Soviética

Part 1. Dublin
...How often we are being told that the Soviet man is nothing but utopia, that he never existed, doesn't exist, will never exist and cannot exist! Read the book of a modern author who spent many years in “flourishing” Europe, and you will see that it’s not truth. The Soviet man is alive and well today! He doesn’t measure life by money and personal success. He is compassionate; he lives in work and struggle...

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Irina Malenko (January 2011)
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Preface to the English language edition

"Hello!
This is the story about my life,
And it goes like this...

(Song of Bobby Farrell "Hoppa Hoppa")

Why did I write this book? Because over the last twenty years I became sick and tired of listening to endless incredible lies about what it was actually like living in the USSR. These lies have become so pervasive today, that there is no escape from them anywhere: from movies and books to newspapers and school textbooks. And, it is not simply a case of a one-sided view of Soviet reality. If that was the case, it would have been half the trouble. But the deeper we go into the forest, the more anti-Soviet "wood" is being offered us: we are being showered with more and more of what can only be classified as wholly untrue. Examples of this I cite on many occasions in my book.

For 20 years now I've read, watched and listened to all this - and I do not recognise my native country in what I read, saw and heard. I do not recognise it at all. Gradually, I became angry. Because these lies are also about my parents, about my grandparents. Lying about our lives to our children and grandchildren, so that they would not know what it was really like to be a Soviet citizen. Finally, I became so tired of these shameless and endless lies that I felt what Tolstoy must have felt: "I can no longer be silent"!

I see the world through the eyes of a Soviet person. Because I am a Soviet person. And I'm proud of it. I was happy in the USSR, and I do not make apologies for openly talking about it. I was not part of "the elite" and I was not an "exception". Life as I describe it in my book was lived by most of my generation. But abroad, and in my own country after the comprador bourgeoisie came to power, it was decided to publicize the view of Soviet life as described by only an extremely small number, a marginal minority: of the so-called "dissidents", whose "dissent" is based primarily in their personal egoism, in their opposition to the majority of the people, in their belief in their own "exclusiveness", in the primacy in their worldview of their personal "human rights" over the basic economic, social, and political rights of the majority of the nation and in their contempt for others and for their own country. In Soviet times, these people were aptly called "renegades."

I am writing on behalf of the "silent majority" of our people, because I hope that they will recognise themselves in my characters, and in description of their lives. And then they will finally identify themselves as a majority (which they are!) and will no longer remain silent. They will
no longer tolerate the endless slander, spitting and jeering of those renegades who now call themselves "reformers" and "innovators".

More than 20 years of my life in exile also give me the right to compare in full the so-called "free" world and our Soviet reality. And this comparison isn't favourable to the former. Of course, this is not what some would like to hear. The West expects us to be in seventh heaven, having landed among the "rivers of milk and honey". Few people are actually interested in how we feel here, what we think about the system and how we got here in the first place.

If I were asked to describe capitalism in one word, I would probably choose the word "bestiality". This fully applies to post-Soviet Russia and its spiritual mentor - the so-called "developed" countries.

If I were asked to describe socialism in one word, I would choose the word "inspired". That is what we experienced during the Soviet era: if not every day, then at least very often.

Letters from Russian readers that I get in large quantities make me feel very happy. They confirm that I touched a live nerve in people, that my book will help them to understand what happened to us and to come back to their true selves.

"... Here, too, if you look at the comments on my articles, for the USSR and against the USSR, you will notice something remarkable. You know what is very interesting? Those who are for the USSR, recall free education, advanced science, sports, free medical care, housing, etc. And those who are against it, you know what their first and main argument is? It's the "sausage". All they talk about is the lack of sausage, of foreign brand "stuff" (namely "stuff", not things, for things we had) and queues. One of them remembered how he got imported chewing gum and he chewed it again and again (keeping it in the fridge between chewing). It's disgusting when the human brain only thinks in terms of sausage" - wrote my reader Rita Shevchenko. Those left-wing activists who thoughtlessly brush aside our Soviet experience, labelling it "totalitarianism", can be immediately written off the revolutionary accounts: they won't produce anything except a lot of noise. I am deeply convinced that without studying all the facets of our Soviet experience, without creative application of this experience in the variety of future practices, it will remain impossible to construct any kind of "another world".

"Sovietica" is a trilogy; you are holding in your hands its part 1. Work on translation of the parts 2 & 3 is being completed at the moment. These parts are dedicated to struggle for justice in various parts of the modern world.

I invite all those who do not live and think only in terms of sausages to read my book. Those who do care how people live around them. Who think about the way the system works. About what can be learned from historical experience of "another world", which, as we, the Soviet people, know, is not just theoretically possible, but really existed and continues to exist on our planet today.
Prologue.

Refugee of perestroika

«I will look around the world for a place where there are no injured feelings».
(A. Griboedov, «Woe from wit»)

... Speckles of the morning sun are pushing through the shutters and curtains. On the grass yard in front of our house these speckles are jumping all over the first dandelions, bouncing from their golden plates. The grass is bright green. There is a strong smell of soil just recently dried after the spring floods and of the apple tree blossoms. All around our little house it is raging with blossoms: of apple trees, pear trees, cherry trees, lilacs...

The most wonderful mornings are in the beginning of the summer when you don't have to go to school anymore. When you wake up slowly and can allow yourself to lie in bed and watch those sun speckles on the curtains, foretasting a long, seemingly endless day, hot and full of interesting events. But, unfortunately, you'll have to wait another few weeks for this. And in June there will be no apple and lilac blossoms anymore, the nightingales will stop singing and the dust will appear on the roads...

I always have a strange, wrenching feeling in May: it is so beautiful around that my heart begins to ache. On such days you really believe in miracles (in a very different way than on New Year's Eve!) - and you feel that it is not far away. It is such a waste to spend these marvellous days in fear of the final tests of the school year or preparing for exams, but there is nothing you can do about that... «A little bit more, just a little, the last battle is the most difficult one...»

May begins with May Day. On the eve of May Day they put new asphalt everywhere, filling up pot-holes in the roads, and it smells like hot tar. People also put lime on the tree trunks on the streets, and the very sight of it makes your soul feel like celebrating.

For some reason on the First of May it is usually good weather, but the next day is always rainy and cold. May Day marks a sharp border between not yet real spring as in April (when the paths are dry one day, so that you can almost wear your summer shoes, and the next day when they again become impassable mire, and you have to get out your demi-
season boots again that you were already so fed up wearing) and the time when «the green noise walks and buzzes». It seems like in just one day the young leaves come out (how nice they smell!), along with the dandelions on the sides of the roads and, if you’re lucky, you will be able to go to the parade wearing just a jumper, with no raincoat.

The parade is a big event, full of joy - not just for the children, but for the adults as well. Whole families go there dressed up in their best clothes. I didn’t always take part in the October Revolution parade, because of the weather, but if I stayed home there was no bigger pleasure for me than to watch the celebrations and parade on TV! But I have never missed one single May Day demonstration. From early morning on, cheerful music, full of the joy of life, played through loud speakers in the streets. The streets were swept clean, the trees were whitewashed, and my grandfather and all our neighbours would hang red flags from our houses early in the morning. Nobody forced us to do that - even such a thought would make us laugh. Public transport in town didn’t run in the morning, and people walked from all directions to their gathering places, accompanied by the sound of cheerful and lively music.

We, the children, would impatiently wait for when the adults would blow up holiday balloons for us that we would tie to the spring tree branches on which new leaves had just opened.

The balloons and lemonade were both strongly associated with May Day and October Revolution day, just as the New Year tree and mandarins were associated with New Year, the sweet cherries and the strawberries with June and the watermelons with August. And it was so great!

Those, who in January gobble up those beautiful plastic-tasting strawberries from a Dutch greenhouse or grapes brought from another hemisphere - in December, those who drink Coca Cola by the litre every day and get their balloons with their «Happy Meals» at McDonald’s, will never understand that. We children of the Soviet times had what we needed to look forward to and what was needed to feel happy about when the time was right.

It was not about things, you see: things didn’t have such an absolute and all-absorbing, all-consuming value for us. If somebody had a bicycle and somebody else didn’t, we would all take turns riding it in the street. If one person was going to the theatre and somebody else wasn’t, you’d just buy an extra ticket and offer him or her to come with you. We wanted to share our joy - not to monopolise it, arrogantly boast about it and push it under other people’s noses to make them jealous.

Our parents could well afford to buy us plenty of lemonade and balloons at any time, but nobody did that, because it was meant for celebrations. Perhaps, the generation that has «chosen Pepsi» won’t be able to understand this. We were able to do what they are not able to: both wait and enjoy things fully!

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2 Fragment from the poem by Russian poet N. Nekrasov "Green Noise" (1863).
3 Reference to the early 1990-s slogan "Our generation chooses Pepsi!" promoted in the former Soviet Union to advertise Coca Cola products as an alternative to Soviet values.
We were able to enjoy the waiting. The commercial «I want it all and I want it now» was not just completely alien to us, as something extraterrestrial. It was repulsive to us, it brought strong associations with the Bad Boy sitting on a barrel with jam from Arkady Gaidar’s book «Malchish Kibalchish»: «Wait till New Year’s Eve comes - and there will be the Christmas tree (not a month in advance and thrown away the very day after the holiday) and they will show on TV «Melodies and Rhythms of Foreign Pop Music». «Wait till summer comes - and we’ll have our own apples in the garden» (fresh and organic!). «Wait till October comes, we’ll start stoking the stove and baking potatoes in it» (not in the microwave any time of the year where, by the way, it just doesn't taste like it should!) «Wait till March comes, the snow will begin to melt, and you can play with your paper boats in the streams» (not in a bath or a pool the whole year around). Do you understand what I am talking about? Or maybe you already don't understand it either?

But let’s go back to our May First. The brass bands would play in the streets. People greeted their acquaintances cheerfully on the way to the gathering place of their column, congratulating them on the big day. Then we waited impatiently until we could finally begin to walk in the procession. If we, the children, would get tired, the adults would put us on the back of the huge trolleys with the portraits of Politburo members. On the way we looked with great interest at the holiday posters and read what was written on the banners. People who had only recently moved to the city from villages would come to the parade with their own accordions and dance dashingly and sing chastushkas. Naturally, nobody forced them to do this either. The feeling of celebration was sincere and universal. Just as October Revolution day (my grandfather called it «Oktyabrskaia»), this was our holiday - not Yeltsin's «day of independence». It wasn't just «the day of spring and labour» either. We knew very well what international solidarity of the working people was!

The closer we approached the central platform next to the monument of Lenin, the louder the music and the holiday's slogans would get. Those slogans were shouted by solemn voices through loudspeakers. This solemnity was passed onto us. Our «hurray!» expressed our joy - the joy of life, joy springing from this beautiful warm day, from the approaching summer, from knowing that we are all here together! And when finally we heard from the loudspeakers «Long live the workers of (this or that) factory», - the above-named workers who were passing the tribune would answer with such a loud «hurray!» that the ground trembled from this sound...

5 A type of traditional short Russian folk poem parallels the poetic genre of limericks in British culture. Chastushkas are often put to music.
6 In the 1990-s Russian government felt unable to cancel a Soviet holiday as it would be an extremely unpopular step, however managed to change the name of it from the 1 May International Workers Solidarity Day to the vague "Day of Spring and Labour".
After the parade people dispersed slowly back home. The transport still was not running, and we walked unhurriedly directly on the rails.

At home my granny had pastry and other tasty food prepared from the previous evening. Granddad was getting ready to drink his little glass of vodka together with Uncle Tolik. (Twice a year, on May 1st and on November 7th, my granddad's niece would always visit us with her husband and son. He was 8 years older than me by and was my big idol and at that time an example for me to follow. It was flattering for me that he always spoke and played with me on an equal basis, not as with a silly young child).

We were always eager to see them! My granddad was a war veteran, but he wasn't a Communist, had never been a Communist and was sufficiently cynical about life. Yet, he was the one who always made communist holiday toasts and was the first to shout «hurray»! We echoed him cheerfully.

...And then... then there were the fireworks in the evening! The sky was lit up with multi-coloured fires, and all of us, from the youngest to the oldest, poured out onto the street to watch them. There were cries of «hurray!» with each new volley - also completely sincere.

Those who do not understand this simply do not have any understanding of what it is to enjoy life, and «what this joy can be eaten with...» And please do not come up with: «You were happy with this because you didn't know anything else»!

