

18+ My Women



Yuri Yakunin

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My Women

«Издательские решения»

Yakunin Y.

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I am convinced that every man has chapters in his life dedicated to the women who crossed his path. Naturally, I have such chapters too. This book is about them — about some of my women who shared pleasant, beautiful, and unforgettable moments of life with me. Данная книга является авторизованным переводом на английский язык сборника рассказов «Мои женщины», ранее опубликованного на платформе Ridero. Книга содержит нецензурную брань.

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Magda, the Cop's Wife

1. If I don't catch up, I'll warm up

The early eighties. I'm on a flight to Leningrad for a business trip. Sitting next to me are newlyweds, Kiti and Vaso, headed off on their honeymoon. It brought back memories of my own honeymoon in Leningrad. I promised to help them out with a hotel.

From the airport, I call the "Evropeyskaya" Hotel. Alla, the senior translator, calls me back after checking with someone and dictates an address — "Yenisei Hotel, 1 Artilleriyskaya Street." Basically, the central district, right by Liteyny Avenue... a prime location. Ladies' connections always work, though the price for the favor sometimes exceeds the favor itself.

The hotel turns out to be some strange building — either a new one half-finished or an old one half-renovated — but definitely an ongoing construction site. A mid-range triple room. I recalled my own "lordly" whims from seven years ago during my honeymoon (there's a story about that), and smiled — different people, different journeys. Dropping the luggage, we sat down to rest. Kiti and Vaso could finally embrace in peace, no longer minding me since I was already "one of the family." But everything has its limits, so I went to explore the hotel and give the youngsters some space to relax.

After wandering around, I walked into the cafe, habitually scanning the room to decide exactly where to sit; otherwise, I'd be stuck counting flies out of boredom. To the left, in the half-empty hall, sat a "target." A polished brunette, well-dressed, sporting a large ruby ring. It was immediately clear she wasn't a prostitute — for a hotel like this, such an outfit on a working girl would be like wearing a Cardin dress with a Gucci bag to a summer dance floor in a rough suburb. But she wasn't my usual crowd either; women like that usually look at men not just from above, but somehow through them. The old saying came to mind — "If I can't catch her, at least I'll get a workout."

— Is this seat taken?

— The whole hall is empty, or do you think you have a shot at something?

The "you" was a bad sign, but it was too late to back down.

— Heavens, no. With my jeans and your ruby... what "shot" are we talking about? I just figured your ruby is being invisibly guarded and decided to play it safe. I haven't slept in twenty-four hours. Thought I might pass out after a glass of champagne, and someone might nick my last ten-ruble bill. Your security wouldn't let that happen!

She looked me over theatrically, as if from the side:

— What, were you unloading cargo crates for that tenner?

The woman spoke with a slight Baltic accent.

2. Half a Bottle of Champagne

— Wrong guess. I'm from Tbilisi, and I wouldn't fly all the way to Leningrad just to unload cargo crates!

— Darling, — I said to the waitress who approached us, — I'll take the assorted appetizer platter and a bottle of champagne.

The woman interjected coldly:

— If you're counting on me, don't bother!

— In that case, make it half a bottle of champagne; the lady won't be drinking.

— How exactly am I supposed to serve half a bottle of champagne? — the waitress asked, confused.

My neighbor didn't even bat an eye.

— Fine, just bring the bottle. We'll figure out what to do with it.

The brunette pulled a pack of Kent and a gold-plated lighter from her purse. She lit up, blowing a smoke ring in my direction, and said with a touch of disdain:

— I look at you people and I'm amazed. You come from the Caucasus, buy a bottle of champagne, and think the deal is done — straight to bed by evening. It's simply ridiculous. You don't actually think I came here to meet Georgians who have nowhere to sleep, do you?

The fact that she shifted from the informal "you" to the formal "you" suggested the disdain was fading.

— At first, I wanted to leave to avoid the cliché advances of some katso offering to share a bottle of Saperavi in his room. Ho you're a bit strange. Are you not Georgian?

The food arrived, along with the champagne and two glasses. The waitress opened the bottle and poured it into both. Good girl, I thought, you'll get a tip for that second glass.

— I told you, I'm not drinking with you!

— To avoid any questions or misunderstandings: my name is Yura, I'm from Tbilisi, and I haven't slept in twenty-four hours because there's a pair of newlyweds in my room. I can't get in the way of their romance just because I want to sleep. Being from the Caucasus, I can't drink champagne without offering some to the beautiful, impeccably dressed woman sitting next to me. Your drinking this glass commits you to absolutely nothing.

— I can buy my own champagne!

— I don't doubt that for a second. In fact, I'll even let you have the last word: if we finish this bottle, you can buy the second one and treat me, so you won't feel obligated.

— You're pleasant to talk to. But if you fall into a dead sleep, where is the staff supposed to carry you? Do you even have keys? Do you actually stay here?

Aha — a test. She's checking if I live here or if I'm just some wandering gigolo (you can't hide the accent). This was a big step forward; if she didn't give a damn about me, I could have slept under the table for all she cared. I twirled the hotel key fob on my finger.

— Yes, you guessed right. I was checking to see if you actually live here. Who knows with you Georgians, you might be a petty thief, — she said with a smile, — though, of course, you don't look like a thief.

The plate was becoming treacherously empty, and the intimate conversation that had begun was stalling. I didn't want to be pushy; I felt that if I overdid it, I'd ruin everything. We drank another glass in silence. Then, the lovely brunette summoned the waitress with a flick of her wrist.

I could have said something like, "Don't worry, it's already paid for," or "Don't insult me; after such a pleasant talk, not paying for you would be an affront." But for that role, I lacked the oversized "airport" cap and the Zhiguli car keys twirling on my finger. My companion would have had to smell

like cheap Polish perfume and sport a “cuckoo’s nest” hairstyle. So, I kept quiet and finished my appetizers without looking up. The waitress approached and handed over the bill.

— This is for my share, and this is a tip for the second glass. Tell the young man that my name is Magda, and if he’s caught up on his sleep by eight tonight, I’m ready to return the favor with some champagne. I think meeting right here would suit everyone.

— I’ll be sure to tell him, — the waitress said with a grin. — I expect I’ll get a tip from him for the second glass as well.

Magda took her purse and departed swiftly, leaving a faint scent behind. Her dress seemed to flow as she moved.

— Young man, should I tell you what Magda said, or are you going to pay me for that second glass right now?

— I’ll pay for the first one too, if you tell me something about Magda. I take it she’s not a woman of easy virtue?

— Heavens, no. I see her here occasionally in the company of some high-ranking police official. She’s supposedly from the Baltics.

As she was settling the bill with me, she added with a mock sense of offense:

— I suppose you’re no longer interested in knowing when I finish my shift? We have a break room with a very comfortable sofa, — the girl continued with a chuckle.

— Does the room happen to stay unlocked at night? Could someone sleep on that sofa?

— You idiot! What did you imagine? That I was planning to sleep with you?

— I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant. I have newlyweds in my room and staying there is a bit awkward. If that little sofa of yours is empty at night, I could really use it.

— Well, there you go! And I thought you were serious about the other thing!

The girl tossed my tip back onto the table and walked away, her hips swinging fiercely.

I watched the waitress leave and thought to myself: If I had been sitting alone, she would have served me and I would have been just another faceless customer — good or bad depending on the tip. But here, she became part of a flirtation; her blood started boiling, her libido kicked in, and she wanted a piece of the action. If I had just smiled at her, I’d have a bed for two tonight and wouldn’t be bothering the newlyweds.

At the same time, if the waitress was like a paperback you read on the subway, Magda was a bestseller — though it wasn’t yet certain I’d get to read it.

3. The Mingrelian Couple

After buying some juice, I returned to the room.

— Yura? We were just about to go looking for you. Come, join our table! — Ketī chirped in a rapid-fire blur.

I think it's worth saying a few words about my friends.

The newlyweds: a young Mingrelian couple from Zugdidi.

Ketī — nineteen years old, pretty, fragile, with chestnut hair. She was like liquid silver — a domestic Napoleon. Vaso — her age, equally thin in build, also a brunette but already showing a receding hairline. On the plane, unlike Ketī, whose energy charged every passenger, he slept the whole way, pretending to read the *Izvestia* newspaper while holding it upside down. Ketī claimed, however, that when it came to eating, drinking, and laughing, he transformed into a fountain of energy, and that his sleepiness was merely the result of the wedding chaos.

Mingrelians — Georgian sprinters in everything except running and pleasure. Practical, they can do everything at once: eat, drink, talk on the phone, watch TV, plan renovations for a new apartment, and notice that the neighbor who just pulled up has a new car... But most importantly, they speak at such a speed that they simply don't have time to breathe. My attempts to speak Georgian with them were useless. Their rapid-fire speech is like a text without spaces; if you aren't from their circle, it's hard to adjust. We spoke exclusively in Russian, as I find "text without spaces" much easier to process in that language. These offspring of wealthy Mingrelians had held their wedding in Tbilisi. To say "wealthy Mingrelian" is an understatement; a Mingrelian without money is like a Chukchi without skis, but you can't compare a wealthy Mingrelian to a Chukchi because it's simply impossible to own that many skis.

In the morning, they had headed straight to the airport. Three large suitcases and a bag that Ketī carried clutched to her chest. Two suitcases for clothes, and the third... for provisions, so they wouldn't have to leave the room for at least the first three days. Usually, the first wedding night on a honeymoon stretches until the first hunger pangs. The Mingrelians had planned for that, too.

The table was covered with delicacies provided by their relatives. In those days, luggage wasn't checked like it is today, so you could have brought a roasted elephant through. But elephants aren't popular food in Georgia; instead, there were roasted chickens, khachapuri, tkemali, wine, and jonjoli — everything usually found on a Georgian table, plus a jar of red caviar.

What is a Georgian feast without songs and "man talk," especially fueled by Kindzmarauli? When the conversation turned to my absence, I told them about Magda. I won't say I haven't known beautiful women before — I have — but I'd never met a "queen" with her stature, dignity, and lack of verbal fluff or frivolity. You constantly felt she was one step ahead; even though she played your game, she played by her own rules. What constituted a win or a loss was anyone's guess. A unique kind of "Russian-Woman Roulette," where only one shot leads to the bedroom. Ketī looked at me intently and asked:

— You plan on playing roulette in those jeans? If so, every shot will be a blank. Believe me, I know queens — I'm one of them!

Emptying her husband's suitcase — luckily, he was roughly my size — Ketī began to work her magic.

— Take off the jeans, — the Georgian princess commanded.

Sure, after a day together we were like friends, but standing before Ketī in my underwear wasn't part of my plan. I clutched my pants, fearing she'd start pulling them off herself. Vaso watched her with wide eyes, amazed at how, in a single day, a demure girl could turn into — well, it's scary to even say.

— What are you two, frozen? Yura, go to the bathroom and change there. Or were you planning to parade in front of me in your shorts? Vaso would slit both our throats, as kind as he is! — Ketí laughed.

Half an hour later, I could have been sent to a reception with the Queen of Denmark. The jacket fit like a glove, as if it were tailored for me instead of Vaso. I looked thinner, leaner, even somehow more handsome. Only my shoes ruined the ensemble — while the color was passable, the style was a disaster. Vaso's shoes, fortunately or unfortunately, were a size and a half too small, and I wouldn't have worn someone else's shoes anyway.

— Fine, you'll go barefoot. Less to take off later! — Ketí joked, hugging Vaso and whispering something in his ear.

— Right, — Ketí began seriously, — we've conferred and unanimously decided: you arranged the hotel for us, so we'll arrange the shoes for you. But, mind you, I'm the one picking them out! And don't you dare object, otherwise... — Ketí hugged Vaso, gave him a long kiss, and continued with a sigh, — I'll divorce my husband and drown myself!

We agreed to split the cost of the shoes. As we walked through the shops, it became clear why Ketí didn't wear her bag over her shoulder but carried it in her arms. It was full of money — the wedding gifts from the guests. After buying me shoes in about twenty minutes, Ketí sighed and said to the air:

— Now, boys, something for me.

Two hours later, we were back at the hotel. It was half past six; an hour and a half remained until the meeting.

4. The Amber Surprise

— Vasiko, are you taking me to the restaurant? I'll simply die if I don't see Magda, — Ketí said.

— I'm inviting you both. I'll introduce you to Magda there, and at the same time, we'll quietly celebrate the new shoes.

As we were getting dressed, Ketí looked at the high-collared jacket and said:

— This jacket is the reason I married Vasiko, and it looks fantastic on you! Right now, compared to this morning, you're two completely different people.

— Wait, — I suddenly realized, — what is Vasiko going to wear?

— What kind of Mingrelian woman would I be if my husband didn't have a second jacket? And what kind of Mingrelian would he be if he were any less of a clothes-horse than his wife?

At ten minutes to eight, we set off for the meeting.

By exactly eight o'clock, we were in the daytime cafe, which had transformed into a restaurant for the evening. The place was packed, but one table stood empty, set for four people. Magda was nowhere to be seen. The waitress from that morning approached and told us to take that table, as it was Magda's reservation. I smiled at her, and she smiled back — she had clearly forgiven me! It was strange, though, that the table was set for four; apparently, Magda wasn't coming alone.

Just as we began to sit down, Magda appeared. It seemed to me she had been waiting, hidden somewhere nearby.

— Good evening. — Magda looked the part for an evening out. She wore an impeccably tailored, form-fitting black dress with a subtle shimmer, a high neckline, and a low-cut back. The ruby ring from the morning was now joined by matching ruby pendants.

— Allow me to introduce my friends, the newlyweds, Ketí and Vaso. I mentioned them to you.

— I am very happy to meet you. I'm Magda. As I understand it, Yura has already told you everything. I figured a Georgian man wouldn't come to a restaurant to meet a near-stranger who was just returning a favor of a bottle of champagne alone — and I was right! Forgive me, Yura, I was watching you from behind that pillar over there. Let's use the informal "you." If you had come alone, I would have left, as it would have looked like I was trying to, shall we say, pick you up. I'm glad I wasn't mistaken. Well, why are we all standing? Please, sit!

The table was elegantly set in a "Georgian style" as interpreted by Leningrad restaurateurs.

— I wanted to do something nice; I hope I've succeeded?

— Very much so, — Ketí said. — Yura told us about you, of course, but to be honest, I thought he was exaggerating. It turns out he was underselling it. You look lovely. We brought some Georgian wine along, Stalin's favorite, "Manavi Mtsvane."

Vaso pulled two bottles of wine from a bag and set them on the table, then took the champagne bottle, opened it, and began pouring. Magda leaned toward me and whispered:

— Well, you look handsome and elegant. It suits you. I think if you had been alone and looking this dashing, it would have been hard for me to walk away.

We drank to our acquaintance, then I proposed a toast to the newlyweds — to eternal love, to those feelings lasting a lifetime, and for them to have many children as beautiful as they are.

— Oh, a true toastmaster! — Magda said, raising her glass. — I'll be honest, I came prepared.

— I was in a bad mood this morning. Someone frightened me last night, peeking into my window from the wing of the building. I was already about to call my husband — he's the chief of the district police in Tallinn. I went in for breakfast, and that's when Yura sat down with me. I thought... here we go again. I knew he sat there on purpose, but he didn't let on that he wanted to meet me; he just showed Georgian gallantry. I calmed down. And when I took out my cigarettes and he didn't rush to help me light up — I actually felt a bit offended. I decided to return the "champagne debt" on a pure impulse. Back in my room, I debated for a long time whether to come or not, but I thought

if Yura told you this story and I didn't show up, it would just be poor form on my part. So I decided to book a table for four and hide. And as I said, if Yura had come alone, I would have left. He came with you and proved he isn't just a "katso in a flat cap," as he put it this morning.

— So, as I said, I prepared for this meeting, and I've brought you wedding gifts so that you may have a happy life together.

