-

fulfillment. And if so, then how exactly? Sophie looked at me in amazement and said that obviously, she meant herself first and foremost. And that she was intending to become an outstanding mathematician. Like Sofya Kovalevskaya. To which I remarked that she thought too much of herself. And that even Kolmogorov never said at her age that he was going to become an outstanding mathematician like Sofya Kovalevskaya. This joke of mine got much approval from all the guys.

Almost everyone in our group was into table tennis at the time. One day, Sophie joined us as well, and we spent a couple of hours playing. After which she said that she liked the game and that she might take it up seriously.

“What do you mean by ‘seriously’?” I asked.

And she replied she wasn’t intending to play table tennis just for the fun of it. She would play only in order to get to the top of the Soviet championships and then to participate in the world championships.

After graduation, Sophie and Cyril’s schoolmate got married. Sophie found a good job where she had a pretty flexible schedule. She attended math seminars at the university. She co-authored a fairly decent article with a mutual friend of ours. But after that, rumor had it, she wilted somewhat. Our mutual friend, her co-author, published several other good papers. But this time, on his own. In the meantime, Sophie’s momentum stalled.

After graduation, Cyril and I ended up working in

completely different fields. He changed jobs a couple of times. Then decided to leave the country. When the management at his last job found out about it all, the usual story came to pass. And soon, Cyril was kicked out of work. He was refused permission to emigrate. All this went on for quite a long time. But one day he called me and said that he was flying to Vienna and that I was invited to his send-off.

Cyril's send-off turned out to be both joyful and sad. More and more people kept showing up. Everyone kept asking Cyril about his plans. And of course, his schoolmate was there along with Sophie. She did not leave Cyril's side and kept firing questions at him. And the following day Cyril related the whole thing to me.

"Make sure you don't turn into a vegetable there," Sophie told him.

"What do you mean?" asked Cyril.

"Well, you'll find a good job there, earn a decent living, buy a house, have children, sign them up for music lessons, get into sports with them, play tennis, go skiing. You'll go to museums, Broadway shows, Carnegie Hall concerts, fly to the Bahamas for vacation..."

"Isn't that called living a full life?"

"No, that's how vegetables live. Whereas you must attain self-fulfillment," Sophie told Cyril.

While I was digesting Sophie's words, Cyril added that when almost everyone had finally left and they were alone for a minute, she rushed to him with tears in her eyes and exclaimed, "Goodbye my darling! I will never forget you!"

“So it turns out that she had some feelings for you?” I asked Cyril.

“It appears so.”

“Not only that, but she was definitely under the impression that you were secretly in love with her as well. That’s very much her style. So, how did you end up replying to that?”

“Well, what could I say?”

“I don’t know.”

“I said that I would never forget her either.”

“Well-done!”

“But that didn’t really mean anything, did it?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

At First Sight

We were sitting in a compartment of an express train with the sinister name of “The Red Arrow.” It was early morning. The train was entering Moscow. And everyone was ready to get off and rush about their business. But something went wrong just before the approach to the station. The train braked and began to move slowly, making frequent stops.

Two young guys from our compartment hopped down from their upper berths, and talking over each other, launched into stories about their wives. Out of the blue, one of them suddenly said that he married out of convenience. And that he thought such marriages were the most long-lasting. He also said he didn’t believe in various tales about love at first sight. While at it, he glanced in my direction, as if expecting me to join their conversation. And after failing to elicit any sort of a response from me, he started asking me questions. I replied in monosyllables. And they went back to chattering to each other.

Among us was a young woman. Ever since the previous evening, she appeared to be immersed in her own thoughts. Either due to this or for some other reason, she did not take part in conversations that are common among casual fellow travelers on trains. In

the morning she was still deep in thought and kept glancing at her watch.

“How about you? Do you believe in love at first sight?” I asked her, mainly because the chatter of the young men from the upper berths was gradually beginning to get to me and I just wanted to draw her into the joint conversation.

“Of course, I do,” she said. “My husband and I fell in love at first sight.”

She fell silent, and I asked her about something else. She replied. I don’t know why, but I felt a certain fondness towards her. And I decided that, in accordance with Newton’s third law, some invisible rays also emanated from me towards her. And that she wouldn’t find my questions intrusive. I appeared to be correct in my assumptions. She answered willingly. And then, without any further prodding from me, quietly started to relate her story. She seemed to be addressing me alone. But as soon as she started talking, our young guys immediately fell silent and did not make a sound until the very end.