What is it that we did not know that is worth knowing? Strip bars, bordellos, narcotics? Periodicals such as «Playboy»? Stock exchange speculation? «One-armed bandits»? Security guards in each store and each school? Such words as «racket» or «gang-war»? The way shots and explosions sound in real life? Some 64 positions from the «Kama Sutra»? Or the feeling of being unemployed? Or what homeless people - and street children! - look like? Or how one can die only because one doesn't have enough money to pay for an operation? Or perhaps holidays in the Maldives - while your former neighbour is digging for food in rubbish bins? Or what the job description for sales manager of Herbalife is? Or of some other Western junk? Oh yeah, that is such great happiness, isn't it?!

...After the 1st of May the 9th of May came very quickly. It was my granddad's day. He never told us much about the war. Only when he was drinking on May 9th, he would say that god forbid for us to find out what kind of a meat grinder it is...

«It was a meat grinder. The human being is the most vicious animal on Earth...» Granddad miraculously survived combat in the environs of Leningrad. He was badly wounded in the leg, and they carried him off the battlefield. Splinters remained in his leg for the rest of his life. Granddad said that in bad weather he felt the splinters in his leg move, and I looked at his foot, attempting to imagine this picture to myself. My imagination sketched something gray, alive - and evil.

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7 Russian Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945 is celebrated on the 9 May.
We (my granddad included) did not feel any personal hatred towards Germans as such. A German and a «Fritz» (a nickname for the Nazis): these were two completely different things. True, for many years I still involuntarily shivered at the sound of the German language: it was automatically associated with cries of «Halt!», «Hende hoch», «Russische schwein» and the sound of machine guns. But today I have exactly the same association with the sound of American English, with its loathsome «R» that sounds like the croaking of a frog. And any negative feelings towards the German language are completely gone. There is no time for them: today mankind has another major enemy...

...They began to show films about the war on TV several days before Victory Day. When I was five, the film «The Dawns Here Are Quiet...» came out.9

I remember well how this film shocked me when we watched it for the first time. True, back then I did not cry after it: it is nowadays that I cry my heart out each time I see this film. I cry both over the fates of the girls antiaircraft gunners and over the fate of my country... But back then I simply woke up the next morning and built in our backyard, under the rowan tree, a memorial in honour of Rita, Zhenya, Lisa, Sonia and Galya. Complete with a wreath-laying ceremony. Then I would go to my granddad and say: «Granddad, buy me a machine gun, please!»

My granddad was not surprised, but they were surprised in the toy store where we came - a small, shoebox-like building next to the drugstore, where they sold toys and office supplies: «A toy machine gun? For a girl?»

But they did not argue. And already that afternoon I and my best friend Marussia, who had also apparently seen the film, along with her brother Andryushka played war in the thick brushwood of burdocks behind their vegetable plot. The burdocks were well above our heads. In their shadow it was almost dark even during the sunniest summer day, and we imagined ourselves to be partisans in the forest. We laid out our paths there, arranged our «dugout». My new machine gun rattled exactly like a real one. Marussia was the sprightly Zhenka Komelkova, and one could hear from the burdocks, along with the crack of the gun, her loud singing of «He said to me: 'Please be mine!'» - I was the lyrical Lisa Brichkina, but I did not drown in the swamp as she did: I managed to bring help.

Probably from that very time I never wanted to be a weak romantic heroine, rescued by a noble hero: I myself wanted to rescue others and be a hero!

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8 "Stop!", "Hands up", "Russian swine" (Germ.)
9 "The Dawns Here Are Quiet..." - 1972 Soviet film directed by S. Rostotsky. Nominated for an Oscar in 1973. The film is set in Karelia forests near Finland in 1941. Senior Sergeant Vaskov is stationed with a group of young female anti-craft gunners near the front line. Vaskov and five of the women attempt to stop sixteen German paratroopers appearing in the forest nearby. Outgunned and outnumbered Soviets decide to hold the Germans for as long as possible with tragic consequences.
Irina Malenko

In my dreams I was the courageous captain of a spaceship and saved the members of my crew from different dangers. The crew had as other members both real people whom I liked and invented heroes.

My crew included Janosik, Zorro and the Black Tulip, and also the courageous Latvians, who were fighting for their independence from the Swedes (in the Latvian film «Servants of the Devil») and Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya.

I imagined myself to be Zorro's companion-in-arms full-fledged, not like Hortensia from the French film with Alain Delon. When one of my mother's colleagues tried to teach me an old everyday Jewish proverb that «when they give you something - take it, and when they beat you - run away»! I was really angered and tried to convince this man, whose hair had already turned grey from age, that when they beat you, you should not run away, but beat them back! That's what my own granddad was like: don't run away from your enemies, but beat them back in retaliation! He would not run even if there were no chance of victory whatever. Our women dream about a man like him nowadays: «One that would not run away»...

... At 6 pm on May 9th there was always a minute of silence, and this solemn silence really grabbed your heart.

At 9 pm there were fireworks again.... After the fireworks I climbed up to the roof of our house and sat there squatted, for a long time, looking into the infinite, endless expanse of the blossoming gardens.

An enormous spider, that spun a web on the rain pipe of our house, was my only companion on the roof. It was so enormous that I called it «spider-weaver-troglydote» as in the famous book of Kir Bulychev about Alisa. The spider hung silently in his web looking at me. And even though I am usually horribly afraid of spiders, for some reason I was not even a little bit afraid of this one. Probably because it never attempted to crawl up to me. It sat by itself in its web and was occupied with its own business.

As soon as twilight descended, nightingales and frogs began their evening concert. There were many more frogs than nightingales, and they shamelessly drowned out the latter. But there was something especially, elusively attractive in that unlikely choir.

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10 Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya (1924-1941) was a Soviet partisan and a Hero of the Soviet Union. Kosmodemyanskaya was captured, tortured by the Germans and hanged. She is one of the most revered martyrs of the Soviet Union and today's Russia.

11 Alain Delon (b. 1935) - famous French actor. He played Zorro in the 1975 Italian version of "Zorro". The film was very popular in the Soviet Union. Hortensia in the film is rescued by Zorro, but doesn't stay and fight alongside him.

12 The line from the late 1990-s Russian pop song about then Russian President V. Putin. The song content was quite flattering to the president.

13 Kir Bulychev (1934-2003) was a Soviet and Russian scientific fiction writer and historian. A number of his novels were made into films, with Guest from the Future, based on Bulychev's novel One Hundred Years Ahead, the most widely known about a girl Alice living in the future.
Irina Malenko

In the space under the roof granddad's sleepy pigeons cooed calmly.

They were his love and pride. I knew all their races (for some reason it always embarrassed my mom if I mentioned this knowledge at school). My favourite ones were those that my granddad called «lenistyi»: the white ones with a brown tail and a little brown «hat» on their heads.

My favourite was one pigeon I called Wood Grouse. He got this name because he had large tumours on both of his eyes due to age that made him look like a wood grouse.

Wood Grouse was not only a veteran among the pigeons, he was also unusually clever: when he couldn't fly well, he was caught and carried off by another pigeon fancier. But within a week Wood Grouse came running back home to us up the fences! The pigeon fancier ran cursing after Wood Grouse along the fences, but there was nothing he could do. When Wood Grouse died, I buried him in the very same spot where I once erected my memorial to the girls from «The Dawns Here Are Quiet...», and I made an epitaph for him with the words «Wood Grouse. 1960-1977»...

Pigeon thefts were the only sort of crimes which took place from time to time in our neighbourhood, and even they had begun to decline: in my time, it only happened once to us, and that attempt was unsuccessful.

One night when I went out onto the inner porch «for the night matters», I saw a thin hand reaching through the garret window. I returned to the house very quietly and woke granddad up, but instead of grabbing the thief by the hand (it would have been impossible for him to escape, he would be caught on the roof with his hand inside the house!), granddad yelled at him loudly: «What the hell are you doing, you little sugar?!»

The intruder ran away... «Sugar» and «flip» were the strongest words in my granddad's vocabulary. Grandmother never cursed at all; even instead of «devil» she would just say «the black word».

Up to 15 years of age not only had I never heard obscene language, I did not even know that such words existed, much less what they meant. From my desk mate at school I heard the word «flip» - completely innocent, it seemed to me. But my mum explained that it was better not to use this word too often. It didn't make any sense to me. «Why?» - I was puzzled.

«Because when people use this word, they are thinking of another word, a very bad one». Naturally, I wanted to learn what the word was. Mum brushed me off for a long time, but finally said that word to me - whispering in my ear. It meant nothing at all to me; I had never heard this word before. «What does it mean?» - I asked innocently. Mum turned red and tried to explain, but I understood very little. After that incident I forgot about that word completely. I didn't have any desire to use it.

In the more than 20 years that I lived in the Soviet Union, in our city with a population of half a million there were only two murders. A

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14 Pigeon race (rus.)
murder was something completely exceptional, extraordinary. Something from the movies. Something almost as extraterrestrial as unemployment, homelessness and hunger.

All these things existed in other places, on another planet that we could only see on TV programs. Nobody had any firearms in their hands, and the very thought of this seemed completely strange to us.

In the first murder case I heard of in our town, a mentally ill mother of one of Marussia's classmates, Olya, killed her daughter. I was so shaken up by this, although I never knew the girl, that I dedicated a poem to her.

In the second case somebody stabbed a man behind the railway line near our house (our house was the last one, right next to the railroad). It was in the winter, and the murder victim was a married man who was meeting his mistress in the forest. Apparently he was stabbed by someone in her family (maybe her husband?), because the murderer did not touch the woman. He only said to her before running away: «Don't yell, you fool!»

I remember that when I heard about it at home I climbed under the table from fear, while the adults ran out into the street. They lay the injured man (he was still alive) on the snow under the light of a street lamp, and our men ran after the killer: yes, such were the times then - people did not remain aloof! But he escaped across the icy river to the other shore.

But nowadays... Do I have to tell you about it?! My classmate Anton, who after medical school worked in the morgue, could not take it anymore: «Each night they bring us seven to ten corpses, and all of them are young people!» He finally reverted to religion and buried himself somewhere in a mud hut, away from the world. Well, what a life we have now...

... When I was six, mum brought me to Moscow; she managed to get tickets for the American ice show «Holiday on Ice». We returned home after that show with the night stop train.

The carriages were empty; I slept in my mum's lap almost the whole way. Then we walked home across the city at 4 A.M.! The summer night was marvellous - warm and quiet. It was so fantastic, and nobody was afraid of anything or anyone. Sometimes we came across occasional passers-by, courting couples or workers returning from the night shift, and no one had the idea of attacking someone for some infamous purpose. Only now those «liberated» democratic apes really do not understand: how could one miss such a chance and not rape or rob a woman with a child, if they happened to be in your way alone in the evening? Why such a change? As one film critic said, completely seriously, «a transition took place in our society, from the Soviet mentality to the norm»!

Oh God, why can't I fall asleep yet? Why is all this filth coming into my head? I have to think about something pleasant.... About May 9th, the Victory Day, the nightingales.... About my evening sitting on the roof...

15 Author refers to "post-perestroika" years straight after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
and how it is gradually getting cooler at twilight... about the first mosquitoes... no, it is better not to think about mosquitoes! About the house? Yes, our house! A small, wooden house, just one room and a small kitchen, but it was so cosy, so much loved. In the entrance hall it is cool in the summer; the mice sometimes rustle in the store-room. In summer granny cooks there on the kerosene stove, and in winter she cooks in the kitchen, on the big, warm, real Russian stove.... How tasty were the baked potatoes she made in it, with a bit of smoky aftertaste of ashes! It was so nice to warm your back on granny's stove bench in winter.

It is the only place on the planet which I still consider my real home. When I was young I shied away from the words «love for ones native land» and «patriotism».

I thought that this was just an official show-off. What a fool I was then! When I left, our house came to me in my dreams for several years in a row, almost each night. These were agonizing dreams. One of them especially came to me frequently: how I was changed into a leaf of paper (don’t ask me how: it was a dream!) in order to get home, at least in an envelope, together with the letter... I would wake up crying, while nobody saw me...

I would turn over on my other side, shut my eyes and attempt to visualize it. On my street they called me Corner Zhenya - because our house was at the corner of the street. Two windows on the main street and three on the court, a shed, a garden with apple trees and pear trees, two apple trees in front of the house and a vegetable-plot next to it... I remember each leaf of sorrel from this vegetable-plot by its taste. I remember the resinous smell of the swings, which granddad built for me from railroad sleepers. I remember their shrill squeak, by their sound my grandmother could tell that I was in the vegetable plot (the rope was attached to the rusted metallic «shoeings» that were suspended from an iron pipe instead of the cross-beam). I remember each little dent on the wooden seat of my swings; I took it into the house from the vegetable plot in the evening, so that it wouldn't get soaked by the rain or the dew.

