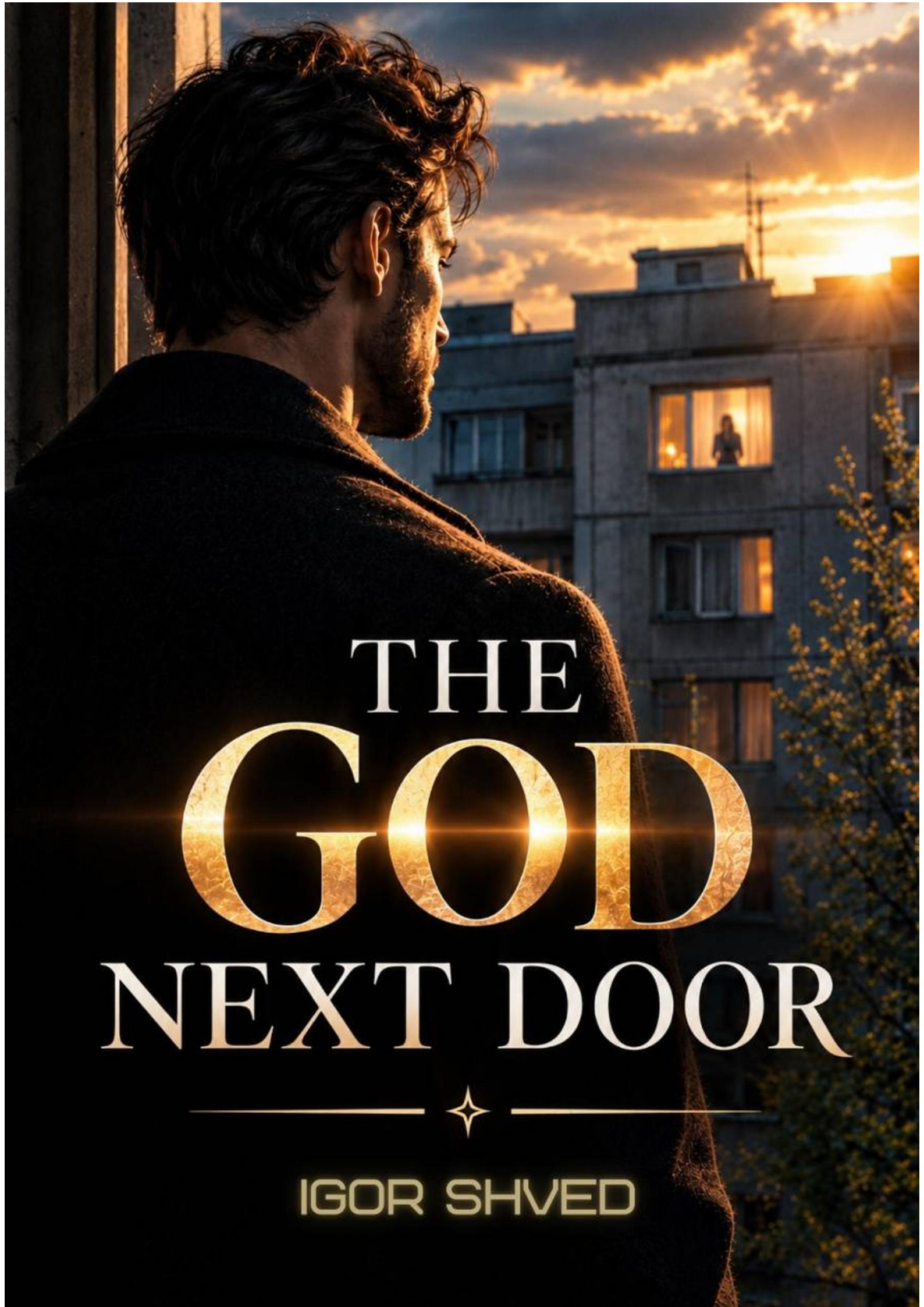


A man with dark, wavy hair and a beard is shown in profile, looking out from a balcony or window. He is wearing a dark jacket. In the background, a multi-story apartment building is visible under a dramatic sunset sky with orange and yellow clouds. One of the windows in the building is lit up, and a person can be seen standing inside. The title 'THE GOD NEXT DOOR' is overlaid on the image in a large, serif font. The word 'GOD' is significantly larger and has a golden, textured appearance with a bright light flare. The words 'THE' and 'NEXT DOOR' are in a smaller, white serif font. Below the title is a decorative horizontal line with a four-pointed star in the center. At the bottom, the name 'IGOR SHVED' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

# THE GOD NEXT DOOR

IGOR SHVED

Игорь Швед

**The God Next Door**

«Автор»

2026

**Швед И.**

The God Next Door / И. Швед — «Автор», 2026

What if God lives among us—and we're just passing by? Thirty years ago, He broke His own rule—intervening in fate to save one life. Now He returns. Not as an all-powerful Creator, but as a human being—with doubts, compassion, and a desire to understand people. His name is Miron. He's a surgeon, a kind stranger, a man with eyes like the sky. He's searching for the woman for whom he broke the order. But instead of one fate, Miron weaves together many. Everyone he meets, seemingly by chance, changes their lives forever. This story is about love and loss, pain and hope, and the invisible presence of miracles in the simplest moments. Somewhere between coffee on a summer terrace and the screeching of brakes, between children's laughter and the whispers of a dying man, a struggle for the soul will unfold that was destined to remain unnoticed. A novel that doesn't preach, but makes you think. About myself. About people. About what's truly important.

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# **Игорь Швед**

## **The God Next Door**

### **Prologue**

What if God is one of us? An ordinary guy who, like everyone else, takes the bus, the subway, or the car every day. Or maybe he prefers a bicycle or a motorcycle? What if he looks no different from any other person? What if you've met him many times before, strolling around the city, just passing by? Or maybe he's your neighbor? You never even thought about it, right? Meeting him would raise a multitude of questions for anyone. What would you ask? Perhaps: What is the meaning of life? Is there Heaven and Hell? What awaits us after death?