She opened her purse and produced an exquisite amber jewelry box and a matching amber lighter.

— I hope you smoke, young man?

Keti, like a little girl, started bouncing in her chair and clapping her hands.

— Keti, my beauty, you will use this box to keep all the jewelry that your husband and loving relatives will give you.

Keti went over to Magda, hugged her, and kissed her:

— Magda dear, half an hour ago I didn't know you at all. When Yura was telling us about you, I thought you were some hotel girl, a hunter of Caucasian men. But now, we've suddenly become close. You must be a very good person at heart, just like Yura, whom we met on the plane. We sat next to each other, and now we're like relatives. I didn't prepare anything, and I don't know what to give you in return. We'll leave you our address. You must come visit us, preferably at the end of summer. It will be the most memorable trip of your life, I promise you!

Keti even began to cry from the emotion. The women then excused themselves to the powder room.

5. The Unbearable Gaze

Vaso and I immediately tested the amber lighter. It was styled like a Zippo, but no metal was visible — just solid, exquisite amber inlay. A stunning piece.

— Yura, what's with all these surprises? Is this some night of wonders? Did you and Magda just fall out of the sky for us? It feels unreal. If I told anyone, they wouldn't believe it.

Then he suddenly burst out laughing, nearly ducking under the table.

— Now Magda's husband will show up — what is he, a colonel? A general? He'll take all these trinkets back, call a squad, throw us in jail for fifteen days for harassing a woman and swindling her out of expensive gifts, and then he'll whisk her back to Tallinn!

— What makes you say that? — I asked.

— Well, she said she was going to call him after breakfast, and it's only a three or four-hour drive from there.

Right then, a police major approached from the back of the hall. With a thick Baltic accent, he asked:

— Where did you put my Magda? She was sitting here two minutes ago and suddenly vanished. He picked up the wine bottle and turned it in his hand.

— Good wine. Stalin loved it.

Vaso instinctively shoved the lighter into his pocket.

— My big mouth is my own worst enemy! — Vaso whispered, turning pale. — Your wife and my wife went to the restroom. Please, have a seat; they'll be back shortly.

The policeman sat down in silence.

Magda and Ketu returned. The major stood up and went to meet them.

— Magda, Viktor called. He asked me to help. Are you having some kind of trouble?

Magda shook the officer's hand.

— Everyone, meet Ainar, a colleague of my husband's. He's here on a business trip, and my husband asked him to help me deal with some "nighttime saboteurs."

Magda smiled, thanked Ainar, and promised to call for help if needed. Ainar asked where we had bought such wine, or if our friends from Georgia had brought it with them.

— Yes, my friends brought it. Take a bottle and treat your lady friend — I see you aren't here alone.

Ainar flushed slightly, but as his gray eyes bore into Magda, he said:

— I trust there is no need for us to spread word to anyone about our dinners or our breakfasts. Better we just drink good wine and have a good time. Call if you have need.

The major bowed and departed with the bottle of wine. A lady was waiting for him at a table diagonally across from us.

— Whenever I come to Leningrad to clear my head and wander around, Ainar conveniently goes on a "business trip." Our rooms are always booked in this hotel — I always have the same two-room suite, and he gets whatever is available.

— Now he'll rat you out, — Ketu said, looking distressed.

— He's not with his wife either, — Magda parried. — To pleasant surprises!

We drank, and suddenly Ketu grew hurried. She "remembered" they had a meeting with relatives on Liteyny Avenue. Pulling Vaso from the table, she lamented that they'd love to stay, but family was sacred. It was clear from Vaso's face that if relatives were waiting, it was a complete surprise to him. Watching the couple leave, Magda looked at me through her glass of champagne and said:

— It turned out to be a good evening. Chaotic, but unexpectedly pleasant and warm. I haven't felt this light in a long time. You have good friends; they're so happy.

— Magda, an indiscreet question: why do you travel to Leningrad almost under guard? Why can't you stay still in Tallinn?

— I'd rather not talk about that, even if Ketī says we're practically relatives. Let's just say I come here to visit museums and theaters. By the way, has anyone ever told you that you have an unbearable gaze?

— What do you mean, "unbearable gaze"?

— Women love you, don't they?

— Magda, are you interested in me, or in how women feel about me?

— You see, I'm a psychologist. Don't worry, I'm not going to start lecturing you about work, but I see you more clearly than you see yourself. There you sit, looking at me with that outrageously sexual, trusting gaze that says, "I like you, but it's up to you — just say the word and I'll leave." But you know, just as I do, that your main weapon is your voice. Its timbre fills a woman with a velvet mood. Usually, she can think of nothing but how to seduce you, fully convinced that it is her desire and that you are exactly what she needs. Enchanted by your voice, she thinks only you can understand her soul, that she can open up to you knowing you won't take advantage, but will simply help as a desirable man can. And you only use that weapon with the women you want to be seduced by. That's how it is, my dear.

— And all of that is me? Perhaps, as a psychologist, you're just imagining things? Maybe I'm just an ordinary, average family man who met a whimsical psychologist on a business trip — a woman who's bored with her husband and doesn't know what she wants. Because she doesn't know what she needs, she drifts from Tallinn to Leningrad, exhausting that poor major by making him follow her. And now, she sits here with me, speaking from the heights of psychology about how I'm seducing her with my voice.

6. Cognac in the Tub

— I see how it is. You've exhausted that poor major with your games, and now you don't know how to tell me that you're afraid to go to your room alone. You want me to suggest it myself — to save you from God knows who, thereby prolonging my own pleasure while justifying it to myself as a sacrifice made for the sake of that young Georgian couple.

— Colleague, — she said, — don't you think you owe it to me to give me at least one chance to feel like I'm the one being seduced?

— Just to keep your conscience clear? No, Magda. If I give you that chance, you'll only torment yourself later, thinking that it wasn't your seduction, but rather that you simply couldn't resist and were pushed off the path of righteousness. So, what's the plan? Will you offer the major and his lady friend a spot on your sofa, or will you entrust that mission to me?

— Only for the sake of your friends, Ketī and Vasiko, you understand!

— Naturally. Who would doubt it?

— I trust you'll spend the night on the sofa in the lounge?

— The sofa it is. I don't mind. But is this just for tonight, or for the duration of our stay in Leningrad? I'm joking — don't change your mind, or that maniac will have you dying of fright.

— Well then, shall we go? I'll show you your "workplace."

I reached into my pocket, mentally calculating the bill for the feast.

— Consider it payment for your services. I hope you aren't offended that I've already settled the bill?

— Well, considering we're providing wine for your bodyguard and his lady, I'd say we're just about even, — I smiled, offering Magda my hand to help her up.

Magda's two-room suite was on the third floor, at the very end of the corridor. She turned the key, and we entered. This was a far cry from our triple-occupancy room that felt like a train station hostel. It had a leather sofa and armchair, a coffee table, a mini-bar, a TV, and a large rug on the floor. There were fruit and candies on the table.

— Alright, go take a shower. There's a large brown robe in there, and I'll make up the sofa for you. I need to call my husband to reassure him that Ainar has taken measures, and I'll call Ketī to tell her you've stayed to guard me. After that, you can watch TV, and I'm going to sleep.

— What, won't you take a shower because of the robe?

— I have a bathroom in the bedroom.

As I washed, I thought to myself: Am I really going to sleep on the sofa alone? Did I overplay my hand somewhere? What a letdown that would be. She wants this just as much as I do, but she's playing me — damn psychologist! Though, she was spot on; she laid it all out perfectly. Smart woman.

The thought of leaving crossed my mind, but it felt awkward. I peered out the window to see where someone could possibly be peeking from, but there wasn't a window in sight for miles.

— You made it all up about the peeping tom, didn't you? There aren't even any windows opposite!

— That's because the window is in the bedroom. Come, I'll show you.

In the bedroom, the window faced sideways, and indeed, about three or four meters away, there was some kind of service window.

— I bet that's exactly what he'll do. He was watching yesterday, and knowing you're alone today, he'll definitely make his move.

Magda's jaw dropped, and she threw up her hands.

— Well, then why are you here?

— Exactly. I can't see him from the lounge. I'll only hear him once he's already attacking you, and by then I might be too late.

— God knows how I fought the temptation. However, rather than being attacked, I'd better spend the night in bed with you. You'll save me then, won't you?

— Of course. And to prove that I'll only be guarding you in that bed, I would...

— Stop! Not that. Have mercy on me!

— Lord, what a pair of psychologists we would have made!

— I hope we make an even better pair of lovers!

— Then go get the candy and the cognac from the bar while I head to the bathroom.

First, I went and locked the front door, checking for any "ambushes" first. Then I called my own room — I'd peeked at the number on a slip of paper I'd tucked into my wallet — and informed them that I'd signed up for the night watch and they could "sleep" peacefully without me. In the bar, I found a bottle of Eniseli, took two glasses, some fruit, and candy, piled it all onto a tray along with a carafe and a glass, and returned to the bedroom.

The bed was already turned down, Magda's clothes were draped over a chair, and Magda herself was in the bathroom. I opened the cognac, poured a little, set the bottle on the nightstand, and placed the glasses and a dozen candies on the tray.

— Well, here we go. Champagne in the cafe this morning, cognac in the bathroom tonight! The ice has broken, Madame Professional Psychologist — from here on out, I'm the one in command!

I undressed, tossing my clothes onto the same chair, and using the tray of candy and cognac to cover my "vitals," I walked into the bathroom without knocking, leaving the bedroom door wide open. The curtains were drawn, and the shower was running with a seductive hiss.

7. The Orgasmic Jackpot

— Did someone call for a guard?

— A-a-ah! — Magda shrieked, peeking from behind the curtain. — I didn't expect that. A guard with a tray and no pistol?

I lifted the tray slightly; the “pistol” was already cocked. Magda burst into laughter and said through her giggles:

— I was afraid of one maniac outside, and I brought another one inside with me. Maybe you'd like to scrub my back too?

— Only if it brings you pleasure. But for now, hold the tray.

I handed Magda the tray with the glasses, and while her hands were occupied, I switched off the bathroom light and slipped behind the curtain. Back then, of course, there were no Jacuzzis, but a suite was still a suite; the bathtub was a large, two-meter affair, clearly an old-fashioned model. Light spilled into the bathroom from the open bedroom door, leaving the tub area in a soft twilight. Magda set the tray on the sink and, taking the glasses, asked:

— What shall we drink to?

— To you, and only you. To your mind, to the beauty of your face and body. May you never be frightened by maniacs, and if they ever appear, may someone always be there to protect you.

I took the glass from her, we drank to “Bruderschaft,” and as is tradition, we locked into a long, deep kiss. Before Magda could catch her breath, I was already kissing her neck, stroking her back and hips, my body pressed against her chest.

— Young man, don't you think you should have asked my opinion on all this kissing?

I turned on the shower and began to kiss her breasts under the cascading water. Her nipples became firm, and my tongue traced slow circles around them. I sat on the edge of the tub and pulled Magda onto my knee, letting her feminine essence spread across it, allowing me to move slowly in a steady rhythm.

— Magda, you're a psychologist. You aren't used to being led. If I had asked if you wanted sex, wouldn't you have said no? But right now, I'm caressing you and you aren't resisting — which means yes. So now I'll ask: wouldn't you like to caress me too?

— Let's do it! But I'm going to wash you at the same time. It's been a long time since I've washed a man for pleasure. Oh, I'm going to give you such a scrubbing!

I don't know which of us was enjoying it more — her as she tenderly washed my “anatomy,” or me as I lathered the soft hair that led to her own charms. Afterward, we lay in the tub for a long time. I held Magda from behind, my hands wandering wherever they could reach, kissing her neck and shoulders. Meanwhile, she reached between our bodies, handling me like a brave cowboy from the Wild West twirling his pistol. Fired up by the sexual prelude, Magda murmured to me — quiet, broken sentences about her husband, about love, about the impossible...

I could barely catch the specific meaning of her words over the sound of the shower. It didn't matter anymore. I don't think she even knew what she was saying, driven by a sudden novelty and sharp desire. The main thing was that the violin was tuned and played without a single false note; all that remained was for the violinist to skillfully draw out the melody without breaking the rhythm, letting the soul sing and sink into passionate bliss.

Naked, Magda was magnificent. Once the husk of her pride, her status, her psychological theories, and that final feminine bastion — shame — had fallen away, she stood as simply a beautiful, desirable woman: tender, passionate, and responsive to every movement of the bow.

I was thoroughly ready, but I waited for Magda to make the first move. I didn't have to wait long.

— Are you just going to lie there in the tub waiting for that maniac I invented out of boredom?

Magda stood up and slapped my shoulder.

— So, there's no maniac after all? I'm protecting your honor for nothing?

— Are you a monster or just pretending? I want you! What, do I have to get on my knees?!

I stood up, and as she wrapped her arms around my neck, I hoisted her up by the legs and did exactly what she so desperately wanted. Magda's legs immediately locked behind my back, and the energy of our bodies could have boiled ten tubs like the one we were standing in. Magda kissed me, hammered on my back, and screamed that I was both a bastard and a darling. She wanted everything she had been deprived of all those years.

— I don't want to feel like I'm being used whenever my husband feels like it. I want to be pleased when I want it and how I want it! I want to soar in the clouds! I want... I waaaaaant...

The climax was explosive and simultaneous. Magda slid back into the tub, her body limp and occasionally twitching. Her head rested on the rim, her eyes closed.

— Heavens... what a difference there is between being "had" and being given sweet pleasure. I always wondered how I would feel after being unfaithful. Even now, I don't know, because I didn't feel unfaithful — I was just getting what Pyotr was supposed to give me. Today I won the lottery — six out of forty-nine! Yura, will there be a five out of thirty-six to follow?

— No, Magda. There won't be a five out of thirty-six. There's going to be a jackpot!

— You almost scare me. I can't imagine anything being more than what just happened. Unless it's dying.

— Magda dear, you are a very beautiful and smart woman. You're a brilliant psychologist. You described my personality type with amazing accuracy — bravo! Ho there are situations in life that even a good psychologist finds hard to imagine. I'm talking about unconventional situations in intimate relations between a man and a woman who meet by chance. Though, it's a well-known fact, especially for sports psychologists.

— Well then, amateur psychologist, enlighten the professional, — Magda laughed, provocatively wiggling her hips. — But wait. There are towels and two robes in the cabinet. Let's go lie down. You can philosophize there while I caress you back into "fighting shape." I know your excuses: "I can't, I'm tired, I have work tomorrow..."

8. She Carried Out Her Threat

It felt wonderful to slip into a terry cloth robe without even drying off. I felt a hollow sense of hunger and exhaustion. Handing a robe to Magda, I took a couple of candies from the tray — I gave one to her and ate the other myself.

— Are you hungry?

— A little.

— I'll order a light supper with some coffee; it'll restore your strength!

— What are you, some kind of underground millionaire? — Magda smiled.

— I'm a frequent guest here; they know me. I often order dinner to the room, though it's a bit late now.

Magda glanced at the clock; it was eleven. She made the call. I brought the glasses from the bathroom and splashed in another thirty grams to keep us warm.

— Magda, I've never slept with an Estonian woman before. I always thought they were cold and blonde.

— And you were right to think so. But I'm not a pure-blooded Estonian. My father is Russian, and my mother is half-Estonian, half-German. That's why she named me Magda, and my last name is Orlova. Yura, let's drink to that bathtub; I'll never forget it! A normal woman is naked before a strange man in only three cases: when she's stripped by force, when she's flaunting herself for profit, or when she simply wants to be naked. Back there in the bathroom, I started out flaunting myself, but then I just wanted it. It gave me pleasure. At first, the sight of you naked with that tray shocked me, but then I wanted you exactly as you were. If someone had told me this morning that I'd be happily holding a man's member in my hands, I wouldn't have believed it. But now I think I definitely have to give you a climax myself. I was right about you back there at the restaurant, and I was so foolish to think I wouldn't buy into it — but I'm so glad I did! Yura, you aren't playing me, are you?