I remember how I swung almost as high as the cross-beam and how I jumped from the highest point, flying through the air, across the vegetable plot, landing on the potato beds.

I remember how to braid diadems from dandelions. How they soil your clothes with their white juice, for which grandmother would reprove you - because it is virtually impossible to wash it off. And how to correctly turn a leaf of burdock around the stem of nettle in order not to burn your hand when you take part in a stinging nettle battle. The nettle was used in our war games, when we were heading for a bayonet assault... I remember how on a hot day mom collected Colorado beetles on the vegetable plot in a jar - I even remember when they appeared in our country for the first time. I remember the little oak tree that I planted at the far end of the vegetable plot, when I was a first-grader. I planted it from an acorn that I found in the park, when we were there on a class excursion...

Behind the vegetable plot there was a ditch where the water bubbled in spring, and behind it there was a big mound, and on the mound
there was a railroad. In my childhood I was terribly afraid of the whistles of steam locomotives; I don’t know why. Once I went out for a walk in winter, and a locomotive passing along the line suddenly began to whistle! I howled and, without looking in front of me, I dived head first into a pile of snow... When my relatives came out in response to my cry, they could only see the soles of my woolen boots sticking out from the snow pile! Little Tamara (may she rest in peace!) even made up this verse for me – «Train driver, don’t whistle, don’t wake our Zhenya up!» and I liked that very much...

But I have been afraid of trains my entire life - because I could see how enormous they are, if you stand next to them. The wheels alone were taller than you! B-r-r-r-r...

When you live next to a railroad, you get accustomed to the noise. You even sleep through it without noticing it. In 1976, when there was a devastating earthquake in Romania, its echoes reached us, but in our house we didn’t even notice it: everything in our house shook regularly with quite the same force!

Once a girlfriend persuaded me to go sit on the railway line: because allegedly a gipsy camp had arrived to park on the other side of it, and we wanted to see it. I was five, she was four, and we were not afraid of trains then. I was certain that if a train came, we would have plenty of time to see it and get off the rails.

We squatted on the rails and tried to see the camp behind the trees. Just then my mom was coming home from work and she saw us from the hill across the street («the mountain» we called it). She says she herself doesn’t remember how she ran to us from so far away! There was no train coming, but still, this was the only time in my life when she slapped me. I was very offended: she actually thought that I would not see the train? But never in my life did I go near the railway line again without an adult.

Behind the railway was a dump and a forest, not an ordinary Russian forest with birch trees and oaks, but an artificially planted one, from Khrushchev’s time (Nikita Sergeyevich wanted to discourage people from arbitrarily planting potatoes for themselves on the river shores, and between the railway and the river seedlings of a horrible tree were planted: an American maple, which multiplies rapidly as a jungle).

Once in the past I used to walk there with granddad, then I stopped going there, but he still went: for firewood. You could buy firewood, of course, no problem. But this was ridding the forest of that nasty tree as well! Behind the artificial forest there was our river - a slow, medium-wide, calm river, which was clean a long time ago, even before my generation.

But in my time already only the most desperate ones would swim in it! In spring it flooded strongly, and we (only with an adult!) would walk to the rail line to throw stones into the melting snow. Once, when I was about three, the flood was so high that our house was knee-deep in water. We all left to spend the night with Little Tamara, and I saw the whole thing as one big adventure! To my granddad it was, of course, not a laughing matter.
In the winter people would ski behind the railway and would go down on sleighs from the dam. In spring people planted potatoes on its slope, and only rarely (in barren years) would some stranger steal any. But generally - everyone just knew where his section was, and no one else would touch it. There were not even any fences. No security guards, no barbed wire, no dogs. For the very first time in my life 15 years ago I saw security guards in stores, in the Antilles. Finally we have now «developed» far enough to reach such «civilization»!

Oh, I am getting carried away again?.. This way I will never fall asleep! I have to get up early for work...

To wake up with a feeling of happiness. With the expectation of a miracle. That's what I am deprived of since there is no Soviet Union anymore. Do I really expect too much from life? And for whom was it such hindrance that I and millions of other people like me would wake up with this quiet and peaceful feeling of happiness?...

I will never wake up with a feeling of happiness again. From the very moment when Lisa¹⁶ became ill. The last few months were one continuous nightmare, like from a soap opera. I am only just getting over it now. But how can you get over something like this?

...Spring, spring... May... after May 9th it was not long until the annual tests at school which always turned my stomach upside down, even though I was a good student. And at the end of May it would suddenly get cold again - when bird-cherry trees begin to flower... If I close my eyes I can almost feel their cloying and sweet smell. And sleep, together with the aroma of bird-cherry from my imagination, finally gets hold of me...

...But what is that? Why I am again in Rotterdam? Where did it come from, that damned Rotterdam? There he is, Sonny¹⁷, with his evil, handsome face, searching for me and Lisa... I hide together with her in a shop and silently pray that he wouldn't come in! There he is, turning very slowly, as is possible only in dreams, heading for the shop door!

I wake up from my own scream, all in a cold sweat.

For some time I cannot understand, who am I? Where am I? What am I doing here? Where are my lawn and my sunbeam reflections that smell of the apple-tree blossom?

I am a Soviet person. Not just Russian, not a «new Dutchwoman» and definitely not a «citizen of the world».

Through the window it smells pleasantly of the smoke of burning peat. I am in Ireland. I remember well now, how I came to be here and why. For a moment I feel a short relief: at least, this is not Rotterdam! But the relief doesn't last long.

What happened? Where did not just I, but all of us take the wrong turn? Why did history take «an alternative road»?

This isn't my life, but somebody else's. That's the problem. All of this is happening not to me, but to somebody else. And soon I will awake and will begin a normal life, not a plastic one.

¹⁶ Heroine's daughter.
¹⁷ Heroine's ex-husband/
Bread will smell like bread again and will get hard on the third day, as it is supposed to, not get mouldy and moist. Roses will smell like roses again, and not like Dutch pesticides. Chocolate will taste like chocolate, not like some strange substance coloured like a baby’s poo. Young girls will dream about first love and romantic strolls under the moon, not about how to win a «Miss Topless» contest. People will not hide their faces and turn away in fear at the sight of hooliganism and caddishness, pretending that they didn’t see anything. There will be no homeless children and no perverts hunting for them, called by this fashionable Western word «paedophile». A doctor will not ask you, when you call him about a very sick child whose life is hanging on the minutes: «So, who will pay for this?»

This feeling has pursued me here for years already. Just hold on for a little longer and - and I will wake up and everything will return to normal. And I live all these years «on the suitcases» - ready to go.

But I wake up - and everything remains as it was last evening. Alien, not mine, very strange to me...

Is it ridiculous or sad: that everything that the people on our planet are fighting for, we already had before? And we were so stupid to think that all of these weren’t the achievements of socialism, but of some «general human progress», something that was so natural that nobody would ever be able to take it away from us. As natural as the air. But here people still think that all we had is almost unreachable...

I turn on my other side and try to visualise boundless collective farm fields with blooming buckwheat, that smells like honey: free, not fenced in by barbed wire, without signs saying «Private property! Do not enter: you will be shot!» That very field that is now built up with private cottages...

Perhaps, I could sleep just a little bit longer? It is only just 4 am, after all...
Chapter 1. A jumper that smells of sheep

«...Drank a pint of beer,
My grief and tears to smother,
Then off to reap the corn,
And leave where I was born,
I cut a stout blackthorn,
To banish ghost and goblin,
In a brand new pair of brogues,
I rattled o’er the bogs,
And frightened all the dogs,
On the rocky road to Dublin».
(«Rocky Road to Dublin», Irish folk song)

...But still, I wake up early enough and stretch. I don't want to get out of bed, but I have to. It's good that I live so near my workplace now! And how lucky I am that I have a job at all!

I live, using my mum’s expression, «in somebody else’s basement», but it seems to me like a palace. After other dwellings in which I spent my first few months in Ireland. Here I have a room, a kitchen and a shower - with my own entrance and even my own small asphalted courtyard. The courtyard is under the windows of my landlord's kitchen. The landlord - a retired English old salt - has expressed a slight hope that I will want to sunbathe there sometime ... Dreaming does no harm!

To share a room with another person when you're already thirty is not the most pleasant thing in the world. Even if this room was in a new, beautiful house. My first landlady crammed the tenants into rooms like herrings in a barrel: not because she was greedy, but simply because otherwise she wouldn't be able to afford to pay her own mortgage. She worked as a stewardess, came home only occasionally and reserved for herself the biggest room en-suite. And the other three rooms she rented out to students. I first arrived here as the student too, probably because I was afraid to start to lead a real adult life. In the Netherlands there was severe unemployment, and for a long time I was simply afraid to graduate to end up on the dole. But in Ireland, thank God, it was an absolutely different life. All young Europeans were heading for Dublin because there was so much work there - especially for people with a knowledge of languages...

To tell the truth, I was afraid to come straight to Dublin to live - it was too big a dream. Perhaps you will understand me better if I tell you that I arrived in Ireland in such a state of mind that for some time I could not even choose for myself any products in a supermarket: I did not dare to make choices. Sonny had taught me for a long time that to make all the choices was always his business. It began at the time when we had to survive on 50 guilders a week: in such conditions you don't have many choices, but I still wanted to eat something tasty, because of my Soviet
habits (in the USSR food did not cost such sky-high prices as here!). And from then on it just continued. And if I asked why he always decided everything for both of us, Sonny just shook the front part of his jeans in front of me, with his Latin American fervour: «Because I have this, that's why!» As a Soviet person, I did not see the slightest connection between the presence of this particular body part and the right to make all decisions by oneself, so to some extent our marriage was doomed from the very beginning...

I signed up for a one-year post-graduate course in the village of Maynooth near Dublin, for which I did not have to pay (it was a European project). Maynooth is a small cozy village, impregnated with tasty smoke from peat used for the domestic heating. The main street, as in many Irish villages, is called just that - Main Street. On Main Street there were four pubs, three of which were mainly for students, and one was where the local older generation usually drank. Students here start to «celebrate» the weekend from Thursday on and calm down only by Sunday evening. In Maynooth there are two main sights - the ruins of FitzGerald’s the castle and the National University of Ireland, scattered mysterious ancient buildings stretched out in the middle of a park with huge centuries-old trees. In the same place is St Patrick’s College - a Catholic seminary. There are also a couple of small shops, a hotel where, to my astonishment, the local residents often went for a meal or drink, according to the local custom (in my country people wouldn't go to a hotel in the same town where they live - why would they? A hotel is for the tourists, for the guests). And that was all there was.

At first I shared a room with a young Dutch girl from Groningen called Anita, who had arrived at the University of Maynooth some months ago on an exchange program. Probably, they decided to put us together because I had arrived from the Netherlands too. The Irish wanted to please my neighbour: they obviously did not know that for the Dutch there is such a concept as «allochtoon».18

However, to Anita's honour, she treated me kindly. And in general she was a pleasant girl, with moist and kind eyes. You could see straight away that she was Pisces by horoscope. A bit too straightforward, as all the Dutch are, but such is their nature. Once she came home with tears in her eyes: she had begun a discussion on the subject of abortion with some young Irish people of her age (10 years or so younger than me). And it is a rather sensitive issue here... There are some things about which it is better not to speak with the Irish (however, there are such things for the Dutch too, only the list of forbidden subjects is different for different nations!). Is it necessary to provoke people? Try, for example, to talk to the Dutch on how they betrayed the Jews during the war (ask who betrayed Anne Frank to the Nazis): Or on the issue of head scarves and other Muslim attire (though you'd think it is not their business!). Well, that's when you'll start a row!...

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18 Allochtoon (Dutch) – inhabitant of the Netherlands one of whose parents (or even grandparents) was born outside of that country. In practice this term is being used mainly for migrants from the Third World and Eastern European countries.
Did she really not know the general view in Ireland on this issue before she arrived here? But that's exactly what she could not understand: why is it impossible to discuss things? Yes, it is possible, my dear, of course, it is possible, only you'll have to face the consequences...