What if he, too, has his own flaws, habits, and desires? Then what is he like? What does he look like? Where does he live? What name did he choose for himself? Or maybe God is a woman? What does he do? Perhaps he's a billionaire living on his own island. Or an ordinary manager, doing routine office work. Or maybe he's a doctor, saving lives every day?

When you consider the possibility that God might live among us, your brain will continually generate more and more questions, which inevitably require logical answers. To alleviate this barrage of questions accumulating in your head, I'll begin my story. But where to begin? Hmm ... I think I know...

## I

A small, gray room with shabby furniture: a bed, a nightstand, a wardrobe, a desk, a chair, and a clothes rack. Bright yellow rays of sunlight filtered through the faded blinds and the long-unwashed window. At such moments, you could discern the tiniest dust particles floating in the air, as if swirling in a dance. The absolute silence was broken only by the ticking of the wall clock.

A tall, slightly thin man of about thirty stood in front of the window. His bright blue eyes, casually tousled dark hair, strong chin, and small beard gave him a charismatic air. He was dressed in a white shirt, black pants, and dark shoes. Walking over to the coat rack, he took off his lonely coat. Putting it on, he walked out of the apartment into the common hallway and locked the door behind him. In the hallway, a girl nearly knocked him over. A short, slender blonde of about twenty-four was pulling a child's bicycle out of the neighboring apartment. Not noticing the man, she accidentally bumped him with her back.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! Please excuse me," the girl began to apologize, realizing she had offended someone.

"It's okay, everything's fine, you're not to blame for anything," the man answered calmly, making it clear that nothing terrible had happened.

"Come on, I'll help you," he smiled at the stranger with some kind of alluring calm.

"That would be great, if it wouldn't be too much trouble for you," the girl said with a little timidity in her voice, handing the bicycle to the man.

A boy followed the girl out of the apartment. The man placed the bicycle on the floor and leaned over the child.

"Hello," he greeted, extending his hand to the baby.

"Hello," the boy answered with a little uncertainty, shaking the man's hand.

"I have something for you. Here, take this," the man added, taking a small airplane out of his pocket and handing it to the little boy.

Slightly confused, the boy looked at his mother, waiting for her approval. Smiling, the woman nodded approvingly at her son.

"Thank you," the little boy replied, looking at the stranger again and then happily taking the toy airplane.

"Mom, I'll be waiting for you at the entrance," he added, looking at the gift.

When the child moved away a little so that their conversation could not be heard, the girl turned to the man:

"His father was a pilot. He died before Max was born. Never knowing he was going to have a son. And he wanted one so much. I'm sorry. I was very touched by your gift," the girl breathed, trying to wipe away a tear.

"You know, I think his father knows about his son and is keeping an eye on you both," the man replied with charming calm, looking the girl straight in the eyes. His gaze lifted her spirits. For some reason, she wanted to believe every word the stranger uttered.

"Thank you," the girl said, realizing that this was exactly what she had wanted to hear for a long time.

A few minutes later, having brought the bicycle down from the third floor, they were standing at the entrance.

"Thank you so much. It's rare these days that someone wants to help," the girl said gratefully.

"Please, I was glad to help you," the man replied with a smile on his face.

- Mooo ...

"My name is..." the blonde said with a sigh.

"Yes, yes, of course. I have to go too," the man replied, nodding toward the avenue.

It was a sunny spring day outside. The sun's rays refracted off the running streams, creating a multitude of sunbeams. Children were sailing boats, arguing over whose ship would reach the finish line first. Across the street, a construction crew was arguing and waving their arms over the plans for a future shopping center. Office workers, sitting on the terrace of a local café, were drinking their second cup of coffee of the morning. A red-haired girl, driving a red convertible, was trying to finish applying makeup to her left eye. Everyone was busy, like ants.

A man strolled leisurely through the morning city. He was deeply touched by the way an elderly couple strolled sweetly down the street, as if they'd only met yesterday. The woman held flowers—a delicate bouquet of snowdrops. Her companion, meanwhile, was fumbling with something in his inside jacket pocket. A few moments later, he pulled out two theater tickets and glanced at his wristwatch.

“Darling, the show starts in ten minutes,” the man said to his lady love.

“Do we need to hurry?!” she asked with a smile.

“Yes,” he answered.

The elderly couple picked up the pace.

“What a wonderful moment,” thought the man, turning onto another street.

On the next street, he spotted a charming café with a terrace immersed in greenery. All the tables were occupied: someone was reading a book and leisurely sipping coffee, another couple was animatedly discussing something, oblivious to the other patrons. Everyone was immersed in their own thoughts.

the hostess appeared out of nowhere, beating the man's question to the punch.

“Good afternoon. That would be wonderful,” he replied amiably.

“Come with me,” the girl added politely.

Only one table for two was empty off to the side. A man took one of the empty seats and then began looking around curiously. At the next table sat two young men, animatedly discussing the new boss. Judging by their conversation, they were happy about the relatively minor changes. Behind them sat a young couple with two children. The kids had already gotten their cheeks dirty while devouring yet another scoop of ice cream.

“Hello. What can I get you?” the waitress asked as she approached the table, bringing the man back to reality.

“Hello. Coffee, please,” the man replied.

— Espresso, Americano, cappuccino, latte, flat “White”, cortado, mochaccino? the waitress rattled off.

“To your taste,” the man replied.

— I recommend you try flat. “White with salted caramel. It's one of the best in town,” the waitress replied, smiling at the man.

- Flat White. “Why not?” the man replied, looking at the girl.

A few minutes later, one of the best coffees in town, at least according to one young, dark-haired waitress, was sitting on his table. He thanked her for the coffee and took a leisurely sip. And then he was lost in his thoughts again. He observed the people around him. He was interested in their manners and behavior. What they liked, what they were interested in, what their plans were. How they interacted with each other. He was interested in everything.

“Excuse me,” came from the side.

“Sorry,” repeated a pleasant female voice, bringing the man back to reality.

A girl of about twenty-five stood before him. In a long black jacket with a short skirt. Long blond hair, bright red lipstick, smoky eyes. Ice. She looked very impressive.

“Yes, how can I help you?” he asked, looking up at her.