They met in the first year of their college studies. Immediately liked each other and started dating. This continued for two years. There was no military unit at the college, and all the boys who were physically fit were corralled straight into the army.

She waited for him while he served. And when he returned, their romance resumed. Six months later they got married. By that time, she had a job. He studied and worked. Both earned very little. And with that, they had to rent an apartment. They rented it from friends of his boss. Renting out an apartment

was not exactly risk-free. So those who did were first and foremost concerned with finding reliable tenants. His boss vouched for them, and the rent was relatively low. But it still took up almost all their money. And at first, their life was not easy.

Her father had an old clunker. He was no longer able to keep it in working order on his own. So her husband ended up having to take the upkeep of the vehicle entirely upon himself. The car was very prone to breaking down. And spare parts were nearly impossible to obtain. It took a significant effort to find them. Sometimes he had to repair the cars of those who had access to the necessary parts. A couple of times he used the help of his friends, and they manufactured the parts at their factory. And even though he was quite handy, all this took up huge amounts of time.

The flipside was that they were pretty much the sole users of the clunker, and during those times, their life became much more interesting. Their apartment was near the Shchyolkovo metro station. In the summer they would drive out of town along the Shchyolkovo highway. They managed to find a place where they could play tennis and swim in the pond. In Autumn they would return there to pick mushrooms. In winter they would take the same highway and set out on skiing expeditions. They would ski about ten kilometers, make a stop, eat an apple and a few lumps of sugar, and ski back for another ten kilometers.

Then he graduated from the college, found a very good job, and began earning quite decent money. And they started making plans to have a baby.

At this point in her tale, she stopped and asked me, "Boring story, isn't it?"

The story really was a bit boring. But something made me listen to her anyway.

"What does your husband do?" I asked.

"He was an adjuster of some sort of complex equipment."

"Why 'was'?"

She didn't reply immediately.

"I said 'was' because that's what he really was."

"What happened?"

"Last year, at the very end of winter, on an early Saturday morning, he told me he would go to a friend's garage. To repair our car. He was gone all day. In the evening I started to get worried. When midnight approached, I raised the alarm."

"And so, what happened?" I asked again.

"He was in the garage with a close girlfriend of mine. They turned on the heater in the car. Fell asleep, got carbon monoxide poisoning, and never woke up."

A tense silence enveloped the compartment.

"I didn't bury him," she said.

In Gurzuf

I was sailing from Yalta to Alushta, where our entire group of friends was already waiting for me. My wife was also there. With her daughter and my son.

We were approaching Gurzuf. I was watching the water lapping the side of the boat. The seagulls circling above us. The beautiful coastline with its imposing cliffs. And my memory took me back to one distant hot summer in Gurzuf.

* * *

She was ten years younger than me. I had already been married once, while she had never been married. When she told me she was expecting a baby, I was strongly opposed it. I already had two daughters from my first marriage. And I launched into some sort of long explanations. I told her I loved her madly. That I'd never been so happy in my life. But that a baby was completely unthinkable for me right now. And she replied that all my arguments were pointless. And that a happy life was not possible without a child.

For several days she tried to exert some influence

over me. But then appeared to realize that she would not be able persuade me and said that she would do as I wished. To which, completely to my own surprise, I replied that she could keep the baby.

She had very serious health problems. But the birth went smoothly. And we had a baby boy.

Our life was difficult. But we were happy together. At times we quarreled. But always very briefly. Because she couldn't bear to have discord between us.

Once we decided to go on a three-week vacation in Gurzuf, on the Southern coast of Crimea. We rented a room in a cabin. It was not too far from the beach. It took about fifteen minutes to get down to the sea along a narrow path. We were never able to make it out early. So even those short fifteen minutes meant trudging in the heat of the sun. The morning trek down to the sea was easy. But walking back up in the middle of the day was much more challenging. And sometimes we needed to veer away from the path and rest in the shade under the trees.