The thing is that, according to the Dutch mentality, people begin discussions not in order to change the opinion of one’s opponent, to persuade him, but simply for the sake of a discussion. A person practices the selection of logical arguments; it is some kind of a mental gymnastics. There usually isn't any result of the discussion at all, but for the Dutch that is not important. Like Lieutenant Rzhevsky\textsuperscript{19}, they just «find the discussion itself pleasant». And the Irish, as well as the Russians, perceive attempts to start a discussion on such hot issues as an attempt to change their views, their beliefs, as an attempt on their way of life. «Nos ta katoliko, no sigui insisti!»\textsuperscript{20} – as Mai would say.

Anita was crying on my shoulder, and I made a discovery. It appears I understand her, but I also understand the Irish! And more than that, I myself have a different, a third point of view!

I did not suspect that I had managed to become Dutch-like to such extent during these years. My school girlfriend in Russia, Alla, had noticed that something wasn't quite right with me: when she wanted to hold me by the arm, according to our old custom, to walk together along the street, I nearly jumped up and drew away my hand. It was an involuntary, almost automatic reaction. The silliest thing is that even I myself cannot explain why I did it! (Perhaps, it was a conditioned reflex, like in the research of academician Pavlov?). But the Dutch would explain it to you. And with details!\textsuperscript{21} Just as detailed as when your Dutch colleagues tell you, when leaving for a lavatory, what exactly they are going to be doing there.

Well, luckily I didn't quite become Dutch to such a degree, but it took me a couple of weeks «to tune myself in» and adjust to the Irish sense of humour. I can give you an example to illustrate a mental difference between the Dutch and the Irish, which I managed to overcome in a relatively short space of time. While in Holland I saw a program on TV made by Dutch journalists about life in the Emerald Isle. An Irish farmer, who was earning extra money in his free time by manufacturing local home-made alcohol - poitin - for sale, which he hid from servants of the law in secluded corners of his farm, was one of heroes of this program. «And aren’t you afraid that they will come to arrest you?» - asked him the law-abiding cheese-heads in horror. «Am I not afraid? Of course, I’m afraid! For the last 20 years I am afraid all the time! I have set some money aside for the fine that I will have to pay when they catch me!» - he

\textsuperscript{19} Lieutenant Rzhevsky is a fictional young cavalry officer who appears in popular Russian jokes that poke fun at social sophistication and decorum.
\textsuperscript{20} “We are Catholics; do not continue to insist!” (a door sign meant for Jehovah’s Witnesses in Curacao) (Papiamento).
\textsuperscript{21} In Holland 2 girls who walk holding each other by the arm, are usually lesbians.
answered with an absolutely serious face. And the Dutch, naturally, took all of it in good faith.

I was also like them: when I just arrived in Ireland, for some time I took everything that was told to me literally and because of this I was often trapped. (Oh, I will tell you about this later on!). Until I finally understood: if you do not want the Irish to lose their charm for you, try to learn how not to take their fantasies seriously. And it is even better if you learn how to pay them with the same coin: they will value it! Thank God, nobody has to teach me how to fantasize, unlike the Dutch. «Slagging» according to the English- Russian dictionary, is translated as «to offend, to slander, to discredit», but in Ireland it is some kind of national sport consisting of an exchange of sharp but harmless jibes at one another. The faster you master it, the faster the Irish will accept you into their company: one of the most valued things here is a good sense of humour. But how can you master slagging if you have gotten used to taking everything literally?

For this reason I so pitied Anita. For me it was a bit easier, I only had to come back to the condition which deep in my heart was far more natural for me than the straightforwardness I acquired in Holland, as annoying as haemorrhoids.

But then for some reason I told her about what happened to Lisa (and that wasn't necessary, to be honest! Well, why did I decide to tell her?). Anita sympathised with me: quite sincerely because she had an autistic disabled brother. «Mum looked after him till he became sixteen years old, and then she handed him over to a respite care. At last she married, and I am glad for her; she deserves a bit of happiness so much!»

I tried to imagine to myself this «deserved happiness» with some bloke, after having handed over my little Lisa to some care home - no matter what sort of difficulties I might have with her! - and I almost became physically sick. Perhaps, now you will understand why Anita and I didn't become real friends. I cannot be a real friend - at least, real in our way - with somebody who thinks it is possible and even desirable to get some sort of «happiness» after rejection of your own child.

But Anita was obviously very lonely in Ireland (it was her first long independent stay abroad!), and she still considered me as one of her own. When she was on the phone with some friends or relatives back home and presented me to them as «this other Dutch girl» (“dat andere Nederlandse meisje”), I understood that I was given her highest praise! For all my eight years in the Netherlands nobody had ever called me that. I never was «dat Nederlandse meisje» when I was living among the Dutch - for them I became Dutch only abroad... It was ridiculous and strange. Here was the «recognition» that it was not necessary for me to find any more.

...I had arrived in Ireland right after my divorce. More precisely, when it wasn't even officially issued yet. I well remember that cold January day. I walked out of the small, cosy Dublin airport, inhaled fresh air with a tang of smoke from burning peat - and nearly burst out crying. For ten minutes or so I literally could not move, as my knees were shaking. In order to understand this, it is necessary to understand what Ireland meant for me back then.
I had left behind an idiotic soap opera into which some higher forces unknown to me had transformed my life for the last five years. I felt as if I had successfully escaped from a high-security prison, though I was still afraid of pursuit (not a soul in the Netherlands, not any of my few friends there, knew I was here). It was an escape from prison where I was not only allowed to work, but I was not allowed to have any hobbies either, any circle of my own friends, or even my own thoughts. No matter what I tried to say, I was immediately told to shut up: «Shut up, it doesn’t interest me!», «I don’t know and I don’t want to know about this!»

But the trouble was not only with Sonny or to be more exact, not so much with Sonny. I felt sorry for Sonny - despite everything that happened between us. Inwardly Sonny was just like me, a person with traditional values - though often his were different from mine. But the Dutch values were deeply alien to both of us.

At the moment when for the first time I stepped on to Irish soil, I was suffocating in the Dutch society where it was impossible to rebuke a person if he smoked in your face, right where there was a sign saying it was forbidden to smoke. Or fellows with dog-shit sticking to the soles of their boots who put their feet on a seat in a train. Oh no, any remark of yours will be infringement of their freedom! It was a place where dog owners dressed up their doggies in special coats and chose from twenty brands of dog food in the shops for them, while at the same time homeless people were begging in the streets whom the same dog owners would not even give a guilder. It was a place where the word «friendship» meant strolling together around the shops and drinking coffee - that is, exclusively with a preliminary arrangement two weeks in advance, written down in a diary in order not to forget it. It was a place where calendars with birthdays of people close to you hung on toilet doors so that, while satisfying your need, you would remember in time that one had to send them a card. It was a place where the treatment of women as things to satisfy a man’s lust was so much the norm that Dutch women did not even notice it at all. They seriously thought themselves free, smoking their cigarettes and thinking that lack of freedom for women can be expressed only in wearing a head scarf or veil, instead of low salaries and the practical absence of women among doctors, engineers and professors in their society. Or in the expectations of your male colleagues that you will always be the one to bring them coffee and that you come to work exclusively for that task - because they simply do not take women seriously in the professional area, even if you know more than they do. It was widespread to use a scornful pejorative «mevrouwte» («little madam») to women - with a little smile and a look down one’s nose.

Freedom there was rather one-sided. It was a society «progressive to the degree of disgust» in which the ayatollahs of liberalism and social democracy forbade anybody to have even a little less «progressive» views than their own.

«...And now let’s talk about sex!» - somebody proclaims on TV every evening, solemnly of course, in such a tone as if it was about something new, although they had already «spoken» about it yesterday, and the day before that, for the last month and half a year back. It was
far more annoying than any communist party congress or conference! My God, how long are you going to talk about it? And what's there to talk about? Are you not fed up with it yet? You'd better go and do it rather than talk about it, you miserable theoreticians! For me the biggest killer among the Dutch was their absence of imagination and their ability to think only in straight lines, expressed in practice by the fact that they did not know at all what to do in cases not described and regulated by law (after all, life is so varied that you cannot write laws for all existing situations!). And the things which were beyond their understanding, for them these simply did not exist: as for a blinkered horse there is nothing outside its frame of view. If there are no locks on the doors, that is not because people are honest, but because «there is nothing to steal from them». They imagine people take part in a parade, of course, only because they are «forced» to, and as soon as people become «free» they at once all rush with pleasure to join the ranks of prostitutes or to «start their own business» (what is «your own» in a «business» which consists simply reselling at prices increased tenfold what was made by others, and does one really need any kind of special intelligence or talent for that? Such questions put them in shock).

Another killer was their cynicism. It seemed they were physically incapable of believing in anything good in a human being. But to see some dirt in everything - that is pleasurable! «Who photographed you so often?» - asked my Dutch girlfriend with a malicious, greasy little smirk at the sight of a heap of my photos - absolutely decent ones! - which were made by my uncle because I asked him to when I turned thirteen and received my first camera as a gift for my birthday.

«Your uncle? It looks like he loved you, he-he, very much...»

There is no need for any «he-he», Petra; he did and he still does love me. And I love him too. Only not at all in the sense you mean. However, as you know, we judge others by ourselves... From such a vision of the world as theirs, constantly imposed on you, you just felt desperate.

And their scandalous predictability, which is a logical consequence of all this, led to situations in which at times you simply did not know whether you should laugh or cry! Each time I got acquainted with a new Dutch man or woman, I already knew absolutely precisely what conversation would follow, right up to exact phrases. Here it is:

- Mag ik iets vragen? - May I ask you something?
- Ja, dat mag. - Yes.
- U bent zeker geen Nederlandse? Waar komt u vandaan? - You are obviously not Dutch, are you? Where are you from?
- Rusland. - From Russia.
- Gaat u nog terug? - Are you going back?
- Ik zou wel willen, maar er is geen werk daar voor mij. - I would like to, but there is no work there for me.
- Jullie hadden vroeger geen vrijheid, maar nu hebben jullie die vrijheid wel. - Before you didn't have freedom, but now you have it.
- Welke vrijheid hadden wij vroeger niet, heer/mevrouw? - What sort of freedom didn't we have before, Sir/ Madam?
Irina Malenko

- Nou, bijvoorbeeld - Well, for example (and I swear to God, all of them, without a single exception, always said the very same thing!), ik kan hier op straat gaan en hardop zeggen dat onze Koningin een stomme koe is. Jullie mochten dat niet over jullie regering zeggen. - I can say here in the street that our Queen is a stupid cow. But you were not allowed to say such things about your government.
- Nou en? - And? So what?
- Als u dit echt kunt zeggen, waarom doet u het niet? - If you really can say that, then why don't you?
- En waarom denkt u dat ik de behoefte had om dit over onze regering te zeggen? - And why do you think that I need to say this about our government?
To this, they could not answer anything.

Most amazing was that people who had never visited my country in their life were quite seriously telling me how awfully we lived. Now, having learnt from the Irish another attitude towards life, I would simply laugh at them. But at that time it was really painful to me to listen to their capitalist nonsense. If you tried to explain to them that women can work because they want to, not because «the salary of their husband does not suffice», or that we had trade unions (without whose permission, by the way, it was forbidden to dismiss any worker!), or that religion has not been forbidden, they went into such a rage that they almost started to stamp their feet. «It's a lie! A lie! You lived under a military dictatorship! Under the cult of personality! And your KGB...»

At first I kept trying to explain things to them. But after a couple of years I gave it up. There are some things which they cannot understand. «Those born to crawl cannot fly». The same applies to those born to consume. But the bitter aftertaste in my heart has not disappeared. When you operate on an absolutely different wavelength than people around you, and you have not the slightest mutual understanding with them, even on the most insignificant issues, you really have reason for despair. My behaviour became inadequate. At times I overflowed with burning hatred towards them; at other times I simply would have liked to be enclosed within four walls and see nobody. It is no wonder that my relationship with Sonny began to worsen. He simply did not understand that I was in mourning for my own country and my way of life.

After the USSR, in Holland I felt as if I had landed in the obscurantist Middle Ages. The fact that, by selling porno magazines and «tolerating» red light districts the society humiliates the dignity of all women, was too complicated for their rectilinear and flat attitude in which form and package are absolutely much more important than substance. Dutch women considered this humiliation to be normal, they could not imagine any other life and they were almost proud when they were valued by the size of their bust and the shape of their buttocks, like thoroughbred horses in the market. («My breasts have become only four centimetres longer in twenty years!» - “the role model of a successful Dutch business woman”, TV presenter Linda de Mol cries out to the whole country. One can only feel sorry for a person who has nothing else to be
proud of). They sincerely thought that exposing their tits and buttocks to general view on a beach is a sign of female liberation and their own personal free choice, while refusing the same right of free choice to Turkish and Moroccan immigrant women to wear a head scarf.

