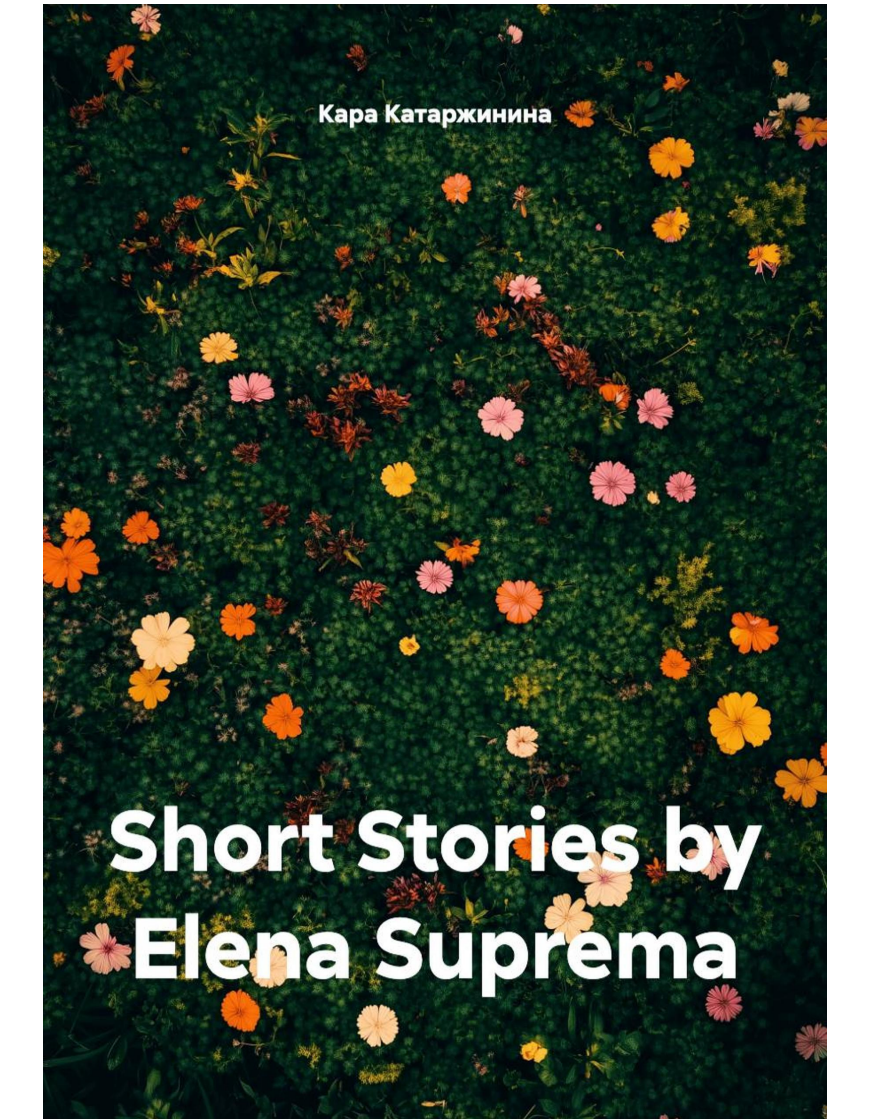




Кара Катаржинина

Short Stories by Elena Suprema

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Аннотация

She was twenty-something, sitting in a stranger's car near the Israeli border, when he pulled out a gun. For the first time in her life, she had to count reasons not to die right there. She found two: she hadn't seen Jerusalem yet, and it didn't seem fair to end in Jordan.

Ten years later, she came back.

This time she found something worse than danger: a prison cell in the Jordanian desert, two months with women from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Ukraine — and a question she couldn't answer: How did I even get here?

Twenty stories. Twenty moments when everything could have gone differently. A Bedouin insists a red cup is blue. A man named Dracula disappears after stealing thousands. A shepherd boy asks for a cigarette. A surf instructor asks: "How long are you going to allow your past to influence your present?"

For anyone who's ever felt lost, afraid, or certain that danger happens to other people.

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Short Stories by

Elena Suprema

Глава

1. The Gun

Ten years ago I was here for the first time. And for the first time I feared for my life.

The guy who was giving me a lift to the border suddenly pulled a gun from under the seat. I didn't know what he was going to do with it. I was scared. Instead of thoughts in my head, I began frantically searching for reasons why I couldn't die right here and right now. After all, I hadn't seen so much yet. And it seemed so unfair to me — that my Russian blood would be spilled here, in Jordan, of all places. And I hadn't yet seen Jerusalem, which was exactly where I was headed.

The guy showed the gun to the driver sitting beside him, said something in Arabic, then put it back under the seat.

That was it.

I was twenty-something years old, sitting in the back of a stranger's car somewhere between Amman and the Israeli border, trying to count up reasons to stay alive. The reasons felt

thin. Not because life was bad — it wasn't — but because I hadn't thought about them before. You don't, until someone holds a gun in front of you and the question becomes suddenly, brutally real.

I found two: I hadn't seen Jerusalem. And it didn't seem fair that it would end here.

That was enough. The car moved on. The gun stayed under the seat. I arrived at the border and crossed on foot. And I didn't think about that moment again for ten years.

Until I came back.