At one point I realized that those were olive trees. The small green fruit that grew on them were olives. I remembered the large black olives I came across in a shop one winter. They were amazing. And I kept wondering how those tiny green olives growing on the tree, could be turned into large black ones. Initially I thought they might not yet be ripe. But one of the locals told me that once they ripened and turned black, they wouldn't be good for anything but oil. Apparently, they needed to be picked while still

green and would darken during processing.

I picked those olives, placed them in a small jar, and covered them in vinegar. Every other day I kept tasting them and growing more and more disappointed. Towards the end of our stay in Gurzuf, I threw the whole thing away.

Our life there worked out well almost immediately. It was difficult to line up in the cafeteria for one and a half to two hours with a child. So we decided to bring lunch home in containers. On the second day, our landlady noticed the containers and offered to bring them herself if we paid for the food to her directly. And she promised that the portions would be larger than usual.

Of course, we agreed. This dramatically simplified everything for us. For breakfast we ate fruit that we bought from the landlady. And for dinner, more fruit, vegetables, lunch leftovers, and an occasional fish that I brought from the sea.

Over winter, I made a spearfishing gun. Initially, I only had a harpoon. But someone suggested using vacuum hoses as a spring. As for the rest, I worked out what to do on my own. And at last, my old dream came true. I was swimming with a mask, snorkel, and fins. I was spearfishing and bringing home my prey.

The spring of my gun turned out to be quite weak. This made it very difficult to shoot mullets. They wouldn't let me get close. But the giant gobies were much easier. When they were sheltering between boulders on the seabed, it was possible to shoot them almost point-blank.

It was a hot summer. Our son was only four years

old. And either because we weren't sufficiently independent, or due to the unfamiliar circumstances, or because none of our friends were nearby, or perhaps due to the sometimes exhausting heat, we began to quarrel a lot.

I would get extremely annoyed, jump up, say that I couldn't stand it anymore. I would run out into the street. She would take this quite seriously and rush after me. Would try to persuade me to stay. Without doubt, after calming down a bit, I would have come back on my own. To be honest, I didn't really understand why I had run out in the first place. But I must have gotten used to the fact that she regulated all our quarrels and was always the first to seek ways to reconcile.

One day, when I felt she was entirely in the wrong, I completely lost my temper. At that moment, it seemed to me that she became afraid I would cross some dangerous line in our argument. I saw her eyes widen. And in my rage, I said something harsh, which hurt her terribly.

But our final days in Gurzuf were peaceful.

Then we returned home. And lived happily, as before.

And then she was gone.

* * *

Our boat had already sailed past Ayu-Dag. And gradually, the mountain began to disappear from view. While in my mind, I kept going back to those days we spent on the Southern coast of Crimea.

We had many happy years. But now, I often think back to our vacation in Gurzuf. Especially, when I'm alone. At those times it gets really hard for me, and I start wondering why things didn't go well for us that hot summer. And when I remember those harsh words I said to her, my chest begins to seize up. And I start to feel completely miserable.

At such moments, I get the urge to reminisce about something pleasant from our stay there, in Gurzuf. And I search through my memory for some of the amusing episodes.

One time I collected several large shells from the seabed. They were quite beautiful. We just had to remove the mollusks. At first, we tried picking them out with a small fork. But that didn't work. The following day someone told us that we should simply throw them whole into boiling water. This would make it easy to remove the mollusks from the shell, and then they could be eaten. Of course, we tried this.

We managed to get the flesh out. But the process resulted in an unbearable stench, and we had to air the place out for half the day. And we were really scared that our landlady would find out what we had been up to.

Another memory takes me back to a few days before we left, when we encountered a problem with our finances. We even worked out that we might not have enough money to get to the train in Simferopol. That's when she came up with the idea of collecting empty bottles for a refund.

Initially, I laughed at her. I told her I couldn't imagine how two scientists, who had just recently submitted their articles for publication in the

“Proceedings of the USSR Academy of Sciences,” would now be scouring through trash to collect empty bottles. But she said she didn’t see anything all that terrible in this. And we decided to give it a try.

After putting our son to bed, we climbed through garbage cans, collecting empty bottles. In almost no time, these bottles fetched us even more money than we needed to buy our tickets to Simferopol. And she said, “you see, this turned out to be a much more profitable venture than writing articles for the ‘Proceedings,’ for which no one was going to pay us a penny.”