“Do you mind if I sit down? All the seats are taken. The only free seat left is at your table,” the girl asked shyly, trying to justify herself.

"Of course, sit down," the man answered in a calm tone, standing up and moving the empty chair a little away from the table, thereby helping the girl sit down at the table.

"Thank you," the girl answered respectfully.

Having sat down at the table, she hung her handbag on the back of the chair.

"Hello. What would you like to order?" came the waitress's now familiar voice.

After quickly studying the menu, the girl settled on the Caesar salad and bruschetta with sun-dried tomatoes.

"Excuse me, another latte, please," the girl added to the order, almost forgetting.

"Would you like coffee now or after the main order?" the waitress asked as she finished the order.

"Let's do it now," the girl answered.

"Thank you for your order. The coffee will be here in a few minutes," the waitress replied, writing everything down in her notebook.

"Can I get you anything else?" she asked, looking at the man.

"Thank you, but no," he replied, taking another sip of coffee.

Having received the new order, the waitress went to the kitchen. A feeling of awkwardness arose at the table.

"Vera," the girl introduced herself, extending her hand.

"Nice to meet you, Miron," the man replied, shaking the girl's hand.

"Nice to meet you," the girl added, relaxing a little.

"Likewise," the man replied with a slight smile on his face.

"Your coffee. The salad and bruschetta will be ready in a few minutes," the waitress's voice came from the side.

"Thank you," the girl replied, looking at the waitress who approached the table.

"Miron, forgive me for asking, but have we crossed paths before?" Vera asked, looking at her new acquaintance.

"That's unlikely. I'm new in town," Myron replied, smiling at the girl.

"I would definitely remember you," Vera added, taking a sip of her hot latte.

"What do you do, if it's not a secret?" Miron asked, not taking his eyes off Vera.

"I work as a lawyer at a bank," the girl answered with a smile, after which she took a sip from her cup.

"You're so young and already in such a position. You must be a very good lawyer," Miron stated.

The girl seemed to hesitate for a moment, but after taking a sip of coffee, she smiled at the man again. Just as she was about to add something, the waitress interrupted, bringing their order.

"Your salad and bruschetta with sun-dried tomatoes," the waitress said, transferring the order from the tray to the table.

"Thank you. Can I get the bill?" Vera replied, pulling the salad closer to her.

"Of course, just a minute," the waitress answered, looking at the girl.

"What do you do?" the girl asked, looking at the man and starting to devour her salad.

"I..." Miron began.

There was a slight pause in the air.

"I'm a doctor," he answered after thinking for a moment, unable to come up with anything that would more accurately describe his occupation.

"Wait, don't tell me. I'll guess," Vera replied, her enthusiasm overwhelming her.

"You're a pediatrician," she said confidently after thinking for a moment.

"Why did you decide that?" Miron asked, surprised by the girl's answer.

"Looking at you, I feel both calm and absolute trust. And your eyes... Your eyes are kind. A person with such eyes... I'm sorry, I got carried away," the girl finished, embarrassed, coming to her senses.

"Thank you, but actually I'm a surgeon," Myron answered with a smile.

"Your bill," the now familiar voice of the waitress, who had just approached the table, was heard from the side.

Turning towards her, Vera saw a hand extended towards Miron with a bill.

"You misunderstood me, miss. We're not together," Vera replied, her voice filled with worry.

"Let me pay for everything," she added, reaching for the bill.

"I insist," Myron answered in his calm manner, making it clear that he wanted to pay.

Looking at Vera, he deftly intercepted the folder with the invoice enclosed.

"It's okay. I'll pay," he added, turning his gaze to the waitress, who was flustered by her mistake.

Taking cash from his coat pocket, he placed the required amount in a folder, adding a generous tip. The tip was much greater than the total of their orders. Specifically, it was the amount the waitress needed to cover her mother's medical bills, which had forced her to work seven days a week for a very long time.

"But there's a lot here," the girl answered in surprise, not believing her eyes, seeing the amount.

"There's as much as you need," Miron reassured her with a smile.

"Thank you so much, thank you. You have no idea what you've just done for me," the waitress chattered, smiling like a little girl. Her eyes lit up. Now she was sure everything would be fine, her mother would get better. Rushing to Myron, she kissed him on the cheek, repeating a few more words of gratitude.

"I think it's time for you to run," Myron said, indirectly reminding the waitress why she needed the money.

A few minutes later, having said goodbye to the girl, he was left alone with Vera.

"I am amazed by your kindness," the girl said, without taking her eyes off her new acquaintance.

"This girl needs money for her mother; she's very ill and needs an urgent operation," Miron explained, not waiting for the question that had just popped into Vera's head. "Everything will be fine now," he added with a smile, finishing his coffee.

Vera was pleasantly surprised by her new acquaintance's actions. It made a very strong impression on her.

"Now I'll simply have to feed you. The next breakfast is on me," the girl blurted out, unable to think of anything better.

"We have a deal, Vera," Miron answered, smiling at the girl.

"You won't even take my number?" the girl asked in surprise, not taking her eyes off the man.

"The number?" Myron asked in surprise.

"Oh, right, sorry. I just flew in from afar yesterday and haven't had time to get a cell phone yet," he added, without waiting for a reply.

"You must have flown in from very far away if you didn't need a mobile phone," Vera answered with surprise.

"Let's meet at this very place at this very time. Say, say, tomorrow?" Myron suggested, rising from the table.

"Excellent. Tomorrow at the same place. It was nice meeting you," Vera replied, standing up after Miron.

"Likewise," he replied, extending his hand to the girl.

They shook hands, said goodbye, and then went their separate ways down the street. Vera even glanced back several times as Miron walked away. She liked her new acquaintance.

"I definitely need a mobile phone," thought Myron, adjusting the collar of his coat.

He strolled the streets until evening, taking in the city's sights. He particularly liked one of the local theaters, which he decided to definitely visit in the near future.

## II

A cozy studio apartment on the ninth floor, in the center of the capital. Modern, stylish renovation. A huge wardrobe with a ton of clothes from famous brands. What more could a young woman, just starting out in the big world, need?