— Amazing! No matter how smart a woman is, she'll always ask "Do you love me?" in bed, even when she knows it isn't so — because if it were, she wouldn't need to ask! Your question about playing you is from the same opera. Look, imagine if from the very start I'd acted like I clearly wanted to sleep with you. Since you don't know me and clearly aren't a prostitute, it would have likely insulted you and made you shut down. It would have been hard to overcome that, certainly not in a single day. At most, I might have gotten a kiss and a chance to press against your chest. But this way — we have total trust and mutual desire. I want you very much, I feel good with you, and I'm simply melting from your kisses, your touch, your temperament, and your beauty.

I pulled open the robe of Magda, who was lying in bed, and began covering her body with kisses that barely brushed her white, velvet skin. With one hand, I caressed her stomach and legs, while the other fondled her breast. Magda purred, occasionally signaling her pleasure. Finally, I got a good look at her body — the body of a woman who either hadn't given birth or had recovered exceptionally well. For her age — somewhere in her thirties — she looked quite stunning. Her breasts, slightly heavy for her fragile frame, were beautiful with large, dark nipples. A small birthmark decorated her belly below the navel, peeking coquettishly from her trim. Everything below was just as magnificent as I had discovered in the tub.

There was a knock at the door. Magda wrapped herself up and went to collect the order. I stretched out blissfully in the bed. This was something else — this morning I didn't know where I'd sleep without bothering the newlyweds, and now I was in a two-room suite with excellent sex in the tub and a fair chance of bedroom athletics until dawn.

Magda brought the order: a jar of caviar, julienne, champagne, an assortment of meats, butter, bread, two bottles of Borjomi, and a pack of cigarettes.

— Now, while we eat, give me some of that philosophy regarding the unknown facts of business-trip sex known to sports psychologists.

— Ah yes, I forgot! Well, speaking as one psychologist to another, since the dawn of time, when a man went hunting, he went to get game; fishing, to catch fish. And he went to bed with a woman to finish. I think most women know this all too well, and they're lucky if they manage to climax while the man is furiously working toward his own end. Many women die thinking they are frigid simply because their men are "sprinters." But there is also sport hunting, sport fishing, and wildlife photography, where the criteria are different than just filling your belly. In that sense, I'm a "pro-lover." For me, the goal isn't to "finish" as fast as possible — I can always do that. But if I finish too soon, my partner will likely miss out on her own climax, and I'd have to finish the job with my hands. Once a man finishes, he's only indirectly interested in his partner, and if it's his wife, he's usually not interested at all.

— Do you remember when you asked me why I travel to Leningrad under guard? — Magda asked. — It's quite banal. Let's just say my husband has an "official" mistress. Yes, official, because his career depends on her. Her husband is a high-ranking official, long since impotent due to diabetes, so he placed his wife nearby and under supervision. In six years, my husband went from a penniless investigator to the head of a district police department, and if anything happens, he can always go back to being an investigator. She often goes away to the dacha with Pyotr as if I don't exist at all. That's when I come to Leningrad, and my husband assigns me a "guard." I used to love him, of course, but now I just use the money and try to get the most out of life. I've never actually been unfaithful before. There were a few times when I could have out of spite, but it felt shameful. I had the impression I was selling myself for a meal, and besides, those men weren't to my liking. They might have been prime specimens, but that's not what I need. My Pyotr is man enough; I'm not neglected. I'm a psychologist; I see right through you men. I don't need just that; I need my soul warmed. And you, you rascal, you showed me exactly what I needed! I needed it to be me, not just something done to me! Yura, after this caviar, I hope you aren't planning to sleep?

— Of course! I'll just have a few sandwiches, get dressed, and go ask the major to take my place!

— Well, at least I got my share under the shower. But you aren't going anywhere. Tonight you're mine. I'll squeeze you like a lemon. Just try to leave for the major and I'll leave you without your member! — Magda laughed.

— Well, if that's the case, then don't blame me. Make me a caviar sandwich, and I'll handle the rest, deal?

— As long as you don't kill me, deal.

After fortifying ourselves with caviar, we went to bed. The night was stormy. In the morning, Magda said:

— I'm going home tonight. And if you don't come to visit me in Tallinn at least once every six months, I'll come to you in Tbilisi myself.

A year later, that wonderful woman carried out her threat!

Dasha

In the summer, after finishing the 9th grade, I was in Sukhumi for a training camp with the Georgian national underwater sports team. It was there that my older diver friends “opened my eyes” to that alluring and, at the time, unknown side of life — women. Everything happened in a way that was as romantic as it was comical. I suppose there is no need to mention the air of importance I had while walking along the beach with my scuba gear and fins, passing by pretty girls. How much of an “Amphibian Man” I imagined myself to be, whistling the song about the sea devil from the movie of the same name.

It seemed that all the girls were staring at me, enchanted, and if I only wanted to... but there was no time yet, training and all that — no time for women!

And so, one day the older guys decided to enlighten me. On the quiet, they talked one of the tried-and-tested workers of beach pleasures into giving me a “young recruit” course — but in such a way that I wouldn’t suspect a setup. They desperately wanted to see “Romeo and Juliet” performed by a virgin and a prostitute.

The next day on the beach, I picked up the pretty Dasha and, of course, strutted around her like a pheasant, seeing the “envious” looks of our older guys! In principle, I might not have dared to go further than spreading my peacock tail, but one of our swimmers said that he had talked to the guys and they were giving up the “fazenda” for the evening. My path of retreat was cut off!

How “charming” and “attractive” I was to women became clear to me the moment I even hinted at going to my place. A “passionate glint” appeared in Dasha’s eyes and a languid word escaped her breast almost immediately: — Of course.

How I regretted then that the guys couldn’t see or hear this, and most importantly, that if I told them later — they wouldn’t believe it!

On the way home, I feverishly played out situations in which I seduced her, where I looked like a sort of “Casanova.” But whenever I glanced at Dasha, something still clawed at my soul and I thought, maybe to hell with it...

However, I seduced Dasha surprisingly quickly. It seemed to me she didn’t even have time to recover when I lightning-fast and technically “laid” her in bed.

How I threw myself onto the “embrasures,” I don’t quite remember now, and only at the end, having “finished my fire,” I saw in the gap of the front door a row of satisfied, smiling heads. That was when I realized who was seducing whom, but the pleasure I received did not diminish because of it, and by the look in Dasha’s eyes, I knew — there had been no misfire!

The most pleasant surprise was when, the following evening, Dasha came to visit us and asked the guys to go for a walk for an hour or two!

This time, Dasha locked the door herself.

Masha

1. The Neck-Heads

It was a late autumn evening, but Tbilisi, heated by the scorching summer, was giving off its warmth slowly, as if reluctantly. This was my eighteenth autumn. I was sitting on the parapet that separated Vake Park from the sidewalk, right across from my house, which was nestled between two institutes — Foreign Languages and Physical Education. I was lazily smoking, killing time and loneliness. I aimlessly watched the passing cars and the rare tourists. Locals usually didn't walk on the side where I sat, as there were no residential buildings, offices, or shops. There was only the park and, at the end of the road, the tourist base.

Suddenly, a pretty stranger approached me almost at a run, waving her hand. I looked back, thinking someone might be behind me, but behind me was only the park! The girl was clearly a stranger, and her outfit was definitely not local. She ran up and whispered anxiously, asking if I could walk her to the tourist base. In her eyes, there was both supplication and terror! Well, well... could I walk her to the tourist base? I wanted to tell her that I had been sitting here for an hour exactly for this purpose — to escort such a lost lamb, even to the end of the world! And then, almost through her, I saw why she was so out of breath, why she was rushing to the base, and why there was terror in her eyes.

Behind her, breathing loudly like two hippos, two Kakhetians were moving on short, bowed legs on parallel courses. They looked like twins, with flat backs of their heads, heads merging imperceptibly into their necks, sweaty hairy faces, and wet handkerchiefs clenched in their fists. It was clear that these males would simply trample me like a competitor on the path of their libido-heavy loins.

Reaction kicked in instantly, before I even realized what I was doing:

— Where have you been wandering? I've been waiting for you here for two full hours. Mother, — I pointed toward the house, — is out of her mind with worry; she's already called the police. They'll probably be here any minute.

I shouted this toward the running hulks with such temperament, as if I were on a scaffold shouting a manifesto to the crowd with a noose already around my neck.

— Mother? What mother? — the brunette was taken aback.

— Oh, so we have different mothers now?

At that moment, the female brain, probably out of fear, began to understand the game:

— What could I do? These two thugs have been chasing me the whole way! Can't they see I'm not some visiting blonde!

— These two??? — I boldly pointed my finger toward the neck-heads and put on the most Caucasian expression possible, that of a man ready to kill anyone who dared look the wrong way at his sister.

Taking a small step toward them, looking as if over their heads, and spitting a thin stream of saliva through my front teeth, I said slowly:

— What, are you from the village? Is it your first day in Tbilisi? Can't you see this is my sister?

I used the “bulging eyes” technique, moving my gaze slowly from “my sister” toward the sweaty-faced pair.

— Which one of them touched you? Show me, — I asked, getting into the role and thrusting my hand into my pocket, taking another half-step toward the bow-legged ones.

And suddenly, these two hulks turned into pure humility:

— What's the matter, brother? We're going to the Physical Education Institute for training, can't you see we're late?

Like synchronized swimmers, they wiped the sweat from their faces simultaneously. I threw my arm over "my sister's" shoulder, feeling only a slight resistance. This was the final argument, after which "Kakhetia" stopped a passing bus and rode off in the opposite direction of the institute.

— Sister, why are you wandering around the city alone, looking for trouble and then forcing me to heroically solve it? — I delivered this tirade while still hugging her shoulders, not yet out of character.

A slight movement of her shoulder, and my hand immediately lost its support. Her gaze expressed both a soft feminine reproach and infinite gratitude:

— Well now, I barely managed to get rid of the claims of two "genatvale" when a third, using trickery, managed to embrace me. How cleverly you deceived them... "sister," — she laughed.

It turned out she had fallen behind her group and had been trying to find the way to the base for half the day. her handbag had been left on the bus, so she was walking, and those two had been following her, whispering indecencies and scaring her to death. She felt incredibly lucky that I had crossed her path.

— So you haven't eaten all day, and look, your legs are shaking from exhaustion.

— They are not shaking at all. I'll get to the base now, eat, and rest.

I took her by the hand and, with a movement that brooked no refusal, led her home.

At home, to my grandmother's silent question — she was always understanding, tactful, sweet, and infinitely adored by me — I replied that this was my friend, she had walked to see me, and was tired and hungry. Granny extended her hand:

— Bella Semyonovna, the most loving grandmother.

— Masha, from Mytishchi.

— So you walked all the way here, straight from Mytishchi? — Grandma smiled. — Then hurry up and wash your hands.

We ate kharcho soup and drank tea with lavash and suluguni. We laughed over the "Kakhetians." When we finished eating and were about to leave, Grandma timidly joked:

— Mashenka, are you walking back to Mytishchi right now? Perhaps you'll stay?

Eh, not just me, but Grandma too wanted this slender, beautiful girl to stay. But Masha thanked her, and we went outside. It had already grown dark and a bit chilly. I offered Masha my jacket, and when she threw it on, I placed my hand firmly on it so it wouldn't accidentally be blown away by a breeze. We spent almost an hour walking the remaining 400 meters to the tourist base, as I led her through the darkest, most roundabout ways — across the institute's football field, then through the dark courts.

My blood was boiling, my whole body trembling slightly; the darkness and my libido were urging me to hug Masha, to kiss her, and let the chips fall where they may. I felt that Masha trusted me completely, and maybe she was waiting for it herself... but the "Kakhetian brothers" were constantly in my head, forcing me to continue being a gentleman. Finally, we arrived. Masha returned the jacket:

— Yura, I felt you were itching for some heroic deeds, but thank you for holding back. I was dying for a kiss myself — it's shameful to say, I'm already twenty-two and never been kissed; I suppose I have an unapproachable character. Yura, could you show me Tbilisi tomorrow?

We agreed to meet the next morning, and I would be her guide. When I returned home, Grandma was still trying to figure out who Masha from Mytishchi was and where exactly this Mytishchi was located. Running her hand over my hair, she said she liked Masha and noticed how Masha looked at me.

— I hope you invited her to lunch with us tomorrow; I'll cook all sorts of delicacies.

My dear, kind grandmother, how she wanted things to be good for me. Her kindness was boundless but unobtrusive; her eyes radiated happiness and warmth. Never in my conscious life did I let her doubt that she was my most beloved person in the whole wide world.

2. The Excursion

The night was turbulent. At eighteen, one's imagination usually doesn't fail, and "Masha" in my dreams added plenty of fuel to the fire, so I woke up in the morning feeling like a squeezed lemon! But the thought of meeting the real Masha shook my system like a dose of adrenaline. I was ready for any heroic deeds. At the appointed time, I stood by the tourist base at the trolleybus stop. In my pocket lay twenty-five rubles, given to me by my grandmother for "ice cream."

When I was rushing around the room, now combing my hair at the mirror, now changing my jacket, Grandma stopped me, sat me down at the table, and said:

— My boy, is that poor girl really going to walk around the city all day? Here is twenty-five rubles, — she handed me the money. — I think this will be enough for both ice cream and the movies.

— What movies?

— What difference does it make? The main thing is that there should be few people and the back rows should be empty. But I think you are a well-bred boy and won't allow yourself anything excessive. I like Masha.

Where didn't we go that day! We drank the signature cream-and-chocolate soda at "Lagidze," ate Adjarian khachapuri, and went to the botanical garden.

We were young, we felt good and happy; we kissed, embraced, and kissed again and again. I didn't take Masha to the movies — I didn't want the standard "pioneer-style" groping, after which it's awkward to look into each other's eyes when the lights come on. Instead, we went to the restaurant on the funicular. It was my first time in that restaurant as well. We ate a lot of delicious ice cream, looking at the unforgettable view of evening Tbilisi, lying down there somewhere below us, so beautiful just for us. Masha rejoiced like a child when riding up on the tramcar and down on the cable car.

It felt as if we had known each other for a long time. As if this city, the restaurant, the warm autumn evening, the huge stars in the sky — all of it was meant only for us. The scent of her perfume, the most sexual perfume of that Soviet era — most likely Polish — the glitter of her deep, warm eyes, and her breast rising as she breathed, so firm and alluring — all for me. How could I "offend" this girl? I couldn't! Of course, I forgot all about Grandma's satsivi. Late that evening, I walked her back to the tourist base; she was leaving the next day. Masha was in Tbilisi on a union-vouchers tour train. We exchanged phone numbers, and she left. I thought we had said goodbye forever, but I was wrong!

About six months later, Masha called. It was unexpected — everything had already seemed like "the white smoke of apple trees" — but no. She called, and off we went! She to me, I to her.

I remembered the kisses, and the sweet girlish breasts, and just hearing her voice in the receiver made it hard to sit still, especially in the tight jeans that had appeared at that time.

My soul immediately wanted a "duet flight." It hadn't worked out then, but now I wanted it. Of course, I wasn't living as a hermit; at my service was the entire dormitory of the Physical Education Institute. Girls for every taste: gymnasts, swimmers, handball players, and basketball players. The latter didn't really attract me, but I spent time with the others. The girls were mostly from out of town; many were Russian-speakers from the Stavropol region with corresponding brakes — or rather, without any brakes at all. But all these "dormitory amours" were like races and swims in width. It was understood that I came to spend the night with her because last time I had been with her friend, and if she started being capricious, I would sleep with someone else. Fleeting sex is like that — indiscriminate and forgetful, and above all, standardly gray. The girls mostly went to bed in the hope of getting married, and every newcomer pretended to be holy innocence, invariably telling the "Caucasian man" a story about how she accidentally lost her virginity while riding a bicycle. It gave the impression that they passed the bicycle to each other in a queue for that specific purpose.