Then I recall once more those harsh words that had escaped my lips. And there is nothing I can do about it. Absolutely nothing.

At such moments it seems to me she, too, is somewhere out there, reminiscing about everything we had. And she is probably remembering the bottles as well. And also wondering why things weren’t quite perfect for us that hot summer. And she is silently looking at me from somewhere up above. And feeling sorry for me.

Non-Aggression Pact

At school, Cyril was told she was no match for him. And at first, he didn't even like her all that much. And yet something about her seemed to attract him. From time to time, he would bully her. He would chuckle when she made a mistake at the blackboard in front of the class. He would make fun of her accent, laugh at the incorrect stresses she applied to words. And at times, he would simply call her name loudly, and when she turned around, he would say that he'd made a mistake and that he'd actually wanted to talk to another girl.

She came from a family that was not well-educated. They lived in the most disadvantaged neighborhood. And to put it scientifically, her speech had a tinge of stylistic reduction.

Way back when they were in the eighth grade, one of the mothers came to see their homeroom teacher, who taught them Russian language and literature. The mother complained that her daughter was using strange words and expressions she had acquired at school. The teacher started to relate something about literary norms and the vernacular, but the mother interrupted her and announced that she did not like it when words were pronounced with the stress on

the wrong syllable and that she was not enthused about the whole thing. In the end, the teacher promised to give this her utmost attention.

Eventually, by around the tenth grade, everything gradually got resolved. Of course, the girls picked up all sorts of dubious expressions from her. But she began to understand how she needed to speak in order to avoid eliciting giggling, at least from Cyril. And in that respect, she was by then almost the same as the other girls in the class.

At first, she really hated Cyril's taunts. But eventually, she got used to them and even came to expect them. And as a matter of fact, she began to like the fact that Cyril paid so much attention to her. And then they started dating.

In those days long gone, the word "dating" had a completely different meaning than it does now. They could talk to each other if they happened to be alone in the street. While at it, they could walk together for a time. But they never agreed to meet in advance. She didn't know his phone number. And he didn't know hers. He didn't even know whether her parents actually had a phone.

At the end of the school day, they poured out of the building as a crowd. But Cyril had a longer distance to walk than the others, and it happened to be in the same direction as hers. As a result, everyone dropped away bit by bit, and they remained alone. On numerous occasions, he missed the turnoff into his street. And it worked out as if he were walking her home.

They were on the threshold of the New Year. The final school New Year's Eve. They decided they would all ring it in together. At first, she also agreed to celebrate with the rest of the class. But then all their plans fell apart. The parents of many of their classmates did not permit them to go. They could not imagine a seventeen-year-old boy or girl spending New Year's Eve away from home. Her parents were also against such a celebration. And she told Cyril she would ring in the New Year with her parents at their friends' place. Cyril was very upset. He gave her his phone number and they agreed she would call him at the very start of the new year.

For New Year's, Cyril stayed home. He was in a terrible mood. Finally, the new year arrived. His parents wished him all the best. He wished his parents all the best. They sat down in front of the TV to watch the New Year's show. There was someone telling jokes, and everyone was laughing. Then there was someone singing, and everyone was applauding. Then someone launched into some sort of satirical verses, without which no performance was complete.

If our discussions at the meeting
Produce a non-aggression pact,
Then the Revision Committee
Wouldn't catch us in the act.

"What is all this about?" thought Cyril. As the TV continued to rattle on.

You told me, "The more you know,"
I replied, "The further you'll go,"
You said, "I have made my bed,"
"Now you lie in it," I said.

That's when the phone started ringing. Cyril

rushed to answer it. She was the one calling. To his great surprise, her voice was cheerful and filled with excitement. She wished him a Happy New Year and came out with a few trite phrases. And then she added that they were having so much fun.

Cyril had not at all expected such a turn in their conversation. He frowned and answered in monosyllables. And soon he said good-bye to her.

On their first day back at school, he didn't go up to her. In fact, he didn't talk to anyone. He sat at his desk immersed in gloom. During breaks between classes, he waited for her to walk over and ask what had happened. But she didn't. And their romance quietly ended.