The alarm clock's melody, dancing with the phone's vibration, echoed throughout the apartment. Six thirty in the morning. The girl's hand instinctively searches for the ill-fated phone, which is trying its best to wake her. But all her efforts are in vain. The girl wakes up. Turning off the alarm, she stands up, leisurely stretching.

"Vera, pull yourself together," she said out loud, trying to open her eyes.

Getting out of bed, she goes to the kitchen, where she starts the coffee machine. Then she heads to the bathroom. After taking a morning shower and freshening up, she leisurely drinks her morning coffee.

"What day is it today? Thursday!" Vera blurted out, asking aloud and then answering herself. She remembered her appointment with Miron. She put down her cup and ran to the dressing room. She was looking for something special, but not too flashy. She wanted to knock her new acquaintance out cold with just her appearance.

"I have nothing to wear again!" she said with displeasure, throwing aside another dress.

"Maybe this one? No, definitely not this one," she said, putting another outfit aside.

"This is just what I needed!" the girl cried out with joy. Reaching into one of the closets, she pulled out a recently purchased black dress, just above the knees.

"I need a belt," she added, opening the other half of the closet. She pulled out a wide leather belt. Then she reached for a pair of black tights, grabbing a pair of black high-heeled shoes with them.

"Something is missing," she thought, looking at the outfit lying nearby.

"Maybe a beige coat?" she asked herself.

Fifteen minutes later, the girl was strutting in front of the mirror, examining herself from every angle. She accessorized with large hoop earrings and added a little eyeliner and lip gloss. Now her look was complete. She looked like she'd just stepped off the cover of a glossy magazine. Taking a final sip of her now-cold coffee, she called a taxi.

Fifteen minutes later, a car was waiting for her at the entrance. Vera grabbed her purse from the nightstand by the door, locked the door, and headed for the elevator. After admiring herself in the elevator mirror one last time, she exited the building, where a black Mercedes was parked. The driver was standing by the car. As she approached, the man opened the door for her.

"Good morning. Please, have a seat," the man greeted the client.

"Good morning. Thank you," Vera replied, settling into the backseat of the car.

Ten minutes later, she was at the bank entrance. She quickly ran up the stairs into the bank lobby and stopped.

"Hello, Nikolai Naumovich," the girl greeted the security guard at the entrance.

"Good morning, Verochka," the elderly, gray-haired man answered her, without looking up from the newspaper he was reading attentively.

A few minutes later, Vera was at her desk, surrounded by two other girls, to whom she told about her new acquaintance, Miron, whom she had met yesterday at the café.

"I knew right away you had a date," said the dark-haired girl with a bob.

"I wouldn't call it a date. We're just having breakfast together," Vera replied sheepishly.

"Do you often have breakfast with cute strangers?" the second friend asked, smiling, adjusting her long, blond hair.

"Lena, stop it. Can't you see? Our Vera's fallen in love," her friend replied sarcastically.

"Vika. How much more?" Vera asked, embarrassed, glancing at her friend.

"Yes, I'm interested in him. There's something about him... something mysterious," the girl tried to justify herself.

"What time did you agree to meet?" Vika asked with irrepressible curiosity.

"At eleven," Vera answered coquettishly.

"Girls, stop chatting," a stern voice was heard from the side.

Their boss entered the office. He was a portly man of about forty-five, slightly balding, handsome, and wearing an expensive suit. The girls scattered to their workstations, occasionally exchanging glances and whispering, trying to get their work done. Occasionally, they made jokes about Vera, who couldn't wait for ten o'clock. Today, time seemed to drag on more slowly for her than usual. As it does for everyone when you're really looking forward to something.

Miron's morning began even earlier. He was awakened by noise from the apartment above. Someone had decided that the neighbors wouldn't hear the guitar if they played it softly. But in the complete silence of the early morning, even that was enough—every note was audible. These were tipsy students who had arrived at their den in the early morning. I think every city dweller, except these musicians, knows about the audibility of apartment buildings. A few minutes after the solo performance, the students were given an explanation of the sound absorption of walls and the architectural features of the building. The lecture was given by a neighbor from the apartment across the street. And he delivered it so loudly that the whole building listened. And it's unlikely that after such a speech, saturated with the literary force of Russian obscenities, these guys will ever want to play the guitar at such a time again.

"The concert is over. Curtain," Miron said out loud, getting out of bed after listening to the rest of his unfamiliar neighbor's heated speech.

On the table lay the open packaging of a brand new phone. A little further on lay the phone itself. Picking it up, he checked the time—it was five thirty in the morning. Putting the phone back, he headed to the kitchen. Without turning on the light, he put the kettle on the gas stove. While waiting for it to boil, he thought about what and who he had encountered in the city. His thoughts were interrupted by the whistle of the boiling kettle. After making himself some coffee, he went out onto the balcony. The city was still asleep. Except for one couple returning home in the early morning and a couple of cars driving past on the avenue.

"Hello, neighbor," a male voice suddenly came from the side.

Turning to the right, Miron saw a gray-haired old man. Through his gray beard, tobacco-stained teeth were visible, holding a cigarette.

"Hello," Myron greeted in a calm voice.

"Uncle Kolya," the old man introduced himself, extending his hand over the railing of the neighboring balcony. The balconies were separated only by a wrought-iron railing. According to the architect who designed this house, each pair of balconies was connected, separated only by a small wrought-iron railing.

"Nice to meet you, Miron," the man replied, shaking the old man's hand.

"Will you smoke, Miron?" Uncle Kolya asked, holding out a cigarette.

"Take it. It's good tobacco. My son sends it to me from Colombia," he added, seeing his new neighbor's hesitation.

Looking into the old man's eyes, Miron realized it was crucial for him to have someone to share a cigarette with. Deciding not to offend his neighbor, he took the offered cigarette.

"Hold the fire," the old man cheerfully suggested, also handing Miron a deftly lit match.

"Thank you," the man replied, then took a drag. A moment later, Myron began coughing loudly—it was the first cigarette he'd ever smoked.

"Why didn't you tell me you don't smoke?" the old man asked, laughing.