So, I went to the dormitory only to see certain "athletes" whom I knew well and with whom I enjoyed nocturnal vigils.

But here, it was something different, something new and unexplored — a feeling that came from somewhere deep inside, hidden somewhere in the lower abdomen, lurking and gnawing at the pit of my stomach. With others, it wasn't like that; the feeling immediately arose in my pants and stayed there until it abruptly died on someone.

One day Masha asked where I was going for the holidays, and finding out I had no plans, she invited me to her place. I decided to go at once!

3. Moscow Unexpected

At the end of June, having passed my summer exams, I packed quickly and, without notifying Masha, set off for Moscow.

It was my first trip to the capital. My spirits were high — I'm flying to Moscow! Red Square, the Kremlin, museums, the Arbat, the Moscow Art Theatre, Luzhniki, the Sanduny baths — and me with Masha! My adrenaline was off the charts.

On the plane, everyone felt almost like family. I chatted incessantly, smoked in the toilet, and complimented the stewardess. Everything was fine until the final minutes of the flight, which made me remember a song from the KVN show to the tune of a funeral march: "The TU-104 is the best plane of all, it takes a hundred passengers and watches them fall." But apparently, the heavenly office upstairs decided it was too early for the plane to drop from the sky, and it flopped onto the runway like a sack of potatoes. The terrified passengers only livened up after the liner came to a standstill, and then they joyfully and loudly thanked the crew for the landing. Passing the sweet stewardess with her painted-on smile, I thought to myself that I would never marry a stewardess; there is something in the word "widower" that sounds too much like "corpse."

I arrived around six in the evening, threw my sports bag over my shoulder, and set out to "discover" the capital. My plan for the first day — which was a Friday — was to walk around the city and stay at a hotel. On Saturday, I'd visit Red Square, the Kremlin, and, if possible, the Armoury. Visiting the Mausoleum didn't even cross my mind. And on Sunday morning, I'd head to Mytishchi.

Making forced marches from hotel to hotel, where, of course, there were no vacancies, I found myself on Leningrad Highway near the "Rechnoy Vokzal" metro station. I glanced at my watch — it was already 11 p.m. I hadn't suspected it was so late because it seemed it was only just beginning to get dark; in Tbilisi, it's pitch black at this time. Geography — that was the one thing I hadn't taken into account. Fatigue and hunger hit me all at once.

The last hotel on my path seemed to be for medical workers. When I asked if there were free rooms, it unexpectedly turned out there were! You can't imagine how pleasant it is, after wandering for half a day in search of a place to sleep, to accidentally stumble upon a hotel with vacancies at nearly midnight. But then they asked for my business travel orders, and it turned out that all "this joy" was not meant for the likes of me.

It was already late, my body ached from fatigue, and my stomach gnawed with hunger. I felt lonely and miserable. Sitting in an armchair in the foyer, I began to sink into oblivion, but a woman's voice — kind and gentle as a sea wave smashing ships against the rocks — brought me back to my initial hopelessness:

— If you plan to sleep here, it won't work, I'll call the police. But if you have absolutely nowhere to sleep, I can give you an address, it's close by. For a modest price, our doorman, Vladimir Semyonich, will rent you a cot. Tell him Maria from the hotel sent you.

There was nothing left to do. Cursing everything in the world, I took the address of the cot-peddler. At midnight, I was at Vladimir Semyonich's front door, which was upholstered in red imitation leather. I rang the bell.

The door was opened by a stocky, fat-faced man with a buzz cut wearing striped pajamas, looking like Father Fyodor from "The Twelve Chairs." The smell of someone else's apartment hit my nose, mixed with the scent of men's socks. I gave him the "Slavic cabinet" password from Maria, and he let me in.

In the living room of the one-room apartment, a thin, lanky four-eyes with protruding ears and an unhealthy bald spot on the back of his head was lying on a folding cot watching TV. He was dressed in a cheap black knitted tracksuit, and on his feet — may they be cursed thrice — were fragrant synthetic socks. Just as a wave of nausea rose to my throat, Vladimir Semyonich asked if

I was hungry. Looking at my bulging eyes, he apparently realized I was full. There wasn't a second cot; there was only a greasy pull-out sofa.

— Where are you from?

— From Tbilisi.

— Georgia... wine, citrus, hot-blooded men...

— I'm tired, I just want to lie down.

— You'll have to sleep on the sofa.

— And you?

— Me too.

— Then I'm not sleeping against the wall. I don't like my nose pressing into either a carpet or the back of the sofa.

The moment my head hit the pillow, I blacked out. Apparently, after finishing his TV show, "Father Fyodor" started climbing over me. I woke up. Once my sleep was interrupted, I couldn't drift off again immediately. Stranger's smells, snoring, and some kind of smacking sound from the host were irritating. I turned and gave him a look to make him settle down. Suddenly, this "holy innocent" started explaining that I had misunderstood him, that a neighbor comes over twice a week, that I had nothing to worry about and could sleep peacefully. Whoops — my sleep vanished instantly. I lay there for about fifteen minutes, thinking:

Should I punch him in the jaw before he decides to punch me while I'm asleep, or will I have to kill him and run?

Should I punch him in the jaw before this psycho decides to attack me in my sleep, or will I have to kill him and run away? A crazy guy was too much for my young, woman-adoring soul. I listened intently for a long time, but the host seemed to have fallen asleep. I began to doubt myself, thinking I had branded the man a lunatic for nothing, and having calmed down, I began to drift off. Suddenly, like an electric shock — why was this "weirdo" pawing at me? At that moment, not caring where I hit, I slammed him over my shoulder. The host jumped up with a yell:

— And they said Georgians were hot-blooded, but you're some kind of psycho, you broke my nose! I'm calling the police right now!

— And I'll cut your balls off before they arrive. Go over to the big-eared one on the cot, and don't move, I want to sleep.

Whining, the loser lay down next to the four-eyes on the cot.

I didn't sleep for the rest of the night, of course, though nobody bothered me. Even the socks didn't irritate me that much anymore, but the proximity of two perverts made me wary, so I just lay there waiting for morning. I got up around five, got dressed, took my bag, and left without paying or closing the door.

And that was my first acquaintance with "Moscow Unexpected," although back then perverts weren't called "blue" or "gay" yet.

Soon I was in the metro, then at Yaroslavsky Station. My plans were ruined; I decided to go to Masha immediately. I arrived in Mytishchi around eight o'clock.

Imagine it's Saturday, people are sleeping, and I arrive unannounced, early in the morning, like a bolt from the blue. I bought some kind of bun at the station and slowly ate it, killing time on a platform bench. Around nine, I set off to find Masha. "My tongue" led me there quickly, but I didn't dare enter the gate of the fenced private house and knock on the doors; I walked near the gate and suddenly, out of the door came... yes, Masha in a striped sailor shirt.

4. The Meeting

The gate was as tall as I was. Through the gaps, the porch was clearly visible. I could be seen, of course, but hardly recognized.

Masha stood on the threshold, shaking out a rug, her gaze fixed intently on the gate. Then she suddenly dropped the rug, sat down on the steps, covered her mouth with her hand, and shook her head.

I called out to her softly: — Masha, it's me, Yura.

Clapping her hands, Masha rushed to the gate, repeating: — I knew it, I knew, I knew it was you!

The gate opened and Masha instantly threw her arms around my neck. — Why were you hiding? Did you want to scare me? Why didn't you warn me? I would have met you. You're a bad boy! I kept thinking, when will he finally finish all his exams. I've told everyone about you; they're all dying of curiosity. Come in.

Finally, all the hardships were behind me. After the long trials in Moscow — hunger and a completely sleepless night, I finally found myself next to the one I had traveled so far to see!

— Mash, feed me, — was the only thing I could say in a trembling voice.

Inside, Masha's parents watched the "Georgian" in curious silence. Her mother worked with Masha at the railcar plant in Mytishchi; her father, as it turned out later, was a crack shot. There were also two sisters, one younger and one older than Masha; both were married and lived nearby. And there was Grandma, always in the shadows but constantly on guard.

When we were seated at the table, Masha's mother stroked my hair and said: — Thank you. Masha told me what a savior you were. We are all grateful to you for that.

Masha blushed. Then her mother continued: — It's good that you came to visit us. Our places are famous, plenty of mushrooms, and the girls here are great. Masha will find you a girlfriend in no time.

I looked at Masha in bewilderment. — Mama, what are you talking about! The man just got off the road, he hasn't even eaten yet, and you're offering him my friends!

— What did I say? He's three years younger than you; surely you aren't planning on courting him?

Masha slammed her spoon on the table and ran out into the yard. — Why did you do that? — I asked.

— She's twenty-two already. Guys have practically worn out the fence, but she doesn't like any of them. Her sister is already married, but this one is still an old maid. Forgive me, Yura, but I'm afraid she's set her eyes on you, and that won't do! Walk with her, see the sights, kiss for all I care — but don't give her hope. I saw how Mashka was waiting for you; look how thin she's become. I'm a simple woman, I'm a mother, and I'll be blunt: maybe you're just looking for a local residency permit? Mashka is like a match right now — one spark and she's gone. You'll ruin the girl and leave her with a child in a year.

— Please, don't worry. I didn't come here to get married. If that was my intention, I would have been whispering "I love you" over the phone and in letters long ago. I could have "made my mark" in Tbilisi just to be sure. Should I leave? Am I out of place here?

— Don't be offended, lad. I've heard plenty about you Georgians.

— I'm not Georgian. My last name is Yakunin, I just live there! And I have no intention of marrying Masha, or Natasha, or anyone else — for now! Yes, Masha is beautiful and I like her, but I've only just started my second year of college. Marriage isn't in my plans.

— Well, forgive me. I'm a mother and you must understand me. Later might be too late! But you're alright, you didn't flinch; you'll make a fine husband for someone. Go on, calm Mashka down, the silly girl is probably crying her eyes out!

Masha was sitting by a gooseberry bush, chewing on berries. She wasn't crying, but her face showed how much her mother had hurt her. — Mash, let's go eat. Then we'll go meet your sisters and head to the forest.

— Really? You want to? And we'll go mushroom hunting in the forest later, right?

— Of course. I can't exactly kiss you here in the house!

— Idiot!

Finally, I ate. The okroshka was heavenly — maybe because I was hungry, maybe because Masha was near, or maybe because we were going to the forest to kiss that evening. Masha laughed, her mother smiled, and even Grandma remarked: — Look at that, the Georgian is devouring the okroshka; guess they don't make it at home! Don't be mad at me, dear, just tell me — does your mother know you're courting Mashka?

— Grandma, have you all conspired? In Tbilisi, those two thugs could have killed Yura, but he didn't care and saved me. And you're offending him. I'm ashamed of you and hurt for Yurochka (something new — no one but my own grandmother had ever called me that). Leave him alone, don't make him blush!

— Look at the handsome one, — Grandma wouldn't let up. — I bet the women in Tbilisi stick to him even without an accordion. Guess you don't even need one nowadays; you can just talk them into it, he-he-he!

Masha's mother got ready for her second job. Leaving, she opened the sideboard and said, looking at me: — If anything, the money is right here. And she went to get dressed. Masha smiled — that meant I was “one of the family” now!

I was touched by the bluntness and trust of these simple people, who believed that if things are good, they're good, and if they're bad, you get shown the door. But if they've accepted you, the guest becomes their own.

After eating and having a smoke on the porch, Masha and I went to see her sisters. The eldest, Katya, was twenty-four. She looked like Masha but was shorter and fairer. She wasn't expecting us, so she was “disheveled” and not very pleased. Asking Masha to make coffee, she disappeared into the bathroom, which gave us a chance to kiss and hold each other in the kitchen.

Ten minutes later, Katya appeared before us looking like a different woman — beautiful and knowing her worth. She studied me with clear curiosity but no obvious interest. Either my age was the reason, or her sister. We sat in the kitchen, drank coffee, smoked, and told jokes — or rather, I told them and the sisters laughed. It was funny to see them making almost the same gestures, facial expressions, and intonations. Only their eyes were different: in one, there was understanding; in the other, an interest in the matter.

Katya shouted out the window to the other sister, Alyona, telling her to bring beer and come over with her husband. I remembered my gifts and went back to Masha's house to fetch some churchkhela, a bottle of Akhasheni, and a string of dried persimmons. When I returned, the table was set. I met Kolya, Alyona's husband, but Alyona herself made a stunning impression on me. Hay-colored hair, huge green eyes, a large chest, and a wasp waist. She sounded like Tatyana Doronina — completely unlike her sisters, but outclassing them both with her youth and looks. Kolya was an ordinary guy, freckled, slightly older than me. Both were students in Moscow.

We had a great time at the table. After some wine and beer, we decided to go to the forest to see the birch groves and pick mushrooms. I really wanted to wash up, and when I told Masha, she laughed: — There will be a bathhouse tonight!

The Russian birches didn't trigger a fit of sentimentality in me. I was more interested in how Alyona picked mushrooms, bending over so that her breasts were visible almost to the nipples, while Katya, occasionally casting a sideways glance at me, tried to reach my very masculine core with her eyes. Masha didn't pick mushrooms; she just smiled and skipped like a young goat, knowing I had come specifically for her, and that her sisters were married and had nothing to gain from me.

How naive young women can be about their sisters — especially when they are young, and the sisters are predatory!

5. Only During That Trip

The bathhouse was waiting for us in the evening. While the girls were splashing around, Kolya, the sisters' father Dmitry Fedorovich, and I drank beer. Later, while we were thumping each other with birch branches in the steam room, the sisters were cooking mushrooms and setting the table on the terrace. There was no lake nearby — thank God, I can't stand cold water.

We sat at the table wrapped in sheets, steamed and red as lobsters. The girls chattered incessantly, and we, having downed a hundred grams “for safety,” devoured the fried mushroom medley. Masha sat next to me, her head on Katya's shoulder, trying to start a song. Alyona and her husband sat opposite us; Kolya was discussing something with his father-in-law. I was in bliss; not even the swarming gnats could break the idyll.

And then, like a bolt from the blue, I felt a leg — no, Alyona's leg — parting the sheet and sliding between my knees. I nearly choked, but Alyona, with her large cow-like eyes, kept watching the singing sisters, nodding her head to the beat while her toes reached their target. Not expecting such agility from Alyona while her husband sat right there, I drank more vodka to hide this sudden “stroke of luck.” For a nineteen-year-old guy, this was beyond the limit, but the alcohol helped; I discreetly stroked her leg and tucked it in more comfortably.

The weekend flew by. On Monday, everyone went to work, and I went to discover a “sexually correctly oriented” Moscow.

Since those distant years, I've loved “Lakomka” ice cream — a whole day's worth of calories — and half-kilogram bricks in cardboard boxes that perfectly brightened the commute. For many years, I knew by heart every station on the Yaroslavl line from Moscow to Mytishchi.

Now, a small digression: The “Details” that struck me in Moscow.

Only during that trip did I realize that the expression “Vai me” (the Russian “oi”) was actually Georgian.

Only during that trip did I hear a live human being on the street, rather than an automated phone service, say, “It is currently 13 hours and 27 minutes.”

Only during that trip did I understand that for a Russian, a queue doesn't have a beginning and an end, but “edges.” Hearing someone ask for the “edge” person instead of the “last” one felt wild. Apparently, for a Russian, being “last” is unbearable — pure pride!

Only during that trip did I hear a woman addressed in the neuter gender: “Woman, you weren't standing here!”

Only during that trip did I learn that one could refuse to give up a seat to a pregnant woman or an old lady with a cane, while blissfully reading “Scientific Communism.”

Only during that trip did I first see children drinking vodka.

Only during that trip did I first see a drunk woman lying on the sidewalk in broad daylight.