There was something awfully false even in the well-known Dutch tolerance (it was exactly this show-off tolerant attitude of a multicultural society and this variety of cultures and languages that so attracted me to this country in the beginning, but I thought it was all sincere!). The Dutch showed a foreign tourist with pride how they drink coffee in the kitchen with their Moroccan servant as equals. But being an immigrant, you could really sense that people feel hostility mixed with fear toward you - though they were not supposed to say so openly (the same way as you were not supposed get indignant out loud on the issue of prostitution). Both these things were «mauvais ton»\(^22\). The paradox is that the Dutch by their nature are very direct people, and I respect them for this frankness, though at first it shocked me when I was not yet used to the Dutch mentality; I thought they were just plain rude. Their motto - «doe gewoon, dan doe jij al gek genoeg» («Stop playing the fool, you are fool enough already»). One can only guess what superhuman efforts they had to make to force themselves not to spill out their negative thoughts about immigrants for so long.

The most ridiculous thing was that Sonny hated all of this no less than I did, and it was just as alien to him as it was to me. More than that, the Dutch disliked his people and were afraid of them more than of me because, though he was a Dutch citizen from birth, he was black. Sonny was what they called «sambo» in our school geography book: a mix of Africans with Latin American Indians; he came from the island of Curacao\(^23\).

«Makamba kens!» («Crazy Dutch!») - he said with contempt when they became too much for him too. But if I was outraged by something or would even just ask him if we would leave this place and get out of here at least some time in the future (because I had to see the light at the end of the tunnel, or even at least imagine it!), he would just attack me: «Nobody asked you to come here! You chose it yourself. So, here you are. Live here now».

Would it not have been more honest to leave a society which you will never consider your own and with whose norms and values you could never agree? As if a person has no right to make a mistake... And once again I secretly cried with tears of anger - and swore to myself not to continue living here, and especially not raise my children here. I will definitely find a way to get out of here, with Sonny or without him.

All that time Ireland was for me like an inaccessible fairy tale, as the promised land which waited for me as the reward for all the thorny thickets through which I had to push myself on the road of life. Every time life became unbearable, I rubbed my temples and said to myself: «Wait till I leave for Ireland - and the bright life will come!»\(^24\)

\(^22\) Bad tone (French).
\(^23\) Curacao – island in the Southern Caribbean, Dutch colony.
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...I came for the first time to Ireland, you could say, by accident. Sonny was sent here for a week on a business trip, and I wanted to see it because first, I read about this country so much in my childhood, and second, because of an anthropologist who by chance was travelling in the same compartment on a train with my mum and quite seriously assured her that she must definitely be of Celtic origin because of her looks. He told her how some Celts had some time ago left Central Europe for the west - for Ireland, and others - for the east, exactly to our part of the world. I wanted to see whether the Irish are really similar to my relatives. In Holland, even though I was also white, when people looked at me they felt at once that I was a stranger and often asked me silly questions, for example, if I was half-Turkish (at that time there were practically no Russians in Holland yet).

I was fed up with this feeling of being a stranger. Nobody of course thinks an immigrant can become 100% accepted in a new society. But at least to feel that you are not disturbing the people by your presence and that they see you as a person, a human being, instead of simply «a native of...» - that would be desirable! Now it does not surprise me anymore that it was the descendants of the Dutch who invented apartheid, because no matter how hard you tried to «integrate», no matter how well you spoke the Dutch language, all the same, you and even your children and grandchildren were doomed to remain «allochtoon» for them. And when you realize that, any desire to become a part of such a society vanishes completely. Yes, you can be different from other people (in my native land I was also different from the majority of my coevals, by my circle of interests). But to feel constantly that are you being evaluated not on your personal qualities, but purely on the basis of your ethnic origin, and that people also adjust their estimation of you to fit their precisely classified stereotypes - that is something quite different.

...A Dutchman who sold tickets for the Eurobus did not even allow me to open my mouth when I walked into his office.
- You are going to Belgrade, - he declared to me in a tone that did not allow any objections.
- No, I...
- Then to Warsaw, - he did not give up.
- Helemaal niet! Not at all! - I was furious, - Not even close: to Dublin!

...Since the first moment I found myself among the Irish - having changed buses in London from a Dutch bus to an Irish one, with a picture of a running dog drawn on its side - I felt at home. Unlike on the Dutch bus where everyone sits by himself as a mouse on groats, and talking to one’s neighbours is seen as something quite abnormal, on the Irish bus, which we boarded at six o’clock in the morning, the noise and din began at once. And an hour later everyone on the bus had already gotten acquainted with each other, and by the end of our journey - very much in the same way on trains in my country! - many of us already knew all the

24 From the Soviet film “Chapaev” (1934), about the Civil war: “Wait will we’ll get rid of all the Whites – and the bright life will come!”

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life story of one’s fellow travellers. People told each other jokes and shared personal tragedies; they ate together and sang songs. No, they were not at all like Russians, these small, freckled merry fellows and jokers with an improbable gift of speech, but they were simply able to make you feel at home! And for that I have grown fond of them once and for all, definitively and irrevocably.

When I left the bus at the bus station «Busaras» in Dublin, a place completely unfamiliar to me, it was already dark. It began to rain, and unfortunately I did not take an umbrella with me (a big mistake!). I did not know yet that this dark October evening would be so fateful for me.

...First of all, I was almost frightened to death by a green double-decker bus (here so many things are green!) that passed me with a whistling noise, missing me by just a couple of inches: I had completely forgotten that the road traffic here is on the left!

I had a city map with me, and I went to look out for the hotel in which Sonny was staying: the posh «Burlington». By the way, Alla Pugacheva stayed there during her fiasco performance at Eurovision. It was a two-mile walk from the bus station - in the rain and with no umbrella. When I finally arrived in its magnificent lobby, water flew down from me in streams.

- Are you OK? - the receptionist asked me sympathetically, it seemed to me.

«Do I really look so terrible that he thinks there is something wrong with me? What caring people!» - I thought. I did not yet know that «are you OK?» Is the Irish equivalent of «may I help you?»

My feelings had been pleasantly surprised by what I had seen and heard on the way there. That schoolchildren (teenagers!) went along the street in pairs, holding hands. That there was no pornography around. That the streets were not soiled by dog excrement. That people generously give alms to those who asked for it. That they say «Sorry!» to you, if you accidentally push them! That churches were full of people (I can't tell if that is good or bad, but what a contrast with Holland where they were open only on the weekends, and even then mainly for foreigners). I was impressed by the dark green and brown tones of the city and its cosy provinciality made me feel bitter-sweet. The city looked so low-built and cosy. I was amazed by the cheerful chaos in its streets - instead of the Good Friday-faced, sour Dutch «order». When I saw how Dubliners quickly run across the road near Trinity College when the light was red, I almost shouted with enthusiasm, «Hurray! Finally I am among live people again, instead of robots!»

However, sometimes this chaos took extreme forms. On the weekends Dubliners got nearly dead drunk, and the little street corners around O'Connell Street were filled with youth throwing up, reminding me of our old Christmas joke «Look, you are still doing your shopping, but people are already celebrating!» In the price-lists of Dublin taxis there was even a special rate - «for a soiled seat», twenty pounds.

25 Alla Pugacheva - popular Soviet singer who later changed her creative image in accordance with the new, more Western fashion.
Ireland appeared to be the complete antithesis of the Netherlands. Unpredictable as its weather, green, full of free space, mysterious and alive. Rebellious and artistic. I was getting back to life by the minute.

Sonny was not impressed by it. I sat and waited for him after his work - under the O'Connell monument «fixed» by pigeons, and the passersby glanced at me with a strange understanding. About ten minutes later I found out why: on the ground near where I was sitting was a huge half-empty cognac bottle! Sonny got angry and swore at the traffic jams in Dublin (to and from work he went throughout the city by taxi), at the fact that nobody was there for his arrival, that at work he had to explain everything several times to people, that nothing began on time. That when you ask for tea, they add milk without even asking you!

- They are all stupid farmers and racists, - he declared to me.
- Well, Sonny, is there at least something in Ireland that you like?
- Something - yes. That there are no Turks here...

While he worked, I wandered around the city all day and soaked up its atmosphere little by little. I liked the conservatism of the local customs and that Ireland was not cosmopolitan - a «country of the world»: it had its own strong distinctive national colour shrouding it through, like a homely fog. I was greatly surprised that the Irish youth loved their folk music and dances. I have not yet seen any European country where the youth in large numbers would take a great interest in their own folk music! And where people would be so musically talented as here. Builders while working on buildings sites produced such trills of national songs that in my country they would have long-ago been invited to join a professional vocal group!

The food was simple and tasty. No sandwiches with bananas and pineapples mixed with ham. Potatoes and meat! I was amazed that my grandfather, who had never been to Ireland and wasn't even interested in it, ate all the same things for breakfast that the Irish do, and he also loved his tea with milk. Perhaps we really had common ancestors?

There was always a strong wind here. The same as in Blok's poem "The wind, the wind all around the world..." Pale children unfamiliar with sunburns played in the streets of Dublin - hide-and-seek, run-and-catch, all the same games that we played in our childhood. (Dutch children generally do not play on the streets.) On the walls there were only political slogans and innocent-child-like ones «Paddy + Fiona = heart» Not a sign of any foul words or graphic pornography.

People are probably right when they say everything we love stems from our childhood. I also wanted to move here because Ireland reminded me of my childhood.

...Far outside of Dublin mysterious mountains turned out to be green. Not as high mountains, of course, as in some parts of Austria, but for me who lived for such a long time in the Netherlands, even they were impressive enough. I decided to see at least by an edge of an eye, what

[26] Aleksandr Blok (1880-1921) was one of the most gifted Russian symbolist poets of the Silver Age. Author refers to the Blok's poem "The Twelve" (1918).
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Ireland was like outside Dublin and I bought a ticket for a bus tour to the Wicklow Mountains.

It was an absolutely different world. Outside it was the end of October. The rain was pouring and the sun was shining in the sky - in quick turns, within a half hour, or even simultaneously. The green mountains were especially gorgeous during what we call «mushroom rain», rain together with the sunshine which in my country happens only in summer, and even then it is very rare. The mountains were bathed in all shades of green that only exist in nature. Especially charming thanks to light and fast changing shadows from running clouds. All around there were boundless open spaces full of wildness and nature which just do not exist in Holland. Along the road wooden electricity posts stuck out of the ground, just like my childhood in our small street (where else in Europe would you see something like this?!), real mushrooms grew in the woods, which I had not seen for at least seven years! Old men and women in villages dressed almost as in our villages: they wore caps with padded jackets and long floral dresses and head scarves. And when the stately view of Killiney Bay opened in front of me, my imagination simply refused to believe that such beauty actually exists in nature.

Our driver, a joker and a singer, sang all the way, joked and told us funny one-liners non-stop. «See that bridge? Three years ago an English lady tourist ran into it with her head. The bridge has never been the same since». Or «it rains in Ireland only twice a year: the first time - for half a year, and the second time - for six months». He showed us «the only church in Ireland where they accept donations by credit cards» - and we, listening to him with open mouth, believed his every word. He did it so naturally that it seemed as if he improvised on the move. Only when I again happened to be in Dublin a year later and took the same bus tour and heard all the same jokes did I understand how they fool those ninny tourists. «Do not trust the smiles of kings - you will lose your head!» - one hero of Kir Bulychev's books used to say. It must have been about the Irish! With Dutch frankness I then spoiled the driver's day, when I told him I had been on this tour previously. After that his jokes faded and became forced. I had to live in Ireland for some time before I realised that here sometimes it is better to pretend you do not see or do not understand something. That is the art of Irish inter-human relations.

Most of the Irish themselves were far from handsome, but they were full of humanity, slyness and humour combined with human warmth. And, improbably, it made them attractive. I never liked white men (except when I was a child!), but here my heart gave in. I felt they have completely different attitudes to women here than in the Netherlands. An Irishman can see a woman as his friend, as an equal without any major difficulty; he does not consider himself more important because of his sex. His vanity is not offended if his boss at work is a woman. For him it is simply insignificant, while for Dutch men it would be the first thing they would notice (it makes you think of Germans during the war, our captured Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya and their «Frau partisan! Frau partisan!»). And I also understood how the Irish charm women: not by their appearance, not by giving them flowers, but by... their ability to speak. You wouldn't come
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across such beautiful compliments and such fairy tales about their own lives anywhere else! Unlike Dutchmen who reminded me of a fresh-frozen hake on a counter, they even had to open special courses for the Dutch where they could learn to express their own emotions and feelings. The Irish are not shy of their emotions, just as they are not shy about singing. Perhaps it is simply because they are talented? How did they land on this planet at all, such people?!