"Well, I don't know myself. I thought it might be important for you to smoke a cigarette with someone," Miron replied, looking at Uncle Kolya.

"To be honest, you're right. But your mere presence would be enough for me," Uncle Kolya replied, taking another drag.

"You should give up this. At your age, it's time to think about your health," Miron added, trying to stub out his cigarette.

"Give it here," the old man said, smiling at Myron and handing the ashtray to his new acquaintance.

Miron stubbed out his cigarette on the ashtray, after which Uncle Kolya put it back in its place.

"So, Miron, tell me, how long have you been in town?" Uncle Kolya asked, taking a drag on his cigarette.

"Yesterday morning," he replied, taking a sip of hot coffee.

"How did you know I just arrived?" Myron asked curiously.

"It's just my instincts, son. I have a good sense of people. You know, you look someone in the eyes and you immediately know they're a good person. They wouldn't hurt a fly. They'd save a drowning man, and then they'd walk off into the sunset without even introducing themselves. But sometimes it's the exact opposite: they'll pretend to be a good person to everyone, but in reality, they'll stab you in the back. You, for example, have a big heart. You don't smoke, but you didn't offend the old man, didn't refuse to have a smoke with me. Even though you've never seen me before. And your eyes, your eyes are kind, guileless," Uncle Kolya replied, taking another drag.

"Don't be upset with the old man if something's wrong. If I'd known you didn't smoke, I'd never have offered you that crap," he continued.

"My son used to send me a letter once a month. He'd write to the old man about everything going on in his life, and he'd even throw in some foreign tobacco. He knows how much I love good tobacco. But for several years now, I haven't heard a word from him. We had a big fight," the old man added, putting out his cigarette and sighing sadly.

After listening to the old man speak, Miron didn't ask him why he and his son had quarreled, understanding that he wasn't yet ready to share such profound emotions with his new acquaintance. Changing the subject, Uncle Kolya smoked another cigarette, and Miron finished his coffee. Afterwards, they sat in silence for a while.

"It was nice to meet you, Uncle Kolya," said Miron, looking at the old man.

"Likewise, Myron. You go ahead, I'll sit for a bit longer," the old man replied, glancing at his neighbor.

"You're an interesting person, Uncle Kolya," the man said finally, walking back into the apartment.

Back inside, he washed out his coffee cup. Then he went to take a shower.

Twenty minutes later, invigorated by his morning shower, he was full of energy. Entering the room, his eyes found his phone. He glanced at the time and began to get ready. It was seven forty. Locking the door, he sped up a little, clearly in a hurry.

Fifteen minutes later, Miron arrived at the city emergency hospital. Two men in white coats stood at the door. They were discussing something intensely—as they approached, it became clear they were discussing the night shift. One of them was short and stocky, with a bald spot already visible among his graying hair. He looked to be about fifty. His slightly hooked nose was complemented by a bushy gray mustache curling at the edges. This was Boris Semyonovich Borkov, head of the emergency department. The second man was tall, with a well-built physique. He had fair hair, was clean-shaven, and a short cropped scalp, and was no older than forty. He was Dmitry Pavlovich Demin, head of the surgical department.

"Good morning," Myron greeted, looking towards the doctors.

"Good," they replied, continuing to discuss the night shift without paying much attention to him.

Stepping inside, he glanced around the foyer before heading toward the stairs. He hadn't even climbed a few steps when someone called out to him.

"Sir, where are you going?" a stern female voice called from the side. It was the head nurse. A girl of about thirty-seven looked at Miron with her blue eyes and large black eyelashes. She was short. Her light hair, slightly copper-tinted, was pinned back with a barrette. Her nose was slightly pointed, matched by full lips. They say of girls like her that she could stop a galloping horse and enter a burning hut. An excellent example of a truly Russian girl, any artist would say, if they met her.

"I'm going to see the head doctor," Miron answered, turning to the girl.

"Put on your shoe covers and a gown. And anyway, we don't wear outerwear," the nurse continued in the same stern tone.

At that moment, her phone rang. She picked it up and waved him on his way.

"Yes, I'm listening. Serious? I'm coming! I'm already running!" she said into the phone, running toward the emergency room.

"Sir, bring your robe and shoe covers. Don't forget your mask," she called after Miron as she ran away.

Miron approached the reception desk. A large, short woman sat in the window. A blonde woman of about fifty was furiously arguing with someone on the phone.

"Hello. Where can I find a robe and shoe covers?" Miron asked, trying to interject during a lull in her heated phone conversation.

"Who are you, sir?" she asked, looking condescendingly at the uninvited guest.

"I'm a doctor..." he began to explain, never finishing his explanation.

Anyone who ever knew Valentina will tell you with one voice: even Satan couldn't talk her down. And this time, after interrupting Miron, she was already giving him her answer.

"If you're a doctor, your lab coat's in the doctor's office. They'll hire young people," the woman replied rudely, frowning, and returning to her phone conversation.

Miron briefly considered explaining to her that he'd just come to apply for a job. But looking at Valentina, he realized that was pointless at the moment. Walking a short distance down the hall, he spotted the staff room. Approaching the door, he knocked. When silence answered, he decided to go inside. As expected, no one was there. Throwing on the nearest robe hanging by the door, he put on shoe covers and a mask. Then he walked out of the staff room. Young nurses ran toward him. Upon seeing Miron, they simultaneously blurted out, as if they'd been rehearsing all day:

"Two seriously ill. They need help urgently," he said, clapping Miron on the shoulder, as if urging him to follow.

Miron was momentarily at a loss. But he decided to follow the nurses. A minute later, they were at the operating room. Entering, he saw a pregnant woman and a young man lying on two separate tables. They were covered in blood.

"What do you know?" asked Myron.

"A twenty-three-year-old woman, eight months pregnant. Broken ribs, punctured right lung. A twenty-five-year-old man with a hematoma on the temple and a fractured left leg. The accident happened twenty minutes ago," the nurse replied, as if reading quickly.

"Doctor, who are we going to operate on first?" the second nurse asked, her voice filled with excitement.

"Personally, I don't want to explain to their child that the doctor decided to save just one of them. Both of them. Where's the anesthesiologist?" Myron answered calmly, disinfecting his hands.