Only during that trip did I realize that women in Georgia and women in Russia are different types. When I paid the fare for a fellow passenger in a bus — a woman over fifty — I received such a tongue-lashing I didn't know where to hide. Apparently, she thought I wanted to sleep with her for the price of a bus ticket! In Georgia, that's just the norm.

Only during that trip did I learn that a night with a woman could be traded for vodka. I was smoking in the train vestibule. A group of students was heading to see girls at a dormitory near “Stroitel” station. I heard them vividly describing their upcoming “adventures.” Suddenly, one of them said, “Let's just go get a drink instead...” and the whole gang got off the train to go drinking! In Georgia, that would be treated as a joke; no one would believe it in reality!

But most importantly, during that trip, the police checked my documents for the first time. The cop said in surprise: — Strange. Doesn't look like a “black-ass,” but speaks with an accent.

But back to “our little goats.” Sometimes I was too lazy to go to Moscow and stayed in Mytishchi. I’d take a basket and go mushroom hunting. I’d wander the forest for two or three hours, gather a full basket, though most of it would be thrown away later, with barely a dozen ending up in the pan. However, a more pleasant task was going into the garden with a basin to pick berries. There were gooseberries — the first time I’d ever seen them — raspberries, and currants, both red and black. I’d cover them with sugar and devour them twenty minutes later so fast my ears whistled, as my grandfather used to say.

I mentioned that Marina (Masha’s mom) showed me on the first day where the family money was kept. Dmitry Fedorovich knew too, of course, but he never took a kopek. Instead, he’d approach me and ask to borrow three rubles — not until payday, but until... my departure. I always gave it to him, and he’d vanish happily until late at night.

Masha and I walked almost every evening. We walked where there were fewer people because we wanted “closeness,” but only up to the “sacred line.” At twenty-two, Masha was still a virgin, and I didn’t want to be the cause of her future troubles — my Caucasian upbringing kicked in: no “yes” meant no “go.” Otherwise, we denied ourselves nothing and enjoyed life to the maximum. Of course, the house would have been more convenient, but her grandmother — I forgot her name — was constantly and sharply vigilant. Several times at night, I tried to crawl over to Masha, but the old woman, sleeping behind a screen, would immediately whisper my name, quietly but firmly.

Masha joked: — Grandma, don’t you ever sleep?

She’d chuckle: — If I fall asleep with this shaggy one around, you’ll end up with a belly in no time. — She’d wag a finger at me, but not unkindly.

Several times Alyona asked jokingly: — So, they won’t let you eat the fish? If you need anything, come over, we’ll go “fishing.” Or did you not like my leg?

One evening at dinner, Marina said: — Yura, you’re almost like family now, and I have to say — we all go to the collective farm field and dig up a bag or two of potatoes. Just for ourselves, instead of the store.

She paused and added: — We’re just stealing what would rot anyway. Volodya is away, and Kolya won’t go out of “Komsomol principles” — though his principle is actually just fear. So, you’ll have to help. Katya and Masha will dig, and you’ll carry the bags to Alyona’s house, since it’s closest to the field.

There was no way out; I agreed. I was never actually a Komsomol member, but that’s a story for another time.

Kolya prudently went to sleep at his mother’s. Alyona was home, and I went to the field with the sisters. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine myself stealing young potatoes from a collective farm. They dug skillfully, I gathered them into a bag and hauled it to Alyona’s on my back. When I brought the first bag, Alyona said in a tone that brooked no refusal:

— I’ve heated the bathhouse. After the field, tell them you want to wash up. We’ll wash together! Go on now, or I’ll start ravishing you right here.

I went back to the field. The second bag was already full. The girls gathered another bucket each — enough for three families — and we trudged back to Alyona’s.

The tension broke. We sat in the kitchen, laughing and discussing the details. I remembered Alyona’s words and was far from opposed to her initiative, but I couldn’t figure out when or how to act, as sex was out of the question with Masha and Katya around. Chattering like the rest, I kept watching Alyona and didn’t miss the look she threw at Katya. “Oh, these sisters!!!” I thought. We were all sweaty and covered in mud. Then Katya said:

— We should wash up. Mashka and I will go bathe at my place. We’d take Yura, of course, but Masha isn’t allowed yet, — she laughed loudly.

Alyona chimed in as if on cue: — Kolya heated the bathhouse here too, so Yura can bathe here. I’ll set the table and we’ll eat afterward.

Masha, as if apologizing for herself, put a hand on my shoulder: — That's perfect. You worked hard; you should have a good wash.

And as she left the house, she said to her sister jokingly: — Alyona, make sure you scrub his back! Try your best!

6. Alyona

Yes, Alyona did her best! Young, beautiful, green-eyed, stately, passionate, and shameless — she tore into me fiercely and selflessly, like a shuttle in a sewing machine. Her young, firm breasts tossed from side to side with such frenzy that it seemed they might fly off. Her sex was completely silent, somehow self-absorbed, and it felt so unnatural to me that I felt like a human vibrator. She neither hugged nor kissed; with eyes rolled back, she plowed straight toward satisfaction, not responding to my caresses or words. It gave the impression that Alyona was simply snatching at the sacred sex she had dreamed of but which her husband, unfortunately, failed to provide. She was taking revenge on me for everything she had missed in bed until then. She wanted maximum pleasure, trying to get everything at once in that one unexpected opportunity.

Of course, this staggeringly passionate, completely uncontrolled indulgence of the libido ended in a quick, violent orgasm accompanied by such convulsions that I followed suit instantly, driving into her as deep as humanly possible.

— Well? — Alyona asked, catching her breath while soaping my still swollen but softening weapon.

— Wonderful, but too fast and not enough.

Alyona smiled. — Thank you! It was more than enough for me. That was my first orgasm. I still feel as if I'm impaled. I need to digest all this; I actually thought I was defective as a woman. And you, you tomcat — if you didn't get enough, you can finish up tomorrow with Katka. Do you think she led Masha away for nothing?

— So, you're "recharged" for life now? Maybe we could try it without the bathhouse next time, in a bed? You know, with caresses, a blowjob... this was a bit like a schoolboy's quickie.

— Listen to the professional. Aren't you afraid I'll bite it off?

— People don't bite things off out of pleasure.

— I'm not in the mood for that now. Maybe later, if there's a chance, we'll play around. I liked it very much! As for the blowjob — tomorrow, Katerina will do it. She loves everything in sex.

— You really are bitches. Don't you feel sorry for Masha?

— Don't you feel sorry for us?

Poor Masha — I felt a pang of pity for her. It felt like I was cheating on her, and considering Alyona's looks promised much more than I had actually received, it felt doubly unfair to Masha.

Alyona was working magic with the table when the steamed sisters arrived. I sat, as is customary after a bathhouse, wrapped in a towel with a mug of homemade kvass, my eyes half-closed either from the heat or exhaustion. Alyona's face radiated indescribable joy that we had "dug the potatoes." While Alyona and Katya exchanged meaningful glances, Masha slapped her thigh and said with a laugh, as if joking: — Well, that's it! I need to end this virginity business, or a man comes to visit me and ends up sleeping with the whole village.

Everyone roared with laughter. — Exactly! — Alyona chirped. — Don't give him to anyone! The women here are all "blood and milk," he won't be enough for everyone. Guard him!

Marina, the mother, came in: — So, how are the potatoes? The sisters took turns telling the story of the "Battle for the Young Potato."

— Well, there it is. The man broke his back, and there was no one to scrub it for him in the bathhouse? Some wives you are, — Marina quipped, looking at me.

— Don't worry, we scrubbed it, — Masha muttered under her breath, sitting down indifferently at the opposite side of the table.

I felt uneasy. Alyona looked too satisfied; only a blind man wouldn't see the word "Slept-With" written on her forehead. And Alyona's words about "finishing up with Katka tomorrow" now took on a sinister meaning of a conspiracy against Masha and me. More precisely: an attempt to open Masha's

eyes to me as a “dog,” so she wouldn’t build any plans. Looking at the sisters and the mother, I smiled — some kind of village women’s CIA — but a bitter aftertaste remained.

After midnight. Masha and I were sitting in the gazebo by her house, watching the Mytishchi stars. Masha leaned back against my chest and tilted her head to look into my eyes. Suddenly, she started talking about exactly what I had been thinking in Alyona’s yard:

— Yura, tell me, why is life so unfair? I know for a fact that if Alyona’s or Katya’s husbands had been in your place in Tbilisi, those “brothers” would have dragged me into the park and raped me. They wouldn’t have stirred, or they would have crossed to the other side of the street to stay out of “trouble.” You, on the other hand, practically saved me and didn’t use it like a “savior” should. I wouldn’t have even resisted you, because I had decided — whatever happens, happens. But you didn’t even kiss me.

— I didn’t save you just so I could rape you myself.

— Yura, be honest. Did you come here to marry me? If you don’t want to, don’t answer; I’ll understand.

— If I’m being honest, the thought of marriage never crossed my mind. I was traveling to see you as a very good friend. Of course, I had sex on my mind, but then your virginity interfered, which I hadn’t thought about. Imagine if you weren’t a virgin; we could have enjoyed ourselves under every bush without worrying about marriage. But I’m only nineteen, I’ve just started my second year — what kind of family could I have? But I like you. I want you, very much. You see yourself: mom, dad, sisters... everyone is on guard for your purity. You don’t know how they’d react. I don’t want a scandal, and I don’t think you do either.

— Yura, I know you were with Alyona. It’s written all over her face that she was in seventh heaven. Thank you for not bragging about it or badmouthing my sister for “seducing the boy.” And I know about Katka, too. Don’t worry, it’s fine. Well, almost fine. I shouldn’t be like a dog in the manger. They are my sisters; they married blindly. Katka’s husband, we think, goes to Leningrad to see a lover and sleeps with Katya maybe once or twice a month. And Alyona’s husband is some kind of “circumcised Komsomol member” — and they clearly cut off more than necessary. He can’t even change a position without his mother’s permission. How could he leave his wife alone knowing there’s a handsome “Georgian” in the house? It serves him right. I hope at least now Alyona knows what an orgasm is and maybe she’ll leave that fool before they have kids. With her looks! I won’t mind if you “chop some wood” for Katerina on Monday before her husband returns. Let her have some joy too.

A heavy silence fell. I didn’t know how to react to such openness, while Masha seemed to be gathering her thoughts to say something else.

— Actually, it’s all my mother. She wanted to kill two birds with one stone. To show Alyona that her husband isn’t worth holding onto, because a man is much more than just wearing pants. And to discourage me from the idea of marrying you. I understand her well. I know she’s right.

Masha fell silent, then turned and looked me in the eyes: — Only, my dear... before you leave... I don’t want any noise, I know my mother, she might even call the police... will you give me a night? I don’t want it under a bush in the forest. I’m with you in my dreams every night, but for the last one, I want to be with you for real.

7. Katerina

As I suspected, the “village CIA” — as ridiculous as it sounds — was operating at full capacity. On Monday morning, before leaving for work, the mother approached me and, in a pitiful tone just as Masha had predicted, delivered her line:

— Yura, maybe you won’t go to Moscow today? Help Katerina split some logs; all her firewood was burned up for the bathhouses the other day. — Marina’s gaze flicked momentarily below my belt.

— You’re a fit lad; swinging a splitting maul is like a morning workout for you. Help the woman out — who knows when her little “slug” of a husband will be back. By the way, no need for breakfast; Katya will feed you something delicious.

Marina turned, businesslike, picked up her bag, gave Masha a questioning look, and left the house.

— Well, what did I tell you yesterday about the firewood? — Masha asked. — I find it all disgusting, but it’s like paying tribute to the Tatars. You understand me: Mother wants to push us together through sex with my sisters. It’s her guaranteed way to discourage you from me, and at the same time, she probably thinks she’s winning her daughters over at your expense.

— Well, it seems I’m being passed from hand to hand according to your mama’s script. What if she decides to bury me in the potato field after I’m done with Katya and Alyona? Just so I don’t have time to take your virginity? — I smiled.

— Look, do as you wish. I’m not planning to marry you, so don’t make a problem out of nothing. If there were some “Vasya” here instead of you, he’d be sleeping with my sex-starved girls within a day and would be perfectly happy with his vacation in Mytishchi. But you’ll spend a year agonizing over your conscience because you gave my sisters pleasure while not forgetting yourself. You weren’t exactly at a forced labor camp, after all.

Masha pressed against me in a long kiss. — But with me, you’ll have to make up for everyone — for Mom and for the sisters — or I’ll strangle you in bed.

Masha kissed me again and ran after her mother, shouting over her shoulder: — Don’t forget to split the wood!

I sat on the porch and watched the street beyond the gate. Someone was in a hurry; two drunks, holding onto the fence, were watering the grass with their former booze; a man on a bicycle wanted to shout something to them but fell into a puddle instead. Masha’s father, having borrowed another three rubles from me, successfully vanished through the gate.

I smoked and thought about what to do — go “chop wood” or spit on it all and head to Moscow. Moscow was fine, of course, but I wanted to “chop wood” more, even if the compulsory nature of it was a bit strange.

Katya approached quietly from behind. — Come on, let’s have breakfast. I know you know everything from Masha; I told her about Mom’s sneaky plan myself. Come, let’s have coffee.

— And the wood?

— You can do the wood too.

We walked through the inner gate and found ourselves in Katya’s yard. About a dozen logs and an axe lay by the shed. I took the axe and drove it into a stump; it didn’t split.

— You need to eat first; you need strength for chopping.

In the kitchen, Katya worked skillfully. Coffee, eggs with bacon, and Olivier salad appeared on the table with striking speed; she clearly enjoyed being a hostess.

— Eat. I’ll just have coffee; I’ve already eaten.

The eggs and bacon were delicious. We drank coffee together, smoking cigarettes and chatting about nothing. Katya looked very much like Masha, only with blonde hair and gray-blue eyes; she looked slightly plumper, perhaps because she was shorter.

— Maybe I'll go chop now?

— Go ahead. We'll have beer afterward; it's in the fridge.

At first, the chopping went poorly, likely due to a total lack of experience. Either a chip would fly off the log, or the axe would get stuck without the wood splitting. I noticed Katya laughing in the window. Out of spite, I started putting in more effort. I got soaked with sweat and took off my shirt. The work started going better. I split more than half but rubbed a blister raw and even tore it. I sat down to smoke. Katya came up and ran her hand over my body:

— That's enough, you're all wet. Go to the bathroom and rinse off.

It felt good to stand under the warm shower after swinging the axe. Katya unceremoniously entered the bathroom, bringing a towel.

— Dry yourself. Yes, Alyona didn't lie, — Katya poked a finger at my abs, — you're good!

Katya quickly washed my shirt and hung it in the hallway. The torn blister hurt; I asked for a Band-Aid. Katya brought some zelyonka (antiseptic) and dabbed it on the blister, blowing on it so it wouldn't sting. I kissed her on the head.

— Yura, if you don't want to, you don't have to. Maybe at twenty-four I'm too old for you?

I kissed her eyes, then her lips, pressing my member against her stomach. Katya threw off her robe; she was magnificent. From the surge of desire, the slanted nipples hardened on her firm breasts, and I felt a sudden urge to stroke the trimmed hair on her pubis. I picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. The bed was already turned down.

In bed, Katya was the total opposite of Alyona. She instantly caught my every movement and adapted. For her, there were no "forbidden topics" in sex. While giving me a blowjob and looking into my eyes, Katya asked me not to rush; she was afraid I'd waste all my fire on "blank shots." Unlike Alyona, she didn't want everything at once; she wanted everything in turn, resting and becoming aroused again and again through caresses. There was no hurry. In the breaks, we ate apples or drank beer. Then we dived back into the soft, passionate haze, tasting our bodies sinking in lust. We enjoyed not only the change of positions and tempo but also swapping caresses for hard sex, using every place Katerina could be entered. The pleasure was wild, and the sex was perfect. Four hours flew by. We lay naked on a completely soaked sheet. Our overworked "tools" were practically smoking.