But three things here in Ireland particularly struck me: the smell of smoke from chimneys, exactly the same as back at home during the winter, baked potatoes - the same as from my granny's oven, and people's attitude to life!

Even in these few days I could already feel how much happier people in Ireland are than the Dutch and even than us: simply because they look at life differently. It's not just life itself that matters, it is also your attitude to it, I understood. «If you wish to be happy, be it». The Irish do not bring all the stress from work back home with them every evening. They do not worry in vain about things they cannot change anyway. They take life easier and more care-free; they do not take all the bad things so close to heart and do not perceive everything as literally as the Dutch. They can laugh at things over which others would only cry.

Many of us would think that the Irish just don't give a damn. But it is not so. They simply do not rub life against the grain. And consequently they are much more mentally healthy.

Suddenly I wanted so desperately to learn from them how to do it. In the Netherlands I was tortured for years by severe depression, which receded a bit in summer and always came on me with new force as September approached (before emigration I did not know such a thing!). And I understood that the only way for me to get rid of it was to adopt the Irish way of life. If I did not learn it, another couple of years and I would simply be lost.

But to do that, I had to move to Ireland and get to know its people more closely. Judging by Sonny's comments, I could not count on him. I suggested that he should go out of the city for the weekend so that his opinion of Ireland would not only be based on traffic jams, but he was more interested in shopping and he refused.

...When we returned to Amsterdam, I was almost in mourning. We were waiting at the Schiphol airport for our suitcases. A ginger-haired young man looked around perplexed, as if he was searching for someone in the crowd. Then he chose me from all the people, approached me and asked:

- Excuse me, are you Irish?

And this sealed my fate. At that moment I decided I would connect my life with that country in every way.

...Just like the Princess from «An Ordinary Miracle» from the famous play by E. Schwartz, who read only about bears27, from that

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27 Soviet playwright Yevgeny Schwartz (1896-1958) wrote a popular play "An ordinary Miracle" where the main character - Princess falls in love with a young man who supposed to be under a magic spell and would turn into a bear if she
moment on I read only about the Irish. I searched for an Aran jumper everywhere. I still did not know that in Ireland these jumpers distinguish tourists from local residents, who rarely wear them. When I finally found such a jumper - grey-brown, stinking disgustingly like a sheep - I wore it almost day and night. I registered with a Dutch club of fans of Ireland that produced a quarterly magazine. In it the club members shared their impressions of trips to Ireland, counting the days before their next holiday when they could go there again, and they complained endlessly about the Dutch life. But for some reason none of them would actually get up and say, «Wait, boys, if we like it there so much and are so unhappy here, why don’t we leave it all behind?» ...

I continually listened to heart-breaking melancholy Irish ballads - this was so unlike me, a fan of disco, reggae and bubbling. Sonny only laughed at my «eccentricities». After I had seen the film «Michael Collins» in a small cinema in Amsterdam (they wouldn't show it in a big cinema in Holland: by Dutch standards, this film was not a box office hit!), it looked and felt like a Soviet film to such a degree that I, who lived in a place where even the word «revolution» was perceived as something very indecent, had literally taken off from the cinema as if on wings...

I have a secret! As in my childhood when I had been in love with Alain Delon’s Zorro, I finally had a purpose in life, which I did not have for so long! The light had appeared at the end of the tunnel. There are still people in the world who make - and watch! - such films. There is also other life in the world, apart from just «shop-till-you-drop». I cheered up...

...I didn’t stay in Maynooth for long. After just a month from the beginning of the course I got a job in Dublin. I was amazed at how easy it was to find it. Employment agencies were almost fighting for candidates with knowledge of foreign languages. I originally intended only to earn some extra money - to work only part time somewhere, but the agencies told me the companies very urgently needed full-time people. In the beginning I still intended to combine work with study somehow, but as it often happens to me, "I had too much on my plate". Anita made a wry face when I involuntarily disturbed her sleep in the morning, getting ready to start work in Dublin by eight o’clock (taking into account all the traffic jams and public transport, I had to leave the house almost by six AM!). «What do you need this for?» - she asked me, as if working was something beneath her dignity (though she worked part-time herself two evenings a week in a local pub and so prevented me from sleeping in the evening).

I wanted to move my daughter to Ireland as soon as possible! To find good doctors for her, to continue her rehabilitation. I believed Lisa could still fully recover - and that it only depended on me. I couldn’t wait. I arrived in Ireland with 2000 pounds in my pocket - all my savings from one big translation job in Holland shortly before my departure. This money was «eaten up» day by day - by bills and transport. And to live on student’s money, especially sharing your accommodation with other people...

kisses him.
I went to work by train. A small green train whose doors opened with great difficulty, smelling like smoke, so fully packed in the morning that it was not easy to even find a place to stand. Sometimes I took the bus, but to get to Dublin by bus took longer. I was awfully proud of my first job - customer service agent in a call centre of a big hotel chain, or rather, a telephone answering machine that was used to make hotel reservations. But I did not yet understand then that I was simply a telephonist. My colleagues were all young graduates of various universities: for them as well as for me it was their first post, and all of us thought that we had achieved something very important. Probably also because during our training our instructors constantly told us with very important faces that we would be the face of this company and other usual corporate rubbish.

I did not understand back then why, while signing the contract we were asked to promise that we would hold on to this job for at least six months. Because of the salary. I did not know that 10.000 pounds a year is very little for life in Dublin. To me this sum seemed astronomic. I was in seventh heaven. My colleagues were very pleasant and friendly, our office was cosy and comfortable, just two steps away from the well-known park, St. Steven's Green. I thought I was a real «young professional». And when I was getting off the train at Connolly Station in the frosty morning, I proudly walked to the office on foot, admiring Dublin and still unable to believe my luck: not even half a year had passed since the most awful nightmare in my life, and I had already realised my treasured dream: I was in Ireland! Imagine, I am working in Dublin, near St. Steven's Green where once upon a time Sonny swore about Irish habits. If he could only know...!

But Sonny did not know, and thank God for that. At the end of January I finally received by mail the notice that my divorce procedures were final. And despite all my feelings about Sonny (I did not hate him at all, to the surprise of those who knew our story - to me it was just very painful and it was such a pity that it all turned out like this), this was one of the happiest days in my life!

Soon I found a room for myself in Dublin: I was too fed up with travelling from Maynooth every day. It cost me too much time and energy. To find a place in Dublin appeared to be quite difficult: all Dublin dwellings that were more or less affordable with my salary and were advertised in papers were gone almost immediately after the issue came out - «like hot rolls over a counter».28.

The room in an old Georgian house in Ranelagh29 was on the ground floor, with a window onto the street, bedraggled, with ragged furniture and smelling of mould. And I almost had to fight even for such room: by the appointed time for the viewing five people had come to see it. Three did not wait for the owner, who as the true Irishman was almost an hour late, and the fourth, an American who probably imagined himself worth

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28 Dutch expression “als warme broodjes over de toonbank gaan” - to sell very quickly.
29 Area in Southern Dublin, mainly with old houses & student population.
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something more decent than this dump, felt sorry for me and told me he conceded the room to me.

The house had three floors and a converted roof space, and there were at least ten other tenants in it: we shared the main entrance door and a call box next to the staircase. Every week on Monday the owner - an elderly bedraggled little man - came to us and passed through all the rooms collecting rent. Each week he received from us more than the average monthly salary of a good programmer. Plus he could kick any of us out onto the street at any moment, after giving only one month’s notice. In comparison with Holland, where the rights of a tenant then were well protected, here it was a real Klondike, the Wild West. But the new residence had three main advantages compared with my half room in the smart new house in Maynooth: I had my own kitchen corner which I did not have to divide with anybody, my own shower; and it was near my workplace - this pleasant old Dublin quarter was just to my taste. It took me at most twenty minutes to get to work from here - on foot!

I had to inform my former landlady - the stewardess - that I was leaving. And then I suddenly found that something had cracked inside me after the whole divorce proceedings with all their complications: I wished at any cost to avoid any confrontation, even the most innocent one, with anybody. I was simply unable to cope with it emotionally. I did something that I did a couple of times later on in Dublin while changing jobs: I simply «disappeared». I took my things from Maynooth under cover of night (actually in the evening when Anita was working in the pub and the other girls were also not home) - in order to avoid their inquiries. To the landlady I left a note with apologies (naturally, I left behind my monthly deposit for the room too). I was awfully ashamed of doing this, I could not explain to myself why I did it, but I felt an upcoming panic attack at the very thought that I would have to talk to her face to face.

Why is that happening to me, can somebody tell me?

I didn’t stay long in the new place either, just about one month. I received a phone call in response to my ad in the paper that a young woman - a professional - was looking for a nice small apartment...

...When I first saw this magnificent «palace» in Rathmines\(^{30}\), behind a fence, with a huge green lawn in front of the house and the lantern above the door that automatically turned on when you approached, I first thought I had the wrong address. To live in such place would obviously be far too expensive for me! But as it turned out, everything was all right. The owners - a retired English captain from the merchant navy who looked like the hero of a poem by Samuil Marshak\(^{31}\) («On Bobkin-street, on Bobkin-street walks quickly postman Mr. Smith. He has a post dark blue cap on and is thin like a chip») and his slightly obese but very nice wife who ran a B&B in the main house - were hospitality itself. The apartment (by local standards, it was really an apartment, not

\(^{30}\) Another area in Southern Dublin, near Ranelagh.

\(^{31}\) Samuil Yakovlevich Marshak (1887-1964) - a very popular Russian and Soviet writer, translator and children's poet. The excerpt is from his children's poem "The Post" (1927).
«somebody's basement»! cost me only seventy pounds a month more than my peasant hut in Ranelagh.

I had my own entrance, at the side of the landlord's house, protected by the locked trellised gate. Behind it stone steps led down to the entrance door. There were bars on the windows everywhere - elegant, true, but nevertheless bars. The room was modestly arranged and old-fashioned, but it was cosy. Here absolute silence and peace reigned, and the only window looked into a courtyard enclosed on four sides, which I already mentioned. Do I have to explain that I did not deliberate for long?! And that I did the same thing to my Dublin landlord that I did to the landlady from Maynooth? Only I didn't feel any pity for him at all: this old Plushkin will quickly find another tenant!

For the first time in many years I was content with myself. I was here just three months, I did not know anybody when I arrived - and I had already found a normal accommodation that I could afford, work which I liked in general. Apparently, I can do something for myself, without "jeans and their contents" next to me!

I was very much afraid of becoming disappointed with Ireland, but it really appeared to be just as I dreamt it. I have never regretted coming here.

I quickly learned the Irish attitude to life, even a bit too much. So much so that my own Mum now indignantly calls me «somebody who doesn't give a damn»: she cannot stand it that I am not jumping up at the slightest pretext as she does. I became a bit like comrade Sukhov who, in reply to jeers of the enemy: «Would you like to be terminated at once, or would you like to suffer a bit first?» Imperturbably answers: «It is better to suffer, of course». That was a truly Irish sense of humour!

And it is true, I became happier now. I would have been absolutely happy, if it weren't for Lisa's illness...

By April I changed workplaces for the third time in three months. Never in my life had I thought I would become what they called in the Soviet Union «a flyer», but the existing possibilities were too seductive, when it was so easy to change work for a more highly paid one. Not because I was greedy, but simply because I was now the sole provider for my family. Every weekend I phoned home and asked how my Lisa was... There was progress, but not enough to rejoice. And in order to survive and

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32 Author refers to one of the characters of the Russian writer's Nikolay Gogol (1809-1852) novel "Dead Souls". The plot of the novel is not complex - a scheme to buy, from landlords, serfs who have died since the last census, in order to perpetrate the hero's own real estate deal in eastern Russia. Plushkin is an elderly and wealthy landowner, Scrooge-type man who the main hero Chichikov meets in his trip through Russia. He possesses more than a thousand serfs and owns storehouses and mansions, yet he lives in a miserable, filthy house crammed with old silver, glassware, jewellery, oil paintings, china, old rags, manuscripts, ink-encrusted pens, broken furniture, old clothes, shoes, and rugs. The character's name is still used in Russia to describe a person accumulating objects out of greed.