They met fifteen years later. She spotted him in the street and called out. He didn't recognize her right away. He was amazed at how much weight she had put on. He started asking how she was and what she had been up to, even though his friends had already filled him in on everything about her. She began inquiring about him. And he noted to himself in surprise that she'd reverted to speaking the way she did in the eighth grade. They chatted for a while and went their separate ways. And later he wondered whether she would have looked the same if they hadn't parted then.

* * *

Then, long ago, when they were still in the tenth grade, they were walking home from school one afternoon. It was just the two of them. And he had the urge to touch her hand. Not to hold her hand, nor to

place his hand over hers. He just wanted to brush against her hand, as if by accident. But when he did, as soon as his hand touched hers, she instantly withdrew it.

He tried to touch her hand again. But she withdrew it once more. That's when he realized she had guessed what he wanted to do. And he told her that his hand was freezing and that he wanted to warm it up.

At the point when he had decided to give up all such attempts, she suddenly and unexpectedly took his hand in hers. This came as a complete surprise. He gazed at her, his eyes brimming with love. And she said that since his hand was frozen, she'd decided to warm it up. And that she wanted to make sure he didn't catch a cold.

They walked like that, holding hands, and he didn't know what it all meant. And he wanted to stop. He had some sort of vague intentions. But she predicted his maneuver and exclaimed sternly, "Cyril, we are walking!"

But then, when they had almost reached her home, she was the one who stopped. She told him she wanted to fix his shirt collar, because otherwise, it might get crumpled and his mom would have to iron it out. And when he looked at her, he saw her eyes shining with infinite love for him.

She started to adjust his collar, during which it seemed as though they were embracing. Although there was no real embrace. But while fiddling with his collar, she paused for a couple of seconds. And he also kind of hugged her back. But not with both hands. Of course, he would never have dared attempt

anything of the sort. He merely touched her elbow with one of his hands. They stood like that for a few seconds. And then she blurted out something to him in farewell and ran home. And he also raced home.

Late that night, dazed with elation, he lay in his bed, thinking how the rest of his life would be just like this - only good. His gaze would always be met with loving eyes. And they would be together forever.

Soon he would enter the university. Without doubt, he would graduate with honors. He would find a good job, defend his thesis.

They would have two children - a son and a daughter, who would be very talented. And his own life would be interesting and infinite.

His parents would always be somewhere nearby. And he would visit them often. Their TV would always be on. And they would doubtlessly bore him a bit with their moralizing. But they would always be aware of his accomplishments and be proud of him.

He lay in bed, unable to fall asleep.

At the time, it was the happiest day of his life.

The General's Daughter

"We will get married" she told him.

"Of course," he replied.

"We will get married soon."

"When?"

"Soon."

That's when, even to his own surprise, he started telling her that next year he was intending to apply for an exit visa. That he wanted to go to America. Forever. He asked if she would go with him. She obviously hadn't expected the conversation to take such a turn. And she laughed.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I didn't expect you to tell me such things."

"So will you come with me?"

"Well... no. Probably not."

"Then why would we get married?"

"You know, you shouldn't talk to me like that. After all, I'm much younger than you. And when you're with me, well... when we're together, they say it rejuvenates the blood. Your blood. Keep this in mind!"

He knew that her father was a KGB general. When she was assigned to his laboratory, everyone knew

this. And I warned him about it as well.

And when he told me about their conversation, I started scolding him.

"Can you imagine what will happen here if she tells someone about your conversation?"

"She won't tell anyone," he replied.

Then he added that he was sick and tired of sending everyone to agricultural warehouses, the police squad, Saturday community work sessions, and communist parades. That he'd had it up to here with organizing political information sessions and being part of the socialist competition. That he was sick of it all. And that he had told her all this as well. On top of that, he told her that he hated, with every fiber of his being, the Soviet regime with its Party leaders and its KGB agents of all breeds.

"Is that how you actually put it?" I asked him.

"That's how I actually put it. We had a lot of time, and we were talking about everything under the sun."

"And where did you manage to have all that time?"

"Last week, when we were on a business trip in St. Petersburg. A friend of mine has a summer house in Berngardovka, and we spent almost the entire week there, just the two of us."

"Is that so?! And what else did you talk about there? I hope you didn't tell her anything about the election."

"About what election?"

"Well, about how during the election, you crossed off all the candidates on the ballot."