Cold beer in a hot bath was exactly what we both needed.

8. Zagorsk. The Enthronement of Patriarch Pimen

Now I will turn your gaze toward something I will never see again, and something many of you have likely never seen and will never see. I will turn your gaze toward the sacred — the Enthronement of Patriarch Pimen.

Masha and I were on a train toward Zagorsk, heading to the forest to collect tree burls; Mashka used them to make all sorts of crafts. I noticed the carriage was black with nuns. Zagorsk, of course — but surely all the nuns don't live in Moscow and just travel to Zagorsk to pray? We got off in Zagorsk and, good Lord, there was a sea of people.

Now I know that on June 2, 1971, there was a Local Council, and on June 3, the Enthronement of Patriarch Pimen. Back then, I knew none of this and stumbled upon such a rare event completely by chance.

In Zagorsk, foreign cars stood in the square; the crowd was huge, enormous. I asked when the service would start; they said in about two hours, so we went to explore the miracle that is the Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra. I walked around with my mouth hanging open, looking at the largest monastery in Russia.

Out of the corner of my ear, I heard that access to the Rublev icons was open. And we found them! We saw the splendor that was hidden from everyone by propaganda back then and, in the literal sense of the word, kept under lock and key. Suddenly a little man approached us — tiny, thin, white-haired like holy relics, in a black robe with very kind eyes. He asked if I was from the theological seminary or perhaps a free artist, because of my long hair.

Of course, I said I was an artist and had come specifically for the icons, as I dreamed of seeing Rublev's work in the original. And then this monk offered to tell us about them!

How I regret now that I was so young and didn't think to write down or memorize what that man told us. When we finally went outside, his words wouldn't let go of me for a long time. I knew about Rublev, of course, but here they were — close enough to touch — and you weren't just looking; someone was explaining the story of each one. It was staggering. I couldn't believe I had set out for an ordinary forest and ended up in a hall of miracles. Two hours passed, and we headed to the church, which was already packed.

— Hold onto the bag; I'll try to push forward, — I told Masha.

People around were whispering — Pimen, Pimen.

My bag was large and sporty, since we were headed for the woods, not a church. I moved like an icebreaker through the crowd, and the old women clinging to Mashka followed us like pilot fish to a shark until we were right at the altar. There was a low, steady hum, the smell of incense, and a sea of white headscarves worn by the devout old women. Suddenly, there was movement. Clergymen dressed in gold-embroidered robes emerged and began parting the crowd, forming a corridor from the altar to the entrance. We were lucky; we ended up in the front row on the left side of the corridor. One old woman kept trying to squeeze me out, poking my back with her fist and muttering, “Oh, you Herod!” Making sure Masha was close, I turned, plucked the old woman from behind my back, and placed her in front of me. She barely reached my chest, so she didn't block the view, but the joy and happiness on her face were immense; she kept apologizing for the “Herod” comment and chanting that Masha was a “queen.”

Suddenly, from the choir loft or somewhere above, singing began. The fabulous, heavenly sound of high voices was so melodic that no word other than “divine” could describe it.

A procession began to emerge from behind the altar. First came four men in gold-embroidered vestments — among them was Patriarch Pimen — followed by four in black vestments. On the flanks were young men, likely seminarians, holding thick candles. They walked to the middle of the cleared corridor and turned to face the altar; everyone around was praying.

Bear in mind, this was the heart of the USSR in 1971 — a time when police raids were carried out on churches during Easter (I mean in Georgia). What I saw in Zagorsk was like a touch of the forbidden, allowed on that specific day for reasons unknown.

I didn't know which church holiday it was, but it seemed to be the Patriarch's first service in that rank. First, the choir sang in honor of the Patriarch, then they fell silent, and Pimen began to sing as if in response. The service was long, but it was worth it — it was peerless! I was so moved by what I saw and heard that I simply couldn't speak. The old woman, whose shoulders I had apparently been holding the whole time, kept repeating, "Thank you, son, thank you, son," while praying. Masha was lamenting that she lived so close but had never seen anything like it.

We rode home in near silence. When we arrived, as if by agreement, we told no one anything. We didn't want to.

The next day in Moscow, I bought a set of twelve records of church chants performed by the Bulgarian Opera "under the counter" (as was the custom then). They were wonderful records.

9. For the Girl — As Always

Time flew by. In the evening, before my flight home, everyone gathered. It was cheerful; toasts were made, and the sisters hinted at the next summer — the battle for potatoes, the bathhouse, the firewood, and the mushrooms. It was painful to look at Masha; although she appeared cheerful, her eyes gave everything away. Masha was on edge.

For perhaps the first time in my life, I felt a strange sensation — something between awkwardness and a kind of guilt, though I wasn't sure what for. Only the sisters' husbands didn't know about the "bathhouse" and the "wood-chopping," so everything there seemed normal and there was no talk of embarrassment; on the contrary, a certain bravado was present. But regarding Masha, I felt very anxious. I remembered our agreement well, but her chastity weighed on my confidence. I wondered if I should go through with it. It was all so delicate; I didn't know from which side to approach it so as not to demean or offend her, and I had no certainty that everything would turn out as expected.

I went out onto the veranda for a smoke. Masha came up to me and looked at me with an expression that was far too serious. Then, lowering her eyes, she said softly:

— Yura, you haven't forgotten your promise? I want you, and this night must be ours. Grandma knows; she'll be sleeping at Katya's.

Once, when Masha had taken a day off and we were "fooling around" in bed after her mother left for work, the mother unexpectedly returned because she had forgotten something! I was simply stunned; if this had happened in Georgia, the best-case scenario would have been an immediate marriage — I didn't even want to think about the worst. I closed my eyes, bracing for the blow of fate. After a short pause, I heard:

— Don't play too far! — and the front door slammed shut.

So I knew the taste of Masha's lips and the firmness of her breasts; I knew much about her body. I knew about the mole on her tummy and the appendicitis scar. I knew how tender she was in bed; I just didn't know her as a woman. By that time, I'd had many women and girls, but none of them had been virgins — and where would they have come from? I didn't "court" girls; I mostly engaged in mutual pleasure. And then, this! Of course, in the eyes of her mother and sisters — who, I'm sure, hadn't hesitated to share their "lessons learned" — everyone, including Masha, considered me a lady-killer, a heartbreaker, a kind of professional virginity liquidator. It clearly never even crossed their minds that in this delicate area, I was an amateur. Masha wanted the desired "Georgian" to give her a lesson in sex where, with a moan of orgasm, she would soar into nirvana.

The "Georgian," however, understood that all his mastery was completely unsuitable for sex with Masha. And it was not a given that it would end in nirvana; it could easily turn into agony and future disappointment for her. It is difficult to describe my state of mind exactly back then.

Masha was different from her sisters, for whom sex was merely a road to pleasure — without a rudder or sails, without remorse toward husbands, mother, or sister. The sisters were two females of different breeds. One was greedy for sex, wanting everything at once; the other was languid, affectionate, and well-acquainted with the path of passion, preferring to walk it slowly without missing a single corner. Masha was something I had never encountered. For her, sex was neither a goal nor a means to an end, but a derivative of the soul's state — like a seal verifying her impulse! It was the maximum she could give to a loved one as a gift, as proof of the purity of her intentions, as proof of her feelings — a desire to enter a new world together with the person she wanted.

And I so badly did not want to destroy this girl's world of ideas about the value of this gift and the happiness with which she would enter adult life.

While I lay waiting for everyone in the house to fall asleep, Masha came to me herself. She stood by the bed against the backdrop of the veranda and the yard light, looking as if she were naked;

her nightshirt was translucent, and as I lay there, I admired her figure. Masha apparently didn't know if I was asleep or not and seemed to hesitate whether to lie down beside me. I moved over, and Masha slipped under the covers. She lay pressed against me, trembling nervously, asking me to warm her. Masha was so spontaneous, so open, and so pure that I was in a stupor. I didn't know how to begin without hurting her, without breaking her soul, or making her regret and suffer from deceived expectations. It's easy for me to write this smoothly now, but back then I didn't know how to properly manage this sudden happiness so that an hour later there wouldn't be agonizing pain and immense shame.

How easy it had been with her sisters and all the girls before Masha. There, everything was as simple as two plus two — like an open book where it was written in black and white: “forward and deep, and then...” Sex was mostly “every man for himself,” where hypersexuality on both sides made it impossible to focus on more than one or two thoughts or actions at a time. And if sex began, it continued until total victory without a breather, regardless of words, moans, or outside sounds — hands gripping buttocks, lips kissing everything within reach, moving the body back and forth until the looming goal was reached. This youthful sex was straightforward and selfish, like a race. It is only with age and experience that harmony comes, and with it the desire not only to receive but to give pleasure — and most importantly, the skill to do it naturally and without showing off.

But here was a virgin, complete trust, and a total absence of selfishness.

Before Masha ended up in my bed, I had thought a lot about how to start, but the solution came on its own. It was my first ever prelude to sex that ended in the partner's orgasm. Masha and I lay on our sides, embracing, for probably about an hour. My “manhood” was pressed against her lower abdomen; Masha grew bold and placed her hand on it, then froze, seemingly afraid of either her own boldness or my indecision.

I kissed her lips, her neck, her breasts, her stomach. But I understood that I had to start not with what Masha expected, but with something completely unexpected for her that would bring a mountain of pleasure. Caressing and kissing Masha, I slowly moved my head downward. Masha's pubis was trimmed short, which was a great rarity for that time. I already knew exactly what would happen next, and, covering us with the blanket just in case, I began to kiss Masha's very essence. At first, Masha froze, afraid not only to spread her legs but even to move. But as soon as I parted them slightly with my hands, everything went like clockwork. I wasn't just giving Masha pleasure; I was delighted by her clumsy attempts to help me. Masha's movements became wider and sharper until they became convulsive. It was an orgasm. We slowly drifted back. Masha was in a trance.

— Yurochka, you're a master. Now I know what an orgasm is, but you still won't get out of it — you must take my virginity. Don't be afraid, I'll bear it if I have to, but don't laugh, you're my first. Don't torture me, Yurochka, I'm dying of fear and desire right now. Do it!

And I “did it”! I tried to enter very slowly, but it was as if I hit a wall. I was checking to see if I was in the right place until, with a sharp movement, she did for me what I hadn't dared to do. Masha cried, smiled, and cried:

— Yurochka, my good one, my joy, I'm so happy, now I know everything. Don't worry, it doesn't hurt, it feels good. Don't stop until I or you receive pleasure.

I was the first to receive pleasure, but I had enough sense to pull out in time. While I went to the bathroom to wash up, thinking there would be more “problems,” Masha changed the bedding. When I returned from the shower, Masha lay down with me again.

— I have it better than they do. They were fools and slept around in school after drinking at a birthday party. Now they don't even remember who with, but for me — you are the first and the beloved.

Oh, if she only knew how good I felt too! Under her whisper, I fell asleep on her chest like a babe!

When Masha left for work, I was sleeping. She kissed me and cried. That afternoon, I flew back to Tbilisi.

Afterword

To this day, I have a dual attitude toward what happened then. I have thought a lot about that situation with Masha. Had I known that Masha was a virgin, I probably — most likely — would not have come to her, because I was traveling, to be honest, specifically to make up for what I had missed out on in Tbilisi.

But my relationship with Masha apparently shaped my future attitude toward both women and sex. Since then, for me, sex has been an opportunity to give a female partner not just joy, but a madness of feelings and a vividness of colors — to feel and understand that sex is freedom! Of course, I never forgot about myself, but the partner always came first. Yes, exactly like that

Honeymoon

Part 1

For our honeymoon, my first wife Tamara and I flew to Leningrad. I had never been there, and neither had Tamara, though she had a relative there — the ex-wife of her cousin.

We landed at Pulkovo. Hurrah, Leningrad! Now for the best hotel, champagne, nights lasting two or three days, a bathtub for two, soft white robes, a “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door, and...!

We get into a taxi: — Where to? — The best hotel! — Which one?

Which one? What a motorized blockhead! Any Caucasian knows that the best hotel in every major Russian city is the “Rossiya.” — To the “Rossiya”!

We arrived fairly quickly, let the taxi go, and headed straight to the receptionist: — Greetings, my dear. A suite with a city view and a large double bed. — Do you have a reservation? — Almost — we’re on our honeymoon! — We have a single room in the attic, but it’s under renovation. The toilet and bathtub don’t work; you’ll have to walk to the end of the corridor.

The grimace on Tamara’s face expressed such horror, as if she were the owner of a castle in Monaco being offered a shack with cockroaches, bedbugs, and rats in the middle of nowhere.

I had to keep the bar high: — Listen, darling, you clearly don’t understand. We are on our honeymoon. We need only a suite, preferably with floor-to-ceiling mirrors in the bedroom! — Try the “Tunist” hotel around the corner; check there!

The flight had exhausted Tamara: — You rest here, and I’ll run over and find out.

I “ran” for a long time. This wasn’t Tbilisi — when they say “it’s not far” in Leningrad, you have to multiply the Tbilisi concept of distance by at least three.

It took about an hour and a half to “run” there, find out there were no vacancies at the “Tunist,” and return. Since it stays light in Leningrad in August even at night compared to Tbilisi — where darkness falls over the city like a theater curtain — I didn’t immediately realize it was already 9 PM. The best we could hope for was a night at the train station. Tamara was asleep in a chair in the middle of the lobby, already floating in a state of honeymoon bliss.

I tried to seduce the clerk with a passionate Caucasian gaze, but the age categories were different, and her training was old-school — Stalinist. Sliding her glasses down her nose, she said: — I’ll let your wife sleep in the chair until midnight. After that, go watch the raising of the bridges — the police will kick you out anyway.

Sitting down next to my sleeping wife, I began to wait for the “raising of the bridges.”

Cleaning ladies scurried around, vacuumed the carpet, rolled it up, and leaned it against my chair. It almost fell on me — large and colorful. — Where did you buy a carpet like that? — asked a man with a Central Asian accent, clearly looking to haggle. — It’s a wedding gift from the hotel, — I brushed him off like a nagging fly.

The second man who approached had a sense of humor: — I’m checking out soon and would also like to give you a wedding gift. — Another carpet?

The man smiled: — I’m vacating my suite in two hours, but they’re supposed to repair the plumbing in a few days. So for a day or two, you’ll be able to alternate your games between the bed and the tub. I’ll give you the key so they don’t give the room to someone else. Don’t mess it up. From the accent — are you from Georgia? — Thank you, genatsvale!

I led the man to the clerk and informed her that this citizen had decided to give us a wedding gift: he was giving us his suite. All three of us laughed. The woman asked for our passports. I began filling out the forms, and suddenly, a baffling question: — Did you change your last name? — Me?

— Well, not me! There's a note in your passport: "Passport subject to exchange due to change of surname."

I spent a long time proving to her that they had written it in mine instead of my wife's due to carelessness. I held that old nag by the elbows, by the hand, even by the lapels, and even ran a finger along her cheek — she believed me!

I dozed for an hour in the chair, and when Volodya (our savior's name) came out with his bags, I woke my wife. Entering the elevator, fully convinced we were going to the attic, she quipped: — To the suite, my all-powerful hubby? The elevator girl: — Yes, yes, dear — to the suite!

The sarcastic smile vanished from my wife's face only when we opened the door. The suite consisted of an entryway and two rooms — a lounge and a bedroom. A fridge, a TV, a bar, a sofa with two armchairs, and a balcony right above the hotel entrance. The bedroom had a plush, cream-colored carpet, a massive double bed, and to the side — a large wardrobe with sliding doors. But where was the bath?! We were about to call the maid, but Tamara opened one of the sliding doors and... there it was! Light green tiles, a large white tub, and a MIRROR across the entire wall! They said there was no sex in the USSR, but we had plenty, and what a kind it was!