33 A reference to the Red Army soldier Fedor Sukhov from the "White Sun of the Desert" (1969), cult Soviet adventure movie, still popular today.
hold on in my everyday life I tried to completely disconnect all thoughts about her, I directed all my energy to work and tried to feel like a young, free and single professional to whom even the sea is just knee-deep.

So I stopped being a tourist here for a long time now. And my jumper that smells of a dirty Irish sheep is now gathering dust in my wardrobe...
Chapter 2. Confession of a Captain of a Spaceship.

«I dreamt of the sound of rain
And of your footsteps in the mist
I remember everything and when I was leaving
For the sky, I have said «Good-bye!» to it all».
(Song «I dreamt of the sound of rain», Ye. Doga. V. Lazarev)

...My first memories of my childhood (please do not laugh, I am serious!) were of the pale-green walls of the maternity hospital and a feeling of being tied up hands and feet. From time to time this feeling was replaced by feeling of freedom of movement - when they changed my nappies.

It never lasted long, and I did not have much time to straighten my arms and legs properly as they were rolling me up again in a cloth cone, tied around with bands - accompanied by the sounds of my loud crying. If I had been some dissident-democrat, I would have declared to you there and then that from infancy I have been deprived of freedom and I see a deep symbolism of «communistic dictatorship» in these memories. What rubbish, it has nothing whatsoever to do with any communism. To tie babies up like this is an ancient Russian tradition! People say we do that so that the child's legs won't be in «O» shape.

I also remember the inexplicable vague feeling of alarm growing every evening as twilight came (probably it was that time of the day when babies usually cry).

My next memory is the smell of the zinc washtub warmed up by boiled water; my grandmother bathed me in it. Does any of you know how warmed up zinc smells? I think very few people do...

My grandmother Sima always radiated calmness and warmth. Not only did she never slap anybody - she did not even raise her voice to us, and nevertheless everybody obeyed her, even the Grandfather. Her most damning condemnation of a person was «I despise this man!» If I behaved badly, she would simply give me an upset look. It was enough. «The granny has a stone hanging on her heart from your behaviour» - she said reproachfully, and I aspired to do everything in my childish power that this stone would remove itself from grandmother's heart as quickly as possible. I asked every half an hour: «Tell me, Granny, is it smaller now?» - until, at last, I was finally convinced the «stone» had resolved itself to the last bit.

For decades Grandmother had neither days off nor holidays, but she never complained. She had no time to sit and feel sorry for herself like the refined aristocratic young ladies: «Did I really graduate from Smolny institute for such a kind of life?» «While your eyes are afraid of
the task, your hands are just doing it» was her favourite saying. And if somebody started to shout - justifying it as «because of bad nerves», - the grandmother just said calmly: «It's not nerves, it's just carelessness!»

And we got used to taking her motherly care of us for granted. Just as much for granted as the Soviet system itself.

On the eve of holidays she baked pies and cooked meat jelly at night while all of us slept. In summer she made pickled gherkins and tomatoes and cooked different sorts of jam. I tried to help her; and sometimes she let me, but more often not, and I recollect with shame, how quickly I gave up, when she said to me: «Zhenechka, you are still a little girl; go play, you will still have enough time to work in the future» or «Go do your homework, that's your work for now, and we will manage by ourselves!» But I still remember, what herbs are required for the making of pickled gherkins (in Europe for some reason they always put vinegar in pickles as though Europeans cannot imagine there can be perfectly pickled gherkins without it!)

In summer Grandmother went to the market and came back short of breath: from the heat and walking fast; she was getting asthma attacks. She sat and tried to recover her breath, and her breath was coming out of her chest with a heavy whistling sound. I felt great pity for her and wanted so much to do something that would ease her suffering!

One more thing is also deeply engraved in my memory - our afternoon winterly sleeps next to the warm oven, at about four o'clock in the afternoon when the dinner was already prepared, but my Mum and Shurek hadn’t come from work yet. The Grandmother would lay me down on the couch, then lie down next to me and tell me a fairy tale so that I would fall asleep. Through the window we could see how lilac winter twilight was slowly deepening, the warm oven made your back warm, it was so good and so quiet...

My Grandmother was born in a family of generations of metal workers. Her father was not only hard working, but was known in their neighbourhood also as a merry fellow and a singer of chastushka’s. They even nicknamed him «Vaska - the record player». During the week-ends he’d go out for a walk with his daughters Sima and Little Tamara and would start to sing impromptu: «Eh, there is an apple-tree, yes, with small petals, and there goes Vaska - the record player with his two daughters!» Some weekdays he came home from work with a terrible back pain that was treated for him by a «folk remedy»: he lay down on a floor and asked his children to run up and down on his back: Grandmother's Mum, Vera, was half - Polish. Before her marriage she worked from the age of thirteen as a servant for rich masters. They could never have imagined that in fifty years time their grandchildren would be engineers. The relationship between my Mum and my Grandmother was complicated - probably because my Mum by nature was Granny's complete antithesis. The Grandmother was modesty herself, did not use cosmetics, did not

34 The Smolny Institute in St. Petersburg was Russia's first educational establishment for women and continued to function under the personal patronage of the Russian Empress until just before the 1917 revolution.
really follow fashion (though she was perfectly able to sew clothes) and was very strict in private life (even her own children named her «You» in polite form). My Mum though was gorgeous, fashionable and from an early age she enjoyed big success with the opposite sex. She also had a very strong character, a man’s mentality really, and a rare talent for dumping some duties she did not like (for example, looking after me) on others, easily and even artistically, with such a look that said this was a natural business («your Grandmother sits at home all the same, doing nothing!»). And for whatever she didn’t succeed in, she blamed somebody else. «It is your Grandmother who taught me all people were good!» - she exclaimed when it came to speaking about her marriage fiasco with my father. It was from my Mum that I accepted the belief that all housewives were idlers. Though now, with my own life experience I can tell that it is better to work for six days in a week than to «have a rest» at home like my Grandmother did! My Mother also considered my uncle Shurek to be Grandmother’s pet, without thinking at all that even if it were so, it was because he was so easy-going, it was so easy to deal with him, and he did not cause any difficulties to others at home by his adventures!

No, Mum loved me very much, she always took me with her everywhere on holidays; and, unlike my Grandmother, with her I could discuss all personal life problems when I became grown up. But she was still very young and of course, she had another life apart from me. She came home from work with a paper cone full of sweets (she shared Grand-dad’s habit of spending a lot on gifts on pay day!), pushed the whole cone over to me at once, to indignant Grandmother’s remark «She’ll have it all at once, and then she will have nothing?» - and then my mother disappeared again.

But I am glad I was brought up by my Grandmother. Who knows what would become of me now and what my childhood would be like without her? The Grandmother gave me the main essential thing necessary for a child: a quiet life and stability. I often envy her: if only I could have one third of her patience! Impatience is one of the most annoying things in my character.

For too long in life I tried to resemble my Mum and «to fulfill her expectations», though at heart I was much closer to my Grandmother, as I later realized! A paradox: many of my Grandmother’s norms and values took their origin from the Bible, but neither I nor she realised that.

It was simply the way her own parents had brought her up. I thought all these sayings I heard from her were just our national, traditional proverbs and sayings. My Grandmother in her youth was a member of «The League of Militant Atheists».35 And she considered her

35 «The League of Militant Atheists» was a mass volunteer antireligious organization of Soviet workers and others in 1925-1947. It consisted of millions of Party members, members of the Komsomol youth movement, workers and army veterans. It aimed at forming scientific mindset among the workers and popularised atheism and scientific achievements. In the late 30's and early 40's the paper "Atheist" called for patient and tactful individual work without offending the believers, but re-educating them.
values in life to be just the norms of behaviour of any decent normal people.

One more of my memories is about lullabies. In the language of civilised nations putting a child to sleep is called «comforting techniques». How about just calling it singing him a lullaby? Tough? When I was a little girl who just never wanted to sleep, they all sang lullabies to me, sang in turns at home. Mum and Grandmother, Grandfather and Uncle. When one of them got tired, I was transferred to another. Each of them had his or her own repertoire.

“I am the Earth,
I see off my pupils,
My sons and daughters.
Go reach the Sun
And come back home soon!”36 - The Grandfather sang in a deep voice after coming back from the evening shift at his factory.

My first lessons in our history also came from lullabies.

"There was a detachment on the river bank,
Walking from far away,
Walking under the red banner
Was the commander of this regiment “37 - My Uncle Shurek sang to me quietly.

It was the one and only song in his repertoire, but he sang it in such a way that from that time on and to the present time I still remember all the text by heart. My childish imagination pictured the bank of our small river overgrown with goose-foot on which this detachment walked armed with sabres and scarlet banners. I did not know yet what it means - «sons of farm-labourers», but I already felt in this song that they were ours!

From lullabies I also learned my first lessons in domestic geography.

Mum sang me songs of all the fifteen Union republics. I demanded that she must sing all fifteen - and was very much upset when she could not remember any Kirghiz songs at all. But she knew at least one song from all the other Soviet republics, the names of which I had already learned by then.

From «At Night in the Narrow Small Streets of Riga» and «There the dark-complexioned Moldovan girl picked up grapes» to Belarus' «From a bag take a potato and eat it little by little». From Georgian «Suliko» to «You Are My Love, Azerbaijan». She even tried to sing some songs to me in the languages of the peoples of these republics, reproducing them on hearing how they sounded, after having heard them on the radio.

When somebody says to me now, «The USSR was an empire», I try to imagine a British mum singing to her children as lullabies Indian,

36 Refrain from the 60-s Soviet song "I am the Earth" devoted to pilots.
African or at the very least Irish songs and I cannot imagine it. One would need to have the imagination of a science fiction writer for that, and even that might not be enough. The attitude of most ordinary Englishmen (and accordingly, of their children brought up by them) to the (former) subjects of the British empire and their knowledge about these people, at the expense of whom they lived and continue to live even today, in the twenty first century, is still well described by words of a hero of an old play about Charley's Brazilian aunt: «So, the surname of your aunt is D'Alvadorez? Is she Irish or something?»

«The Silent Working Town» was my favourite song in Mum's repertoire. But when I persistently refused to sleep until she finished singing songs of all the fifteen republics of the USSR, Grandmother came to my Mum's help. In her repertoire there was one lullaby so old and so plaintive that I fell asleep quickly, just not to hear the end of it.

It began like this:
«It was evening, stars sparkled,
Outside things cracked from frost,
There was a baby walking on the street,
Turned blue and shivered...
«My God», the baby speaks,
I am cold and hungry...»

Further on it says there is nobody to shelter and warm the orphan and he will have to freeze in the street. And even the prospect that, probably, somebody would then feel sorry for the child and «will feed and warm him up», did not calm me. I imagined to myself this baby (though wrapped up in a black rabbit fur coat I had myself: I could not imagine «rags»), wandering in the dark, snow-covered street when all the people have taken cover beside their warm ovens - and literally all my being began to sob.

«Mum, why do you sing such a song to a child?» - my Mum could not stand it. But the Grandmother was wiser. So she brought me up with a feeling of compassion for people from the earliest days of my life. Already back then I correctly understood that what my Grandmother sang about was the Past: the terrible, disgusting, prehistoric past. An antiquity. In our time babies do not freeze in the streets. Each of them has a warm little bed, they all have loving people around them who look after them. And until recently I could not imagine that this disgusting, prehistoric past will return - moreover, will not just return, but will be presented to us as «freedom, democracy and unprecedented progress» in our lives. That, apparently, we have now returned to the bosom of civilisation from where we had temporarily dropped out when our babies - what a shame! - ceased to freeze in the streets for over seventy years!

...In the civilised West average parents do not sing lullabies to their children. Remember the Soviet film «This Merry Planet» and its «Couplets of Aliens?» “They give zero attention to the songs over there, so that they won't waste their voice in vain...» An average civilised parent cannot even imagine spending hours and hours sitting with the child every evening. Especially since the user’s manual - sorry, instructions for
upbringing! - for the children says nothing about how they can be put to sleep with the help of singing lullabies. A child should be locked in a separate room - after checking up first that it is not hungry, doesn't need a nappy change, and what is the room temperature. As a last resort, you can leave the night light on - and leave the child. After all, the parents have to spend some time together without it, «some quality time» as they call it - that is, with a cup of tea and at the TV, waiting for the next part of some soap opera or a fascinating talk show in which one woman tells how she has pulled «a three-inch bird's feather» out of her own nipple, and a doctor educates his millions-strong audience on «what the colour of your urine tells about you» (I am not joking, both examples are taken from popular British TV shows). How can one come away from something so fascinating for the sake of some little shouter? And as a general rule, let him get used to that, as Sonny used to say, «You were born alone and you will die alone».