"Ahh! Why not? I told her about that as well."

"My God! You've gone insane. You are simply mad. You are overly cautious with these elections, you avoid going into the booth, you glue the pencil lead to your finger with an adhesive plaster. And then you disclose it all to someone..."

"What do you mean, 'to someone'?" he interrupted me.

And that's when I realized that it was best for me to stop there.

"So how did she react to all these confessions of yours?" I asked him.

"She said that she had no clue about any of this. And that I turned out to be a completely different person. Not the man she'd imagined."

"And did you consider what would happen here if she told anyone about all this?" I asked him once again.

"She won't say anything to anyone."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm not so sure."

"That's because you don't know Russian women very well."

This last remark of his really surprised me. Why had he decided I didn't know Russian women well? Why did he think he knew them well, or at least better than I did? In all, this assertion of his seemed somewhat silly to me.

All this took place at the Institute of Solid State Physics in Chernogolovka, near Moscow. It was an ordinary Soviet town. Only there weren't any silly standard street names. They were simply called "First

Street," "Second Street," "Academician so-and-so Street," etc. Both my friend and I ended up there for the same reason. With our Jewish last names, it was almost impossible to get a head-of-laboratory job at an academic institute in Moscow. Besides, neither of us was a Party member. However, in Chernogolovka, it was sometimes possible to beat the odds. In addition, it was easier to tackle the housing issue there. So that's where we ended up working. Sometimes it was a bit boring. But every September the place was bursting with wild mushrooms. So our Moscow friends often came to visit us in Autumn. And at other times we visited our friends in Moscow. So life there was quite tolerable.

My friend and the general's daughter parted ways. But their breakup ended up being quite amicable. And it even seemed to me that she started treating him more warmly than before. But she must have realized she would not be able to link her fate with his.

In the end, my friend was right. By all indications, she didn't tell anyone about any of their conversations.

One day, long after their breakup, a discussion of something very important was scheduled to take place at his laboratory. Or rather, of something that seemed important to us in those days. And he invited me to join them. Around two hours later, at the very end, he made his concluding remarks.

That's when I saw her. She did not take her eyes off him. And when he finished speaking and

everyone started to rise from their seats, she just kept on looking at him. There was something in her gaze that made me very envious of my friend. And I caught myself thinking how much I would love it if some woman, someday would look at me just like that.

She caught my gaze, seemed a bit embarrassed, and stuck her tongue out at me. Then she quickly gathered up her things and walked towards the exit.

Vika

In the summer, right after the exams, we decided to go on a week-long hiking trip – just us, boys. But the sister of Cyril, one of the guys, wanted to come along. We decided to take her as well. And she brought her classmate Dennis and a girlfriend from the year below, who in turn brought along her girlfriend, Vika.

This wasn't quite what we had planned, but it was too late to say no, and everyone accepted it.

Dennis appeared at the agreed place near the Belorussian train station with a guitar. I'm not sure how happy everyone was about this since his backpack was considerably smaller than anyone else's. But he swore he'd packed everything that he was told to.

On the very first evening by the campfire, Dennis took out his guitar and started strumming something. Then he slowly felt out which way our musical preferences extended and started telling us lots of interesting facts about Western jazz musicians. It was from him that we first learned who "Satchmo" was and why he was called that. We were caught by surprise when Dennis told us that Louis Prima was

white. We were engrossed in a funny story about how Tony Williams added the “Ah-ah” to the famous song “Only you.” And for the rest of the evening, Dennis continued strumming his guitar and singing songs both familiar and unknown to us. Without a doubt, he captivated us all.

Late that evening, when the girls briefly left us, he told us a very funny joke. It so happened that none of us had ever heard it before. That’s when I became a bit worried he would follow it up with other ones, which was a trait I really disliked. As a rule, it wasn’t customary in our circle to tell old jokes. But Dennis stopped there, even though he probably realized that we really enjoyed the one he’d told us. And these two points made us even more disposed towards him.

By then, no one regretted that our group had grown bigger than we had originally intended. Probably because it turned out to be quite homogeneous. Except, perhaps, for Vika. She was definitely somehow different from the rest of us. In some way, she fell outside our circle. But I would have found it difficult to formulate exactly how. I talked it over with Cyril and he also said she was clearly not like the rest of us. But he also couldn’t pinpoint in what way.