The "sexodrome" didn't particularly impress me after the bath; besides, it wasn't a wedding night anymore, but a month into a legal marriage certified with a stamp. Tamara went to sleep, and I went to watch the local kids beg foreigners for chewing gum. As I said, it was late August, and a piercing wind was blowing, but "we had it"! We hadn't found anything decent for Tamara at the "wedding store" with our coupons, but I had bought a Bulgarian sheepskin vest there. It was so pleasant, soft, and warm, and it looked so good that someone even asked me: — Give me a cigarette.

What Georgian traveled to Moscow or Leningrad without a pack of Philip Morris in a cocoa-colored plastic box (acquired through God knows what channels) in his pocket? I handed him a cigarette from the pack: — Please!

Long hair like the Beatles, a brown sheepskin vest worn over a t-shirt, and shiny brown shoes made me look like a foreign "dude," albeit a mute one (the flaws of my education!). I saw the cops chasing away the beggars while politely bypassing me. One girl in fishnet stockings even asked: — Do you like me? What could I say to her when my wife was sleeping on the third floor, and I barely knew Georgian, let alone English? I patted her on the bottom and said: — No money.

Heading back up to the third floor, I thought: — I'll go to the room now, pour two glasses of cognac from the bar, light a Philip Morris, wake the dozing Tamara (she surely got enough sleep in the lobby), and hand her the cognac... and not a single paid "girl" in fishnets will be able to arrange anything like what we (supposedly) didn't have in the USSR! Yes, I didn't lose out!

In the morning, we decided to go for a bite and find out when the bridges were being raised. Strange thing: everyone in Leningrad knew when the bridges went up, but everyone gave a different time. It seemed like they were mocking us. Later I realized the bridges were raised at different times, and everyone gave the time for the bridge closest to them. At first, I didn't like Leningrad. Bare streets without trees, courtyards like interconnected wells — it took three or four tries to find an entrance. For the first time, near some metro station. I saw the chaotic nightlife of the capital, with its bright lights, strange characters, and the unforgettable atmosphere of freedom that filled every street corner and phone booth.

While this was going on, the floor maid came in the evening and announced that they would be tearing up the bathroom in the morning. No, we wouldn't stand for that! We flew two thousand kilometers to St. Petersburg just to go pee like we did at home in a Tbilisi communal apartment? There it was free, but here!

My hot head flared up, and I went to war with the management. I attacked with such force that they gave me another room — a junior suite, one room with a courtyard view, but with excellent plumbing. A fool would have been happy, but not me — I slammed my fist on the desk: — I will not

live in anything halfway in this hotel! If you don't stop the renovation in my suite right now or give me another one just like it, I won't stay in this hotel for another minute!

Tamara didn't even have time to exhale during this tirade! She finally exhaled on the street, where our suitcases stood at our feet.

Part 2

Sometimes even forty-eight hours can change a person's behavior. I was no longer the same Yura who had arrived in Leningrad two days ago. I hailed a taxi and commanded:

— Driver, to the Hotel Leningrad!

After buying a beautiful box of small pastries along the way, we entered the lobby of the hotel's central building. The girls at the reception were drinking coffee, and a "NO VACANCIES" sign was prominently displayed. Leaving Tamara in the cafeteria, I approached them:

— Is it possible for me to get a coffee too? — The cafe is right across from here; you can order there. — Girls, here's the situation: my wife is sitting right there in the cafeteria — I gestured casually toward the cafe. — As we walked past you, I pointed out how young and pretty you are, which, of course, I shouldn't have done. When we got to the cafe, she said, "Go on then, go ask those beauties for a coffee and let's see them hit you with a shoe." I quickly explained that we're from Tbilisi and our women are very jealous.

Tamara, of course, had no idea about my impromptu performance. The girls burst out laughing: — Won't she kill us? — Not at all, I'll take every dagger strike myself!

I opened the box of pastries I'd been keeping "in the wings," and we peacefully sipped coffee together. — So, are you all native Leningraders? — Yes! — Then tell me, who loaded the cannon on the Aurora on that momentous day?

Puzzled smiles appeared on their sweet faces. — My grandfather, Kupriyan Stepanovich Yakunin! — Oh, so you're a celebrity in Leningrad! — Of course! And surely in Leningrad, the cradle of the Revolution, in a hotel with the same name, there's a room for the grandson of such a man — especially since I'm on my honeymoon. — And won't your wife divorce you for flirting with us?

If only they knew how close they were to the truth. But then, a wooden barrel-key tag flashed in the hand of one of them: — For a grandson like that, we'll find a room. But don't hold it against us: it's a double room in the wing (St. Petersburgers, don't hit me, I don't remember if it was A or B, but it was along the canal) — 5th floor.

The potential scandal with Tamara ended before it began because I already had the registration forms in my hand.

The room was a single unit: you enter into a small hallway with a coat rack and a bathroom, then a door to the main room. Along one wall were two beds with pull-cord switches for the sconces above. The windows were closed; it was stifling. Before I could even deal with the luggage, Tamara had "uncorked the room," throwing the window wide open. Within a minute, "Messerschmitts" were swarming in the air. Before we could even close the window, I was already being bitten by this bloodthirsty armada. Chasing mosquitoes around the room with towels, we naturally got into a fight — because it wasn't Tamara's fault for letting them in, but mine for allowing myself to be bitten. One word led to another, temperament took over, and I grabbed the keys, slammed the door, and left.

I thought I'd take a walk in the cool air to look around and cool off... but man proposes, and God disposes! Entering the elevator, I pressed the first button and... ended up in the basement, where there was a bar-restaurant. I thought — even better!

A group of "Burghers" was sitting at the tables, having a blast. There was a piano in the corner, and one of them was lively playing various tunes while the rest howled along. I had studied German in school, so, gathering my nerve, I told my neighbor: Mein Name ist Juri und ich lebe in Tiflis, Georgien. These "Burghers" turned out to be East Germans who spoke decent Russian. We drank to victory, to Stalin, sang "Suliko," ate shashlik, and drank beer. It was good, satisfying, warm, and felt like home. Time flew by unnoticed. At 3 AM, the bar was closing, and we were asked to leave. The Germans pleaded with me to go with them, but an inner voice reminded me of patriotism and

my wife — though more likely, the inner voice was someone else's; after all that beer, I probably didn't realize it.

The elevator wasn't working, so after counting five floors, I inserted the key into the second door from the stairs — my room, I knew it. But I didn't have to unlock it; the door was already open. "Thoughtful of her," I thought, "leaving it unlocked so I wouldn't wake her." Entering the hallway, I slid the bolt shut. Without turning on the light, I stripped down. I thought about taking a bath, but exhaustion took its toll, so I didn't.

The room was quite dark; the window was closed and draped. Tiptoeing toward my bed to avoid lectures about my "drunk face," "philandering nature," and being a "pig that finds mud everywhere" — and most importantly, to avoid explaining where, with whom, and why I had been drinking and roaming — I approached "my" bed. The familiar scent of Signature perfume, which I'd recently given my wife, seemed to say: — I'm here, let's forget everything, come to me!

"Perfect," I decided. I lay down and gave her a "soulful" hug of appreciation. But what happened next was beyond the pale.

A piercing shriek, a slap, and "Tamara" yanked the cord, turning on the light. The only thing familiar was the scent of the perfume. Everything else was like a scene from Eldar Ryazanov's famous movie, even though it wouldn't be filmed for another three years.

There I was, in my room, sitting on the bed — but instead of my wife, two pretty blondes were lying on the two beds, screaming at the top of their lungs. The only thing I could squeeze out was: — Where is Tamara?

Someone started pounding on the door. A faint thought stirred that this wasn't just their nightmare, but mine too, as I thought about the coming explanations with Tamara and the potential Jesuitical consequences. I broke into nervous, Homeric laughter.

One of the girls rushed past me and opened the door. I was still sitting on her friend's bed in nothing but my underwear — lucky I hadn't gone for that bath and taken those off too. About five people burst into the room; it felt like they'd been standing guard. In an instant, I was on the floor with my arms pinned behind my back. The girls turned out to be Polish, and now they were eyeing me with curiosity. Someone in the hallway shouted that they'd finally caught the "rascal." I stopped laughing and started thinking frantically: what kind of "rascal" were they looking for? A translator arrived to check if anything was missing, including the honor of Milena, whom I'd lain down next to. They didn't check that, settling for her assurance that I "didn't have time!"

"So he's not a thief, but a maniac," a cop rumbled, pinning me harder to the floor. "And how did he get in?" I barely wheezed out: — I'm not a thief or a rapist! I live here, and the door was open! The translator, after talking to the girls, explained that I was lying and didn't live there. Silence fell. Taking advantage of the confusion, I started explaining: — If I came to steal, would I strip to my underwear? And if I decided to rape someone, surely it wouldn't be in the Hotel Leningrad! Give me my clothes and I'll prove I live in this hotel — and anyway, where is my wife?

Rummaging through my trousers, they produced the barrel-key: — Look, see? I live here, I'm not a thief! — My dear fellow, you don't live here. This is the key to a different room! — There, you see? Everything's fine — I just got the wrong floor.

The cop gave a crooked smile: — Just a small thing left then — to go up one floor and find out if you're the husband of your... what was it... Tamara, or not.

I simply couldn't imagine explaining my presence in the Polish girls' bed to Tamara. The mosquitoes she'd let in would be glaring evidence of my "devious, vile plan as a cheater and a scoundrel." Naturally, this would be followed by her throwing every heavy object within reach at me and demanding I take her home to her father immediately.

I started begging: — Anything but that! I'm here on my honeymoon; I had a fight with my wife this evening. How will I explain a bed full of Polish girls? She's Georgian (I could lie a bit, since my wife was actually worse — a Molokan) and she'll slit my throat because of your lack of trust!

The Polish girls had already realized I wasn't a thief or a spy — just someone's husband — and through the translator, they asked the policeman to let me go. With what pleasure I would have stayed with them! Anything but going up one floor. — Please leave me here, I'm honest! — I tried to move the man's heart. — Get dressed, let's go upstairs.

While dressing, I suggested taking me straight to the police station to sort it out in the morning — nothing worked. They led me up. On the stairs, I pleaded: — Let's do this: I'll go into the room, and if there's any noise within a minute or two, arrest me. You'll have the keys and the door will be unlocked.

The whole cavalcade went up to the fifth floor. Quietly opening the door, I handed the key to the cop and entered. — So you finally showed up? And I'm sitting here waiting for you! You pest! — Shh, people are sleeping, — was all I said. — I'm going to strip, wash up, and come back.

I quietly went back out into the hallway. Everyone had already understood. At the floor desk, they were giggling. The Polish girls were pressing their hands to their chests — maybe inviting me for a visit with my wife, or maybe without. I took the keys and said goodbye.

By morning, the whole hotel knew about the “wedding night” of the Georgian and the Polish girl, but that was already morning, and I had told Tamara everything much earlier.

Part 3

To prevent you from getting the impression that our honeymoon consisted entirely of moving between hotels and my high-stakes, near-sexual adventures, I must disappoint you — there were no more moves, and the hotel quickly forgot about us as a scandalous couple.

Naturally, we hadn't come to Leningrad on our honeymoon to drift from room to room looking for trouble; we came to enjoy the magnificent architecture of the Northern Capital: the bridges, the museums, to visit Palace Square and imagine the storming of the Winter Palace. We wanted to visit the Aurora and perhaps scratch onto one of its barrels — “Know our kind: my grandfather fired this at the Winter Palace.” We wanted to admire the suburban palaces and talk to Leningraders, with their purest Russian language, about the famous “porebrik” (curb). Naturally, we switched our focus to the sights.

Tamara, as a “refined intellectual” with a degree in journalism, made a list of everything we had to visit. My task was the logistics: finding these spots on the map, asking people how and when to get there, how to get tickets, and everything else involving travel. Unfortunately, back then there was no internet, and you could only call from the hotel room or for two kopeks from a phone booth.

We decided to dedicate a week to museums: the Hermitage, the Russian Museum, the Kunstkamera, Peterhof, the Aurora, the Peter and Paul Fortress, the Mint, St. Isaac's Cathedral... and, of course, to visit “Katka's Garden” in Ostrovsky Square — to get a look at the Leningrad eccentrics.

The first thing we decided to do was watch the raising of the bridges on the Neva. I ran around asking the floor maids about the schedule, and to my surprise, different people gave me different times! In Tbilisi, the bridges don't open, so we don't have those problems, but here there are nearly twenty drawbridges — try remembering when each one goes up so you can make it to the right side of the river in time! You'd think there wasn't one smart person in the city to realize that if you raised all the bridges at once, people wouldn't have problems with being late. It only later dawned on me that the bridges are raised at different times not to torment drivers, but for the convenience of ships passing through the Neva.

Since most people agreed that the Blagoveshchensky Bridge was the first to open, we decided to go to the English Embankment to wait, and then move along the embankment to watch the others in turn. Leningrad is not Tbilisi. Standing on the Neva embankment at night, you realize it is the “Northern Capital” where the wind pierces you to the bone even in summer. By chance, we found a building with a recessed entrance where Tamara and I successfully sheltered from the wind. It would have been fine, except the few passersby looked at us as if they were seeing living people sitting on a staircase for the first time; many laughed and pointed fingers. In Tbilisi, people sitting on stairs wouldn't cause such a stir — likely a result of my Caucasian upbringing, as you could get punched in the eye for such mocking.

When the bridge finally opened, we emerged from our shelter and immediately realized the comedy of the situation. We had been sitting on the steps of the Wedding Palace (the registry office), and people assumed we had been waiting in line since the night before to get registered. Not wanting to suffer in the cold or end up in another comical situation, we hailed a taxi and watched the rest of the bridges from the comfort of the back seat!

For the next week, Tamara's program focused on museums. Somewhere, to my misfortune, she bought a “Guidebook to the Sights of Leningrad.” First on the list was the Hermitage — the one where, as soon as you “leave the gate, turn right,” as Arkady Raikin used to say. The USSR was a country with the most well-read population. Every family had its own home library, mostly subscription editions, and those who weren't lucky enough to have real books bought wallpaper where painted bookshelves looked as good as the real thing. My grandfather's library began with 35 volumes of Lenin — a tribute to the year 1937 — followed by 30 volumes of Charles Dickens,

22 of Tolstoy, 11 of Kuprin, 28 of Balzac, and of course, our everything — Pushkin, Lermontov, Chekhov, Dostoevsky... In Tamara's and my library, we had plenty of everything as well. There was both classics and fiction. My wife, a certified journalist and amateur artist, had a special love for painting, so we had enough books on the subject, from museum treasures to reproductions.

I had my own view on this “paint-and-varnish” art. I could never understand why Raphael and Pirosmeni were both considered “artists.” They explained to me that Raphael studied painting while Pirosmeni did not, so Raphael knew about perspective and Pirosmeni did not. When I said that in that case, Rachmaninoff and I are both pianists — it's just that Rachmaninoff studied at the conservatory, so he knows the notes and can play with two hands, while I never studied and play with one finger and don't know the notes — no one liked that comparison. Pirosmeni remained an “artist” to everyone, while I, unfortunately, was not a “pianist.”

However, in the State Russian Museum, I tried to rehabilitate myself and almost proved that I was no less great than some, such as Kazimir Malevich. His “Red Square” — a painting from 1915 titled “Woman in Two Dimensions” on the back — is a red quadrilateral on a white background, slightly different in shape from a square. So, I approached the museum guard, a gray-haired woman sitting near the painting, and offered my own version — “The Green Square.” The painting would be titled “Philosophy of the Greens and the Third Rome.” Unlike Malevich's square — who, due to gaps in his education, didn't know the difference between a rectangle and a square — my “Green Square” would be a strict square on a white background. As for the price of the green masterpiece, I stated that agreeing on it shouldn't be a problem.