Another nurse just entered the room. Myron nodded toward her, indicating that they should begin the operation.

It's impossible to describe what happened in the operating room. Miron, like a symphony orchestra conductor, controlled the scalpel, nurses, and patients. Having removed air and blood from the girl's lungs, he stopped the bleeding in the boy's artery, preventing irreversible consequences for their health and the health of the baby. When the crisis passed and Miron told the nurse to begin stitching, a commotion erupted at the door of the operating room. Taking off his gloves and walking

out the door, he immediately encountered Boris Semenovitch and Dmitry Pavlovitch. They were the same two doctors standing on the hospital steps. A few seconds later, the head nurse appeared in the hallway. The same Nadezhda Vasilyevna Nemtsova who had recently scolded him for his appearance.

"What's going on here?" Boris Semyonovich asked rudely.

"Who are you? And what are you doing here?" he added in an even rougher tone, looking at Myron.

"I'm calling the police," said the head nurse, taking her phone out of her pocket.

"Boris Semyonovich, Nadezhda Vasilyevna, wait a minute. If it weren't for the doctor, we would have had three fatalities," said the nurse, who had followed Miron out and witnessed the scene, rushing to the doctor's defense.

"What do you mean?" Dmitry Pavlovitch asked, taken aback.

"Thanks to the doctor, they're alive," the girl answered, pointing towards the operating room.

"But who are you anyway?" Nadezhda Vasilyevna asked, her expression as surprised as if she'd just seen Hippocrates in person.

"Maybe we should go to the staff room? I'll tell you everything there," Myron answered confidently and calmly.

Returning to the same doctor's office where he had taken his robe, but now accompanied by two doctors and nurses, Miron decided to introduce himself first.

— Miron Mikhailovich Maikov. General surgeon.

Then he began his story from the first steps of the hospital. He vividly described his journey to the head doctor, his search for a gown, and his fleeting encounter with the head nurse. He also described his decision to take responsibility, as there was no time to think.

"After which, almost before we even started storming the operating room, all of you showed up," Miron finished.

At that moment, a woman in a white coat entered the staff room. Her name tag indicated her title as chief physician. Galina Vladimirovna Gunko, fifty-one years old, was slightly above average height. She had fair hair and a short bob befitting her age. Her distinctive feature was heterochromia oculosa. One eye was brown, the other half green, half brown.

Walking down the hallway, she overheard Miron's monologue from behind the loosely closed door of the doctor's office. She then decided to listen to him outside the office door to hear the real, unvarnished truth.

"Hello," she greeted.

"Galina Vladimirovna! Hello," Nadezhda Vasilyevna greeted with a frightened look.

"Good morning," the other doctors and nurses greeted one after the other. They looked as if they were about to be executed.

"Hello," Myron greeted in a confident voice, looking at the woman who entered the office.

"Excuse me, what's your name?" the head doctor asked Miron.

"Myron," he answered.

"And your patronymic?" Galina Vladimirovna asked again.

"Miron Mikhailovich," he introduced himself again.

"Let's go to my office, Miron Mikhailovich. I'll deal with the rest later. Now, let's get to work," she said to the man, then glanced at everyone else present.

After an hour of conversation with the head doctor, Myron was leaving the hospital. Today he'd been promoted to surgeon. And who wouldn't have been, after such a masterful performance in the operating room? He was heading to the café, where he was already a little late. A new acquaintance was waiting for him.

Bank office. Legal office.

"Vera, it's time," Lena reminded the girl, pointing her finger at the dial of her watch.

"Oh, it's already ten to eleven," Vera said, jumping up from her chair.

Hurriedly getting ready, she scooped her keys and phone into her purse. Then, going to the mirror, she fixed her hair and touched up her lips. Today, she chose a less vibrant lipstick color. This way, she wanted to emphasize her self-confidence. She wanted her look to say, "I know my worth." Today, she had to be perfect.

"Girls, wish me luck," she rattled off, running out of the office.

"Good luck," the friends' voices came in unison from the office.

The bank building wasn't far from the café where she was supposed to meet Miron. About a ten-minute walk. If she walked briskly, she'd be just in time. And that's what Vera did. She disliked unpunctual people. And she certainly couldn't afford to be unpunctual. Almost all the way there, she took her phone out of her purse to check the time. All she had to do was cross the street at the crosswalk. And there she was, just in time. But fate had other plans. A car came around the corner, running a red light, as if it had appeared out of thin air. Due to the circumstances, the driver couldn't possibly see Vera, who was crossing the street at that moment at the crosswalk. Vera, in turn, standing in the middle of the roadway, saw Miron walking on the other side. Pausing briefly to wave, she heard the sharp screech of brakes. Turning around, she saw a black SUV struggling to stop. But it was too late. The driver tried to brake, but realizing the stopping distance was longer, he swerved. But even that didn't help. Impact. Vera lay unconscious on the asphalt.

### III

There was a commotion around the scene. Vera lay unconscious on the road. Her head had been bruised from the impact with the asphalt. Miron was the first to run to her. Then, other passersby began to approach. He checked her pulse and then confirmed that she was breathing.

"An ambulance. Call an ambulance!" someone's voice came from the side.

"They won't make it. She needs to be taken immediately," Miron said calmly, not taking his eyes off Vera.

At that moment, the driver ran out of the car. He fell to his knees, clutching his head. His forehead was covered in blood.

"I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to..." he wailed in panic, rocking back and forth.

Miron looked at him, then glanced at the SUV. He carefully lifted Vera from the asphalt and carried her to the car.

"Open the door," he said in a commanding tone, looking at the unfortunate driver.

"Yes, yes. Of course," he answered fearfully, running to open the door.

"Get in," Myron said in a serious voice, pointing to the back seat.

The driver sat down in the back row without question.

"Do you have any bandages?" Myron asked, looking at him.

"There was a first aid kit in the trunk. I'll look for it now," the driver replied, his voice trembling as he began frantically searching for it, leaning over the back of the rear seat into the trunk.

Seeing that he wouldn't get any bandages, Myron glanced around the car. A brand-new white shirt, still wrapped, lay on the front seat.