From the very beginning, Vika seemed very likable to me. Then, when she relaxed a bit, I found her simply charming. And sensing that everyone liked her, she behaved very freely. Perhaps even a bit too freely. And as I later understood, maybe that was what made her different from us. Although this did not appear to annoy anyone in any way. At least not initially.

One day, when we were all sunbathing on the bank of the river, she lay down on the grass next to Cyril and rested her head on his stomach. At first, he lay in silence. But not for long.

“Are you happy, Vika?” he asked.

“Yes I am,” she replied.

“Well, at least you are happy,” said Cyril.

The guys and I really liked that quip of Cyril’s. Later, when we returned from our trip, we often repeated Cyril’s words, “Well, at least you are happy...” at appropriate, and sometimes less than appropriate moments.

I kept wondering who would start courting Vika in earnest. Or rather, I kept wondering whom she would choose. I asked Cyril what his views were on the matter. He was astonished at my question. For some reason, he was under the impression that something was going on between Vika and me. So when I assured him otherwise, he was evidently surprised.

Over the next couple of days, Cyril launched into super-intellectual conversations with Vika, for which, it turned out, she was completely unprepared. And Cyril complained to me about this, declaring that it was difficult to talk to her on any subject and that he was now utterly convinced she was “not one of us.” In the meantime, Vika told me that by the campfire, Cyril seemed like a completely normal person. But when you started talking to him, his behavior became very odd.

As for Dennis, at first he was clearly predisposed towards Vika. I noticed him tagging along with her a couple of times when she wanted to go somewhere

by herself. But then he suddenly cooled towards her and was perhaps the only one in our group to dislike her. This seemed strange to me.

One day, when we were alone, I asked him why he was so hard on Vika.

"Femme fatale," he squeezed through gritted teeth.

"Pardon?" I asked in confusion.

"She is a temptress, a witch."

"Temptress?"

"I've seen her kind many times. They drive someone crazy, but don't let him get close. I just hate girls like her. I simply detest the type."

Celebrity

During lunch, he told his wife that he was invited to speak at a conference in Moscow. And that he was considering the offer.

“But I thought you’d never go there,” she said.

“You see, they are treating me like a big celebrity, paying all my expenses: travel, hotel. And anyway, they are all good guys. They know me from the First Medical School and really respect me.”

“A couple of years ago, they also promised to pay all your expenses. But you didn't go.”

“A couple of years ago, they asked me to send them copies of my diplomas, and I sent them to hell.”

“Sent all your good guys to hell?”

“Yep.”

“And this time they’re not asking for diplomas?”

“No, this time they’re not.”

“They must have found what they took from you when you left Russia.”

“They have nothing to do with it. You know that perfectly well.”

“Tell me honestly why do you need this? You have already been treated like a king at all your conferences around the world. Why do you need to fly to Moscow?”

Yet he told her that he still wanted to go. That he had never returned to Moscow since his departure from Russia. He said he wanted to see his old school and showed her photos that his classmate had sent him recently. This is where the trams used to run. This is where his mother used to take him across the tram tracks on the way to school. And here, on the corner, is his school itself. Only before, it seemed big and beautiful, with wide rows of steps at the entrance. But in the photo, it looks small and plain. And the steps at the entrance are barely visible. And here, where the huge building now stands, there used to be a vacant lot. And over there, around the corner, was their neighborhood clinic. Mom used to take him there for check-ups. He had blood tests done there. They stabbed his finger with some scary hole puncher, and he always fainted.

He told his wife he wanted to hang out with his friends, his classmates, those with whom he had studied and worked. To reminisce about the old days. He wanted to go to their homes, see how they live. To ask them how their work is going.

“To tell them about yourself,” his wife inserted.

“Stop it,” he said. “I want to go to museums.”

“When was the last time you were in a museum?” his wife asked.

“Recently. You know that.”

“Sure, because you had to take your guest there.”

“What's the difference?”

And he also told his wife he wanted to see how and what had changed in Moscow. He asked her to come with him. But she flatly refused. And he flew to Moscow alone.