This old lady, who perhaps remembered Stalin building her a “happy childhood,” first turned red, then green. Reaching into her garment as if pulling out a prop Mauser pistol, she declared that while the KGB wouldn't give me millions, they would gladly give me twenty to twenty-five years for trying to sell a fake and thus insulting and disgracing the great Russian artist, Kazimir Malevich.

Part 4

After we had scoured almost all of Leningrad, we visited our translator-relative Alla and her two daughters several times. The girls were as different from each other, both inside and out, as my two wives. Alla's daughters, Tanya and Alyona, declared that if we didn't see Petrodvorets, we might as well consider our trip to Leningrad a waste. The elder, Tatyana, wouldn't stop talking about the Upper and Lower parks, the Kolonistsky park, the Olga and Tsarina pavilions, the Gothic Chapel, and much more.

I read about Peterhof in a promotional booklet too — it described it as a brilliant suburb of St. Petersburg on the Gulf of Finland, where you could feel the sea breeze and see about 180 fountains and 4 cascades! Surrounded by the architectural masterpieces of Rastrelli, Le Blond, and Michetti... you would feel the aesthetics of the "Russian Versailles" — from perfect lawns and whimsical garden forms to garden labyrinths, pavilions, and Small Palaces.

So, Tamara and I decided to spend our last weekend in Leningrad visiting Peterhof. We clearly didn't have enough energy left for the other palaces and sights of the Leningrad suburbs. After resting for a couple of evenings in Leningrad restaurants, we took the suburban train from the Baltic Station to Peterhof on Sunday.

The train was quite crowded. I thought it would have been better to go on a weekday since, unlike many others, all days for us in Leningrad — even weekdays — were holidays. After thirty minutes of travel, we were at the Peterhof station, which itself is an architectural monument. Walking for a while along the "people's path," as everyone called it, we arrived in Peterhof. Once again, we regretted not going on a weekday; the size of the crowd was already irritating, as many Leningraders came here not to see anything specific, but simply to stroll. And, of course, there were many groups of foreigners with translators.

I was struck by a scene that would be impossible in Tbilisi — two women, drunk as lords, were sprawling on the grass to the right of the path, while next to them, two almost translucent little girls, about 3 or 4 years old, were weaving a wreath of flowers.

I won't describe the parks and fountains of Peterhof; much has been said and written about them. I will simply say that it made a staggering impression on us! I have never seen anything more beautiful. The parks, the fountains, the layout, and the palace itself were, of course, something marvelous!

Let me tell you about one more episode. The line for the palace was enormous — like the line for the Mausoleum on Lenin's birthday. Naturally, we didn't want to wait through that, so I figured out how to "come out dry from the water." Being someone who gets cold easily, I was wearing my sheepskin vest even while everyone else was dressed for summer; I had long hair and was smoking a Marlboro. So, Tamara approached the guard at the door and, pointing at me, declared that I was a foreigner who had strayed from a group that had already entered the building. They immediately handed us shoe covers, and we bypassed the line into the fairytale palace.

Lana

Selivanovo

In the early 80s, I began working in the laboratory of the Polytechnic Institute, within the Department of Electric Machines — “ONILBEP.” The laboratory was headed by Oleg Valiashvili, who had traded the wrestling mat for a department head’s chair. His Master of Sports title was supposed to transition smoothly into a PhD! He was a large man with a powerful neck and a great desire to look like a boss, but in essence, he was a “good fellow” with the grip of a wrestler. The laboratory operated on a self-financing basis, and our salaries depended on what technical tasks (TZ) Oleg could secure from the Main Directorate, and to a lesser extent, on whether we actually completed them.

Oleg was never short on cunning. He would travel to Moscow for these tasks right before the New Year, precisely when everyone was packing up and only the “penny-ante” or “impossible” tasks remained — but those were the ones that stayed funded! To everyone’s surprise, he easily snatched up the “impossible” ones, making it look as though his lab could handle any challenge. Oleg would leave Moscow with the funding secured. Of course, he knew he was playing a no-lose lottery. At the Main Directorate, they understood he’d been handed a “dead duck,” so no one would hold him accountable for failure. And if something actually worked out, he might even get a medal pinned to his chest.

That year, he was tasked with developing a tracking drive for bobbin-winding machines. It was a pressing matter: our viscose fiber wasn’t selling in the West because our bobbins were straight, while abroad they were conical. In short, we needed a tracking drive to switch to conical bobbins.

Well, the development of the drives was assigned to me. We — a “group of comrades” — were sent to the Selivanovo Machine-Building Plant, somewhere near Moscow, where they manufactured weaving looms.

There were three of us: myself, Soso, and Rezo.

We flew into Moscow without a hitch and, after spending a day idling in the capital — at our long-favored “Lira” cafe — we headed to the railway station for tickets. My logic was simple: if the Rustavi Metallurgical Plant is in Rustavi, the Tbilisi TV Plant is in Tbilisi, and the Tolyatti Auto Plant is in Tolyatti, then the Selivanovo Machine-Building Plant must, naturally, be in Selivanovo. We’re buying tickets to — Selivanovo!

The first “alarm bell” rang from the ticket window like a thunderclap:

— And which Selivanovo do you want? In which region?

— Do you have a selection? — I joked.

After a pointed look in our direction, the clerk opened the “Directory of USSR Railway Stations” and announced that there were five of them. The nearest one turned out to be in the Gorky region. We had no choice but to buy tickets there, with a transfer in Kovrovo. We went back to finish our time at the “Lira.”

The Gorky region. I don’t know about the others, but I only knew Gorky from maps in geography textbooks. From Moscow, it was maybe — oh, three or three and a half centimeters to the east. And who looked at the scale? Who could even visualize it? It’s not like we were going to Kutaisi in Western Georgia; it was somewhere near Moscow, just a couple of hours away. And surely, we’d be met there — the boss had called the plant to say we were coming, and they’d promised to set up a sauna to warm us up.

Everything was fine as far as Kovrovo. Sandwiches with sausage and cheese, washed down with homemade wine, went down like a dream. Since it was a third-class sleeper carriage, the neighbors were happy to help us empty the keg. The smell of wine in the carriage was diluted by the scent

of cheap tobacco, quilted jackets, and a goat being transported by a man who, sensing the wine, sat down closer to us with his animal. In Kovrovo, we waited for the train for about three hours, and only then did doubt begin to creep into our souls. Those “3—3.5 centimeters” seemed awfully far. Unfortunately, in those dark times, there were no cell phones, and we could only adjust our movements by asking the people. But, to our great regret, the people were silent. Although after the keg of “Kakhetian,” everyone had a burning desire to help us, no one had ever even heard of a place called Selivanovo!

And so, there we were in a carriage with only six other people, facing a five-hour ride. Outside the window — for the first and last time in my life — I saw a forest clearing straight as an arrow, with tangled undergrowth on either side. It felt exactly like a movie set where the scenery doesn’t change hour after hour, and the carriage is just being rocked to create the illusion of travel. When our spirits had completely plummeted — because there was no wine left, no sandwiches, and no sign of Selivanovo — we suddenly stumbled upon a “Selivanovian.” One of the three passengers was from there. But our joy turned into bitter disappointment, followed by long, hysterical laughter! Selivanovo was a tiny hamlet of seven inhabited huts, where the electric train slows down for only one minute. However, the information this woman gave us was priceless: her daughter-in-law worked at that very same ill-fated Selivanovo plant.

The difference between plant names in Tsarist and Soviet times was that in Soviet times, a plant was named after its location, but in Tsarist times, it was named after the owner! So, the Selivanovo Plant, built and operated back in the Tsarist era, bore the name of its master — Selivanov. But it was located in an ordinary Soviet backwater called Krasnaya Gorbarka, near Kovrovo — where, incidentally, we had made our transfer.

We didn’t ride all the way to the huts but got off at the very first whistle-stop. Hungry, cold, but most importantly — a “light at the end of the tunnel” had appeared!

Krasnaya Gorbatka

Finally, with great difficulty, we returned to Kovrovo. My God, what a wonderful mood we had been in there toward morning, and what a broken state we were in now. From Kovrovo, taking a bus and relying on the remnants of our willpower, we reached Krasnaya Gorbatka.

I didn't see what the town looked like in Selivanov's time, but I suspect it hadn't changed much by the time of our arrival.

I don't remember the little red-brick factory very well, but the small hatchet they gave me as a parting gift — manufactured right there — was excellent! I do, however, remember the hotel well (on my next visit, there was a new one, called "Ilet," I think). It was a large log cabin, apparently built back under the Tsar. We were given a "room" with three cots. We dropped our things and went in search of food, as hunger was making itself known. Fortunately, there was a grocery store across from the hotel. The assortment of goods in that store consisted of exactly one item, arranged in beautiful little mounds. People from Tbilisi would immediately think of condensed milk — that's what the mounds in Tbilisi stores were usually made of — but they would be wrong. The item was called "Tourist's Breakfast," and there was nothing else. Not even bread! We took three tins of these canned goods and headed back to eat. The hotel kitchen was at the end of the hall — a tiny cubbyhole with a table and a kerosene stove. An old woman wrapped in a shawl, personifying the entire service staff of the hotel, gave us aluminum forks and, as a personal gesture, a crust of bread.

We opened one of the cans. It was watery rice in fish juice — cold, it was an absolute abomination. Heated up, it turned out to be even worse. It was simply impossible to eat. We gave the opened tin to the local cat — even he refused to eat it.

We decided to head to the plant — there was a canteen there, they'd feed us, and the promised sauna was a warming thought. They weren't exactly expecting us at the plant yet; having heard from our boss that we were going to Selivanovo, they figured — it's going to take them a long time to get here!

How delicious they were: the borscht, the navy-style pasta, and the compote in the warm factory canteen — a fairy tale! We sat with the workers, smoked, shared our travel impressions, listened to their successes, smiled at the pretty female workers, and, promising that with our help those successes would be even more tangible, reminded them about the promised sauna. After someone from the plant made a call, the — women's day — at the sauna was converted into a — men's evening — just for us.

On the way to the sauna, we popped into a department store and bought clean underwear. Being a man without prejudices, I held a pair of those — family-style — masterpieces up to my trousers, since the stack held trunks of various sizes. Soso and Rezo, being true Caucasians, refused to try them on and just grabbed pairs from the same stack I did! We had a great soak; the whole sauna was ours, and the beer — which appeared from out of nowhere — was also quite welcome. After all those tribulations — pure bliss! We started to get dressed and... it turned out that for short, stout Soso, the trunks reached almost to his ankles, while for tall, thin Rezo, they simply fell off! We laughed until we cried, as their trunks turned out to be the largest size possible! And so we returned to the hotel, flopped onto the beds clean and fed, and began to recount all the nonsense that had happened to us, teasing one another. Suddenly... a snore. A distinct, clear snore. We looked at each other. At first, we thought one of us was playing a joke, but when we realized it was a real snore, we started roaring with laughter, as there were only three beds in the room and a built-in wardrobe — no bathroom or toilet, so there was no one to be snoring and no place for it to come from. The snoring stopped; we joked around some more, and Rezo decided to hang his things in the wardrobe. Imagine his surprise when, opening the door, he found himself in another tiny room — a — luxury suite — barely larger than the bed, where a drunk man in boots lay on top of the covers! There was our snore!

The Sleeping Beauty

Finally, back to Moscow by bus, in comfort. We departed from Krasnaya Gorbalka at midnight and arrived in Moscow at 6:00 AM — convenient, you can sleep on the bus through the night. Well, you can, but it doesn't always work out! First things first.

As I mentioned, it was the end of January. For reference, the seasons according to Tbilisi concepts: Winter — when it's not very cold, but women wear fur coats to show they have them. Spring — when it's already warm, you wear jackets, and snow can fall — out of the blue. Summer — it's summer, even in Africa! Autumn — in Tbilisi, it's when it's still summer, but the watermelons are gone!

So, when I wrote that it was winter, it meant we were dressed like Muscovites in October — transitional wear. A raincoat and a scarf were enough for a Tbilisi winter, and the intelligentsia didn't wear those — airport-style — flat caps at all! As we were saying goodbye to Krasnaya Gorbalka and leaving for Moscow, nature apparently decided to show us — Kuzka's mother — it turned bitterly cold. The temperature dropped past minus thirty, the wind picked up, noses turned blue and runny, ears began to wither, and the skin under our clothes turned into goosebumps.

Thank God, it was warm in the bus. And where I was sitting, it was practically Tashkent, because there was a heater right under the seat! For the first half hour, it was fine, but then it started to bake! But you can't just change seats — they are numbered. At every stop, people kept boarding, and within half an hour every seat was taken. I tried sitting next to the driver to cool off a bit, but then I had to return to my place, as his relief driver boarded along the way and gave me a look that said — your reign is over. Rezo and Soso were snoring in their seats across from me.

And then, like in a fairy tale:

— Young man, could you please switch seats with me? I have sciatica, and there's a draft here, but you have the heater under you!

I didn't pause for long, fearing the old woman might change her mind, but I still hesitated a bit so she wouldn't see how happy I was! But trouble, like luck, never travels alone, and after switching places with the old lady, I discovered that my neighbor was a — Sleeping Beauty. — The scent of her delicate perfume set a lyrical mood! She sat by the window, covered in a fur coat and wearing a fox-fur hat. The dim night-lights were on in the bus, and in that faint glow, her perfect blonde features were like something out of a storybook. I was enchanted. But she was sleeping! I wasn't about to wake her just to introduce myself. I fidgeted in the seat as much as I could, coughed more than necessary, but alas! Then I changed tactics: I began to — fall asleep, — and with every lurch of the bus, my head rested more firmly on her shoulder. Out of the corner of my half-closed eyes, I noticed the girl turn her head and look appraisingly at me, sleeping on her shoulder. Apparently, I didn't seem dangerous, and the sight of my thin raincoat prompted her to cover me with the flap of her fur coat too!

What a — sleeping — man can get away with is limited only by what a — sleeping — woman won't allow! Apparently, the — sweetness of my sleep — was contagious to the beauty, as my arm, wrapped around her waist, caused her chest to rise deeply. And so we rode, locked in an embrace — one pretending it was accidental, the other pretending not to notice. We traveled like that until the bus suffered some kind of breakdown. The bus stopped for repairs.

I — woke up — from a candy being placed in my mouth and a squeeze of my hand under the fur coat:

— Lana.

— Yura. Shall we go for a smoke?

— I don't smoke, but let's go!

It was about two in the morning. Snow was falling in large, shaggy flakes, but strangely enough, it had grown warmer, or perhaps the wind had just died down. Lana — slender, in heels, slightly

taller than me, blonde with big blue eyes, a proudly set head, and a slightly husky voice — looked very striking in the light of the streetlamp and the falling snowflakes. I felt almost proud as I caught the interested glances of other men. She was traveling from home, where she'd been on some family business, to the institute dormitory at — Stroiteli — station, on the Yaroslavl line.

After the repairs, we traveled like old acquaintances. The space under the fur coat became shared, and it didn't bother anyone! Until we reached Moscow, I didn't even think of Rezo and Soso; they either were asleep or were tactfully keeping out of sight. In Moscow, each of us had our own anchors, and we had agreed beforehand to meet at the Lira at three o'clock to go to the Sanduny Baths. On the way to Stroiteli station, we fooled around sweetly, but the closer we got to the station, the more the tension grew.

How beautiful it is when certain circumstances strip away specific conventions — or perhaps not conventions, but simply narrow the frame of perception to a shared personal space, outside of which everything happening is of little significance. A sort of soap opera for two. And it is completely irrelevant how it looks from the outside, since its content is entirely of one's own directing, and the space is dotted with sexual markers. Like wolves hemmed in by flags bolting toward the hunter, so too this opera was bound to lead onto the path of sex!

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