"Sit down already!" Myron said again in a commanding voice.

The man immediately stopped rummaging through the trunk and got in. Myron laid the girl on the back seat, her head on the driver's lap. Then he quickly jumped into the driver's seat and began opening a new shirt from the package lying nearby, then handed it to the driver.

"Press the wound," Myron said, turning the ignition key.

The driver silently complied with Myron's instructions. The engine's roar echoed throughout the street. Closing the car doors, Myron honked the horn to signal everyone to move out of the way. Then he abruptly turned the jeep around. He picked up speed and drove toward the hospital.

Ten minutes later, an old SUV pulled up in front of the emergency room. Myron quickly ran out. Opening the back door, he carefully lifted the girl out and carried her into the emergency room. To his right, slightly ahead, walked the man responsible for the accident. The hapless driver opened every door they came across. Nurses were already running toward them. These were the same women who had assisted Myron that morning.

"We need a gurney. And get the operating room ready!" Myron ordered, carefully transferring the girl onto the gurney that instantly appeared before him.

"Yes, of course," answered one of the nurses, turning away.

The second one took the gurney with the girl lying on it and, practically running, pushing it forward, headed towards the operating room.

Miron ran into the pre-operative block, where Dmitry Pavlovich was already, and a nurse helped him quickly change clothes, put on gloves and a mask.

"You again?" he blurted out, stunned by what he saw, upon seeing Myron.

"Traumatic brain injury. A twenty-five-year-old girl. Hit by a car. Ten minutes had passed since the accident. She never regained consciousness," Myron replied, his voice calm and clear, but faster than usual.

After these words, Dmitry Pavlovich, having completed all the procedures necessary to enter the sterile operating room, pushed open the door. Miron wanted to follow him, but Dmitry Pavlovich stopped him.

"Where are you going? Take a rest," he said, looking at Myron.

"I've performed operations like this before. I can handle it," Dmitry Pavlovich assured him, placing his hand on his shoulder before disappearing through the operating room door.

"Okay. If you need my help, I'll be waiting here," Myron replied to the departing surgeon, nodding toward the corridor.

A man sat in an iron chair, the kind usually found along the walls of hospital rooms. He had his head almost down to his knees, and to keep from falling forward, he held it with both hands, his elbows resting on his knees. Another nurse approached him. Looking at him, she gently touched his shoulder.

"You're the second victim in the accident, aren't you? Where did you run off to? I had to look for you. Come on, we need to examine your head," she said, leading him into the procedure room.

Miron didn't leave the operating room for a minute, expecting to be nearby if help was needed. Twenty minutes later, a driver approached him, his head bandaged, apparently having hit the windshield while braking.

"How is she? Do you know anything?" he asked fearfully, looking at Myron.

"The operation is still ongoing. No one has come out," he replied, looking up at the man.

They sat in silence for about two hours. Nurses and patients passed by. But they had no time for them. The hapless driver had already lost his freedom several times in his thoughts. And then, his life in prison. He reproached himself for his carelessness behind the wheel. He was deeply worried about the girl's health, but thoughts of his own fate and the fate of his family also haunted his mind. Miron appeared calm. However, if you looked closely, you could see that he was equally worried about Vera's life and health.

The silence was broken by Dmitry Pavlovich emerging from the operating room.

"Miron, if I'm not mistaken," he addressed the man, approaching him.

"Yes. How is she? Is she alright?" he asked, rising from his chair as soon as he saw Dmitry Pavlovich.

"She's fine. You brought her here just in time. The surgery was a success. She'll be in intensive care today for observation. Then we'll transfer her to a regular ward," Dmitry Pavlovich replied, looking at Miron.

"Do you mind if I address you informally?" he asked, hoping for an affirmative answer.

"Everything's fine. The main thing is that her health is not in any danger," Myron replied with a tired smile.

"Thank you," added Miron, extending his hand to Dmitry Pavlovich.

"Thank you very much. You saved four people in one morning. I've never seen anything like that before. You're a real superhero," Dmitry Pavlovich replied with respect in his voice.

The man, his head bandaged, stood nearby the entire time and heard the doctors' words. And when it became clear the girl was alive and would be fine, he raised his hands above his head and began wailing:

"Thank God, thank God..." the driver repeated, as if he were in some kind of trance.

Police officers appeared in the hallway. As per protocol, the nurse on duty had summoned them. After looking at the men, they approached.

"Who's at fault for the accident?" the lieutenant asked in a serious voice.

"Me," the driver answered with regret in his voice.

"Come with me," said the lieutenant, pointing towards the exit.

"Did you bring the victim?" he added, looking at Miron.

"Yes, I am," Myron answered calmly, looking at the lieutenant.

"I'll need to ask you a few questions as well," said the lieutenant, taking the driver's arm.

"Of course," Myron answered, watching as the driver was taken away.

"Thank you again," Miron repeated, extending his hand to Dmitry Pavlovich in farewell.

"Doctor, your testimony will also be needed. You will be contacted," the lieutenant added as he left.

"As you say," he replied, looking at the men leaving.

Forty minutes later, they testified about what happened. The man at fault for the accident fully admitted his guilt, without the slightest attempt to conceal details or soften the investigator's feelings. He told everything as it happened. He explained how he failed to notice the red light and how he was speeding. He also explained where he was rushing to. It turned out his wife was giving birth at the hospital on the other side of town. That's why he had exceeded the speed limit. Miron recounted everything he saw and how he had to act under the circumstances. After several hours of questioning, everyone was released.

"Thank you for everything," the man said, grabbing Myron's hand with both hands, trying to shake it in that way.

"Go to your wife. Everything will be fine," Myron replied, extending his hand.

"Do you really think so? Will everything be okay?" the man asked, letting go of Miron's hand, hope in his voice.

"I really didn't mean to. The devil made me overstep. Until today, I've never done so," the man added, trying to justify what had happened to Miron.

"I'm very sorry," he continued with emotion.

"Go see your wife. She really needs your support right now," Miron interrupted his monologue.

"Thank you, thank you," the man added hastily but gratefully. Then he ran toward the road to hail a taxi.