2. Write Another Shantaram

In Wadi Rum I met an Italian journalist named David. Three earrings in one ear, a keffiyeh tied around his neck, and a kind of restless intelligence in his eyes that I recognised immediately — the kind that comes from having moved through too many countries to stay impressed by any single one.

He noticed I was reading Shantaram and sat down beside me.

We talked for several evenings in a row, sitting next to each other listening to Arabic music drifting from the camp. I told him I was confused about my future. That I felt like I was stuck in one episode of a series, rewatching it over and over.

— My life is like driving on the left side of the road and constantly apologising for it.

— What do you mean?

— Being out of place. Not knowing what to do next. You know what came before, but you can't imagine what comes after. Like something broke in the forward motion.

— You can create your own future. Just choose it. Don't think about it so much.

He was leaving a few days before me. On his last day he sat in the back of a pickup truck, waved, and called out: "Draw something or write while you're here. You have an unconventional life, you've travelled so much, seen so much. Maybe you'll write another Shantaram."

I nodded and smiled — part politeness, part vanity, part something else I didn't name.

A few years later I wrote this book.

I hope he reads it someday and leaves a review.

3. The Guard at the Gate

Eight years before I came to live in the Bedouin village, I visited Petra for the first time as a tourist. Three days, a side trip from Israel. I remember almost nothing of the logistics — only the feeling of the Treasury opening up at the end of the canyon. I sat opposite it for three hours and couldn't look away.

A Bedouin followed me around all day. I didn't ask him to. He showed me hidden paths up into the cliffs, a view of Al-Khazneh from above that most tourists never see. He was the first person I had ever met who couldn't read or write but spoke

five languages fluently. Or so he said. Later I would hear that exact description from many Bedouins in Petra, as if they had all decided it sounded romantic.

By evening he wanted to take me to his village. I refused. He got angry. It had grown dark. He turned and walked back toward his village, and as I reached the main gate I noticed the security guard watching me. The guard drew a slow finger across his throat.

He didn't say a word. He didn't need to.

I thought about that gesture sometimes in the years that followed. The casual certainty of it. How he drew the line without drama, as if it were just a piece of information. Take it or leave it.

I left. I went back to Israel. I didn't think about that Bedouin again.

Until I ended up living in his village. That understanding came much later.

4. The Blue Cup

There was an argument. I don't remember what started it — something about the truth of what he had said, whether it could be trusted, whether anything in this place could be trusted.

In the middle of it, I lost my patience and said:

— I ask you what colour this cup is, and you tell me it's blue.

— I pointed at a red mug.

— It's blue, he said.

He didn't flinch. He didn't smile. He just looked at me and said it was blue.

That was the moment I understood something I had been circling around for weeks. His manipulations were obvious. He told me exactly what he thought I wanted to hear, rather than what was true. He had been doing it all along, and somewhere in me I had known it — the way you know something you haven't yet decided to admit.

Black will never become white for me. When someone tries too hard to convince me of something, I resist on principle, because the judgment of truth becomes too subjective. I hold both images in my head — the real one, and the one they're selling — and I don't confuse them.

But I also know it's not enough to see the lie. You still have to decide what to do with that knowledge.

I kept looking at the red cup. He kept insisting it was blue. And I stayed there far longer than I should have.

5. The Shoes

Spring came to the desert in a thin layer of green that coats the yellow hills for a few weeks before the sun burns it off. The Bedouin family — several generations, everyone — piled into pickup trucks and drove out to Little Petra to celebrate the approach of Ramadan with a picnic.

Blankets were spread. The women unpacked food they had prepared. Children scattered immediately into the dunes,

disappearing a hundred metres in every direction. Some of the women sat on the blankets. I stood.

The wife of the uncle of Amina's husband settled herself beside me. Her eyes were level with my feet. She looked at my shoes — good leather boots I'd bought in Petersburg — and gestured for me to take them off. She wanted to try them on. She didn't speak English. This was communicated entirely through pointing and hand gestures.

So I took off my boots and stood on the blanket in my socks and watched her try them on. She was roughly three times my size. The boots did not fit in any conventional sense. She was delighted anyway, and announced with enormous satisfaction that they suited her perfectly.

— Will you leave me your boots when you go?

She looked at me with the same open expression you might use asking someone to pass the salt.

I thought: I'll walk home barefoot, then. Across the desert.

With the same simple logic she could have asked any of the men present to hand over his car. Some requests carry their own absurdity so completely that they become almost philosophical.

The watermelon was the last course. The head of the family set it on the ground, cut a slice with a knife that was coated in sand, and handed it to me. The sand was still on it.

I ate the watermelon.

6. Shakira the Donkey

One afternoon Gassam stopped beside me and said to open Instagram and type: Shakira_the_donkey.

I didn't know what to expect. I typed it in. The profile opened and immediately I saw faces I recognised — Bedouins from the village, almost everyone I had met since arriving in Petra. I scrolled slowly, and Gassam kept murmuring in my ear: "I'm not like these donkey people. I'm not like that." I had already stopped listening to him.

From the first posts it was clear what the account was: something between a wanted board and a collective warning. It had been created to alert tourists visiting Petra — especially women travelling alone — about schemes that had been running in this place for years. "Shakira" is what the Bedouins call the donkeys that carry tourists through the canyon. The meaning did not seem accidental.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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