He arrived the day before the conference. They met him at the airport, took him to a hotel, let him have a rest, and then put him in a car and brought him to the Pushkin Museum. An hour later, he said he was tired and asked to be taken back to the hotel. Nonetheless, he was persuaded to go to the Tretyakov Gallery. There he immediately got a cup of strong coffee, perked up, and enjoyed wandering around the Gallery for another hour.

The next day the conference began. He gave a great plenary talk. He was appointed head of one of the sections. He chaired all its sessions, spoke a lot in round-table discussions in the evenings, and overall, was the highlight of the program.

There were always lots of people crowding around him. He behaved modestly. And yet, when talking about himself, he made a great impression on everyone.

He complained about how hectic his life was. He said he worked mostly in Manhattan. But his wife did not want to live in the city all the time. So they bought a house in New Jersey. But he had to keep an apartment in Manhattan as well – it was hard for him to go home every day after work. And yet he got exhausted, as he had to travel all over the country. He named the universities and hospitals with which he was affiliated. He showed photos of the coin

collection at his home in Chicago. This was his first home in America. Where he got his first full-time job – at the Northwestern Memorial Hospital, and where he still retained his work contacts.

Everyone wanted to talk to him. Everyone treated him with great reverence. And they all wanted to tell him what they had accomplished in life.

He hoped to see those with whom he had studied. But he met few of them there for, what was becoming more and more apparent, the same sad reason.

And in the evenings, he was invited to special home receptions. He had missed Russian cuisine. And with great pleasure, he ate salted, dried, and cured fish, smoked sturgeon of a completely forgotten taste, pancakes with caviar, meat snacks. He tried all those extraordinary pickles, sour-and-soaked apples, numerous delicious salads, mushrooms, jellied meat with wicked horseradish, smoked sausages with the very taste and smell that he once loved so much. Nor did he ignore the pastries – coulubiaks, pies, and small stuffed buns that simply melted in his mouth. He drank vodka, snacking on half-sour pickles and salted herring with green onion. After all this, he still found the strength to try various stewed, boiled, and baked dishes. And once, he even stumbled upon a house that served a roast piglet stuffed with buckwheat porridge.

At the end of the conference, a magnificent banquet was held, essentially in his honor. He was photographed there with all of his “good guys.” In

the evening, he called his wife. He said he had gone to his mom's cemetery. He told his wife where else he had been. And then he sent her the banquet photos and took a long time explaining who was who. This one, to whom he had once written his thesis, is now the director of a major institute. That one, who started at First Medical a year before he departed from Russia, is nearly a minister, and often rubs shoulders with the president. And in general, they are all really big shots now.

After speaking with his wife, he went to bed and looked at the photos for a long time. Then he put down the computer and tried to sleep. But he couldn't fall asleep because he kept trying to figure out what else he had to do tomorrow, his last day in Moscow.

He woke up early, ordered breakfast in his room. Shaved thoroughly. Called a cab.

He vaguely remembered that flowers were sold at the cemetery, but he did not want to take chances. So he asked the cab driver to stop by a flower shop. There he bought a large bouquet of white roses.

Once inside the cemetery, he made several hasty and, apparently, erroneous turns. He realized he was lost. But he wanted to find the columbarium himself, without asking anyone. He returned to the Vysotsky monument and tried to concentrate. He walked forward again but more slowly. He figured out where he had made the wrong turn. And soon he was entering the columbarium.

On a piece of paper he took out of his pocket was written, "Section 47, row 3, niche 39." He found the

section, the row, and the niche. He walked over to the marble plaque. It had a woman's profile engraved on it. HER profile. And below that, two dates. He stared at the plaque dumbly for a long while and seemed to have lost track of time. Then he tried to figure out the best way to place the roses he had brought.

He stood a little longer. He remembered choosing a photo for the marble plaque. His memory retained everything about it. Even the smallest, most insignificant moments.

He remembered something else. And then more and more. And once again, he noted in his mind that time – the greatest healer – still could not cure him.

His head started to spin, and his vision was getting blurry. He realized that his blood pressure had spiked, so he decided to calm himself. He sat down on a bench, put his head in his hands, and stayed motionless for a while. But then his shoulders began to shake. And no longer seeing or hearing anything around him, he burst into sobs and began either to curse someone, or to scold himself, or to ask someone for forgiveness.