After the incident, Miron spent several hours walking around the city, reflecting on and analyzing the reactions, behavior, and relationships of the people he'd encountered that day. Lost in thought, he approached the building where his apartment was located. Upon reaching his floor, he encountered a neighbor with her child, whom he'd helped carry her bike down the street the previous day.

"Hello," Miron greeted, coming closer to the girl.

"Good evening," the girl greeted back, a little embarrassed.

"Hello," Myron said, leaning toward the child. He made it clear that he considered him an equal, that he was an adult just like him, and that it didn't matter that he was still a boy.

In response, the boy smiled and clapped the outstretched hand. Then they went to their separate apartments. Closing the door, Myron took off his shoes and coat. Just as he was about to enter the room, the doorbell rang. Opening the door, he saw the same girl from next door. Smiling awkwardly, she extended her hand to him.

"Since we're neighbors, maybe we should finally get to know each other. My name is Lara," she introduced herself, extending her hand to Miron.

"Sorry, it's high time I introduced myself. Myron," he said, shaking the girl's hand.

"Would you like to have dinner with me?" the girl asked, blushing slightly.

"Don't get me wrong, this isn't a date. I just want to thank you for your help," she added, looking even more embarrassed by her own words.

"Dinner. That would be great," Myron replied, smiling at the girl.

"Then I invite you to our place. 'To our place,' meaning to Max and me, the girl continued to justify herself.

"We'll be expecting you at our place in twenty minutes," she added, after which she ran back into her apartment.

"I'll be there on time," Miron replied after Lara, who was running away.

Having received an invitation to dinner, he decided it wouldn't be right to go empty-handed. So he went to the nearest store. There he bought a cake and a toy for Max. Twenty minutes later, he stood at Lara's door. He had just rang the doorbell when the door opened. Lara seemed to be standing next to him, waiting for him to arrive. She was still wearing her apron and holding a towel. It was clear she had only just finished setting the table.

"Come in," she invited, trying to brush a lock of hair from her face.

"This is for you," said Miron, handing the cake to the girl.

"Thank you. You shouldn't have spent so much money. I feel so bad," Lara replied, blushing again.

"And this is for you," he handed the boy a model of a supercar, he added to his son, who appeared from behind the girl's back.

"Thank you," the baby replied, not taking his eyes off the gift.

"You go into the kitchen, and I'll change and come over," the girl said, pointing towards the kitchen.

Miron walked into the kitchen, where a freshly set table awaited him. It was completely covered with food.

"This is a very cozy apartment," he thought.

The apartment was truly cozy. Nothing fancy, but everything was clean and tidy. The well-chosen furniture, combined with the warm color scheme of the walls and a few photographs interspersed with a few paintings, created that cozy atmosphere.

Five minutes later, Lara entered the kitchen. Admittedly, she looked good. A touch of eyeshadow accentuated her deep blue eyes. Soft pink lipstick and neatly combed hair perfectly accentuated her pretty face. She was wearing a red dress with white polka dots and a small white collar. She was holding Max in her arms.

"You look wonderful," said Myron, looking at the apartment's owner who had just entered.

"Thank you," Lara said, smiling in response.

The girl sat the child down on a chair and pulled him closer to the table, then sat down next to him. Afterward, Miron took the empty seat. They chatted all evening on a variety of topics. Miron explained that he'd recently moved to the city and was getting ready to settle in. He also mentioned that he'd started working as a surgeon today and that tomorrow would be his first day. He didn't mention the heroic details of his employment, as he was modest. He spent most of the evening listening attentively to Lara, who recounted her life story in detail. She explained that she'd moved into this apartment just a month ago. She explained that Max was all she had. She explained the death of her parents and that she was an orphan. She told him about her husband's accident. About how his parents refused to see her with Max after his death. She also told him that she'd taken an academic leave of absence, having failed to graduate from the Institute of Culture, and was now working as a cosmetologist to somehow keep afloat. The child fell asleep an hour later. Tired from the adults' conversation, he fell asleep in his mother's arms. Lara carried the baby into the room, and they talked until late into the night. At the end of the evening, Myron thanked Lara for the delicious dinner and such a heartfelt conversation. Afterward, she walked him to the door. There, Myron thanked Lara again and returned to his room.

Sleep overtook him in an instant.

## IV

Miron's morning began at half past five. Waking before his alarm, he went to the bathroom first thing for a refreshing shower. Afterward, he decided to change. Today, he chose brown trousers and a white shirt. He also picked up a new mechanical watch, bought on his first day in the city. After changing, he went into the kitchen to put on the kettle. His attention was drawn to the flame of the gas stove, dancing with a blue flame. While the kettle was boiling, he glanced at the balcony. He wondered if he might meet Uncle Kolya there again today. He was right—in exactly the same spot as yesterday, a lonely, gray-haired old man was smoking on the balcony.

"Good morning, Uncle Kol," Miron greeted the old man as he stepped out onto the balcony.

"Hello, Myron," the old man answered with a smile, a little surprised by his new neighbor.

"Would you like some coffee?" asked Miron, smiling at Uncle Kolya.

"Why not? It's possible," he replied, smiling back at Myron.

"Just a moment, I'll get everything organized," he replied, heading back to the apartment.

Having brewed two cups of coffee, one for Uncle Kolya and one for himself, he returned to the balcony. Five minutes later, they were savoring the hot coffee, looking out over the morning city streets.

"I'm not offering you any tobacco," Uncle Kolya said, smiling at Miron. This time the old man opened the antique silver cigarette case.

"Last time was enough for me," Myron answered with a laugh, taking another sip of coffee.

Uncle Kolya lit a match and then lit a cigarette.

"Have you settled in yet?" the old man asked, reaching for a mug of coffee.

"I'm getting settled in little by little," Miron answered, still looking ahead at the empty streets of the city.

"If you need any help, don't hesitate, call the old man," Uncle Kolya offered his help.

"Thank you," Myron replied, looking at the old man with gratitude.

"Our life is like a thread. A man lived, and now he's gone. He went to a better place. I forgave, did he?" the old man said unexpectedly.

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