«If a child who is locked in a separate room continues to cry», teach the Western experts, "you may approach the door and check up on him, whether everything is in order. But under no circumstances take him out of his bed and do not give him any eye contact. Otherwise he will never become silent.

He should understand from an early age that he will not receive any reward for crying».

Perhaps that is why these kiddies grow up into adults who with such sadistic pleasure torture the captives in Iraq today? Because their parents considered simple expressions of love for a child - to hold him in their hands, to hug him, to stroke him, to give a kiss, to calm him down - to be not just simply a waste of their own precious time, but a «harmful» business, «a reward for crying»? Because from early childhood these kids did not know what love is: not the quantity of Nike trainers bought by their parents, but that feeling of warmth and security which I remember so well when my granny swung me in a blanket, not thinking about any soap operas and colour of urine and about how to leave herself more free time after having dispersed all of us as far away as possible?

Perhaps for this reason mothers of our soldiers feel pain at the sight of all human sufferings, no matter where in the world. («I am a mother too, and I do not want suffering for the other mothers and their children as well»), while so many mothers of US soldiers are proud of their sonnies in the service of the modern fascism and begin to think about what their «nice boys» were actually doing in other countries only after their bodies are brought back home in zinc coffins? It is obvious that nobody sang to these mothers when they were children, any lullabies about the freezing baby. And as well as their own children, they too, have probably grown up falling asleep under monotonous sounds of clockwork musical toys attached to cradles, summoned to ease «an unbearable parental fate»...

...With each new song sung to me by my relatives, my child's outlook broadened. Soon I learned about the existence of other countries and about such phenomena as friendship of peoples:

«There was a Bulgarian on the banks of Danube,
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She has thrown a flower in the water...
This flower the Slovaks have seen
From their bank,
They began to throw scarlet poppies,
That were accepted by the river.
Danube, Danube, can you tell us,
Where is whose gift?
Flower to flower you can plait a diadem,
Let it be beautiful and bright».

«March on, we go towards an ideal
Knowing that we have to prevail
For the sake of peace and prosperity
We all fight for freedom.

Forward Cubans
Cuba will award our gallantry
Because we are soldiers
Who go on to liberate the fatherland
To clean up with fire
What has been devastated by this infernal plague
Of undesirable rulers
And insatiable tyrants
Who made Cuba
Sink in the mess...»

Before I started school I already knew by heart a little poem:
«If one says the word «Motherland»,
At once in memory rises
Your old house, blackcurrant in the garden,
Thin poplar at the gate...»

I did not yet know then how lucky I was. Lucky that we weren’t «civilised». There, where I grew up, everything was living and breathing in the connection between the generations, connection between the past and the present: my grandfather still wore the padded jacket of the late 1920-s style, the one like they show now in the film «Dog’s Heart», and on our table there still stood the same glass jug my grandparents had, and the clock we had hanging on the wall belonged to Grandad’s parents, and every morning the mother of my friend Katya passed by our windows with buckets full of water hanging on a shoulder yoke, back from the water pump... And high above our house, on «a mountain» as the local hillock was called, in the shadow of huge poplars, brand new Czech trams that creaked on the turns until late at night, would take you to the city centre in twenty minutes...

Today, as they assure us, we just have another little bit to go, one last jump - and my Motherland with its black currants in the garden whose smell I still remember, will finally become «civilized». Will finally enter the world where children actually do not have grandmothers and
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granddads, there are no fairy tales before going to sleep, there are no outdoor games in streets - and that's probably why there is also no compassion towards street children or to anybody else. «Burn, motherfucker, burn!» - cries out an American soldier from his tank in Iraq, shooting civilians at close range, under the sounds of hard rock music coming from his ear-phones: a fellow who has grown up with a joystick in his hand...

Do we really want this? The world where housewives do not cook their own jam («We will break the habit of Russian women cooking jam!» - some German canneries bragged at the very beginning of «democracy», as if it was some valid criterion of our progress). The world where people change their objects of affection like gloves, loving not what's in their heart, but what is «in» («in fashion»): only in «uncivilised» Russia people still remember who are «Smokey», Afric Simone and «Boney M» - and we love them! The world where people put their feet on a seat in public transport right next to a special sign that it is forbidden to do so (in the USSR we never even needed such sign - none of us would even think of doing this). Probably because of «totalitarianism» and «lack of freedom».

The world where nobody, except foreigners from Eastern Europe (out of long habit) and from the Third World, knows that it would be nice to give up your place in the public transport to old people, disabled, pregnant women and young children... The World where you cannot name things straight by their names.

The world in which you are not allowed to call a racist a racist, if he has a thick purse (that's "defamation"!). The world where it is impossible to have your own opinion, different from what «is acceptable» to think (or, at least, it is impossible to express this different opinion aloud)?

In this world there is no place for children's lullabies with which my knowledge of the world began. Because the less a future consumer and future canon fodder knows, and the less he learns to think and to feel, the better.

Lullabies remain for him something abnormal, associated with «the underdeveloped» (bad) countries: recently in the West local «anti globalists» even produced a CD with lullabies from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Cuba and North Korea, under the name «Lullabies From «The Axis of Evil»!»

...They sang lullabies to me in turns back at home, and I slept in the same bed with all my relatives in turns, and none of us would even get an idea that there might be anything «indecent» in that. And I remember to this day the smell of each of my family members close to me. And that feeling of peace and confidence in tomorrow that each of them radiated.

...Unlike my quiet Grandmother, my Grandfather Ilya was a person with an explosive temperament, but very easily appeased. He could say some nasty things to you (within the limits of decency: he did not use obscene words, but he was very categorical and sharp in his valuations of others and very direct, almost like the Dutch!), but then he would walk around you with a guilty look and try to soften down his words. He deeply respected my Grandmother. Though it wasn't easy for her to live with him
because of his difficult character: at home my grandfather never rowed, instead he had a habit of going out to get «a discussion» with neighbours! My Grandmother in such moments heroically blocked his way, and he then went to lie down on a trestle bed that served to him as an ordinary bed, beside the furnace in the kitchen, drank some cucumber brine and groaned: «Oh, what a fool I am! Oh, I feel so bad! I will never drink anymore!»

As well as the majority of our men, Grandfather Ilya had no objection to drink, - and because at work he had easy access to spirits, at some stage this problem had grown to almost catastrophic proportions. In those days men were punished strictly for bingeing at work, as far as imprisonment - and Ilya «took on» some alcohol literally five minutes before the end of his working day, and then ran in a gallop to the entrance checkpoints of his factory, «before it hits you». By the time he approached home, he was already semi-bent...

My Grandmother and my Grandfather also got acquainted at that factory where they worked together in the chemical/galvanic laboratory. My Grandfather was a galvaniser by profession. Having only gone up to seventh class at school, he could not always express himself accurately in writing and put his thoughts clearly on the paper, - and that's where the Grandmother came to his aid. After her editing, his thoughts took readable form, and the Grandfather brought more than one innovation and improvement by his suggestions and received more than one award for it at his factory.

In the course of time the Grandfather settled. Before retirement he now drank only on big holidays and only in good company. And I did not see him in his most «madcap» years. I was three years old when the Grandfather retired. I remember even how we went together to his factory to sign up for his pension.

And in a sober state he was simply fantastic: worked at home and in the garden non-stop, both in summer and in winter. He found himself something to do all the time: was bringing firewood from the forest, fixing something, digging the garden, hilling potatoes, ran in the mornings with his little milk can to get some milk... He told me stories made up by himself - about sixteen little girls who lived by themselves, without parents in a house in the Metalworkers Street (I searched there for their house for a long time!). Yulia, the eldest girl, was sixteen. Alenka and Vika, the youngest, were five. There were always some improbable adventures happening with these girls, most often they had different little animals getting into their backpacks when they went to the forest to pick up some mushrooms: from a rabbit to a squirrel.

«Alenka sits in the electric train, suddenly the backpack gives her su-u-uch a push to her side!» - told the Grandfather to me for the hundredth time, to my same full delight as for the first time. And he also told me true stories - about his cat for whom he carried pancakes from his work, from the factory canteen in hungry years, and the cat knew precisely at what time he came from work and waited for him at the street corner; and about his other cat - the rat catcher. And about a pig that danced a waltz when somebody played an accordion in the street,
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and knocked down with his snout a neighbour whom it disliked for some reason.

Grandfather sang to me his own version of a song «In a Field there Stood a Birch Tree» in which there were strange mysterious words «choovil na choovil, choovil na vil-vil-vil-vill» (we never found out what they meant!), he took me with him to pick mushrooms in the forest and to fish, he made me a swing in the vegetable garden, went with me along the railway to get the spring water and to swim in the river. And he pulled me on a sledge in the winter. From Grandfather I learned even before I started going to school the names of various trees and plants. This constantly amazed my Western acquaintances. («How have you learned how all these trees are called?») I also learned from him which mushrooms are edible and which are not (Sonny was horrified when I brought boletus - the best mushrooms in the world! - from the Dutch forest and tried to fry them for him!) and how to dig potatoes (however, the Grandfather did not trust any of us with this important job all the same!).

We still lived in his parents’ house, in an old part of the city - very close to the city centre, but living there felt almost as in a village. All of us there knew each other personally, - however in due course more and more migrants from the countryside started to appear in our city, whom the Grandfather, born and bred city man, could not stand. It was their another way of life, other behaviour: constant nibbling of sunflower seeds on the street, petty-bourgeois love for (often tasteless) material things and for money, desire «to live so that Manya and Tanya would envy me» - all these trademarks of theirs were disgusting to him, and he always openly spoke about it. He also was a genuine pigeon fancier, like many of our born and bred city men of his generation.

When we had something especially tasty at home, the Grandfather never ate this tasty stuff: «keep it for the kids» (for us); but when food then began to get bad, he ate it - «so that we won't have to throw it out». He won’t waste even a crumb. All stale bread went to pigeons, for everything else too there was some use. I have been brought up in such traditions, so that even now, almost twenty years later, I am horrified to see how fussy Westerners throw out still perfectly good food by the tonne...

Grandfather Ilya was also born and grew up in a family of generations of factory workers, the Ilyichev family. Great-grandmother Marfa, his mother, was a very strict woman. Great-grandfather Semyon, his father, veteran of the First World war (actually, they should not have taken him into the army, because he was a father with many children, but some merchant son had bought himself out of it, and instead of him they had dispatched Semyon to the frontline). He died young, just 46 years old, - of dysentery; and Marfa alone raised six children (some others died in early childhood). The Grandfather spoke about her with invariable respect and only chuckled at how during the February revolution «my mother went on demonstrations and shouted: «Freedom! Freedom!» (and he demonstrated in a very comical way her high pitched voice). Once in his childhood he also saw «the saint» Nikolay Romanov whom he recollected with contempt. («Such a bedraggled fellow, he looked like a plucked hen,
in his miserable military coat, sitting on a horse... You wouldn't even notice him next to our governor!») He was the only one of all my relatives who still remembered «the old world» (during the Revolution he was ten) - and he could not say anything good about it.

For two years Ilya went to a pre-revolutionary grammar school and still remembered such, for us, prehistoric subjects as «religious studies». However, the Grandfather did not go to church and was unaffected by religion. He did not like priests. In the days of the Civil war Ilya as the senior man in his family (he was just a teenager), took desperately dangerous trips to Ukraine: to exchange things for bread. He told us how he travelled underneath train cars, and how once during one such trip of his he was whipped by batka (father) ataman Makhno\textsuperscript{38}.

The Grandfather was a very good looking guy but very few girls could cope with his character: straight, sharp, sarcastic. He was not one of those fellows who know how to court girls romantically. On the contrary, he could for example bring hydrogen sulphide with him in a tube from work to the dancehall, hide this test tube in his pocket and open it secretly during the most romantic dance with the girl...

Grandfather was never a communist. He never joined the party. But on the other hand almost all the family of his future wife were active members of Komsomol and of the party: the Grandmother and her sister were Komsomol activists, and their two brothers even became professional party workers. The eldest of them, also Ilya, began to work in a metal plant when he was nine (!) years old and joined the party in 1917 at the age of 17. This later led the Pozdnyakov family to endure much hardship in the 1930's. Ilya and his brother Vladimir were arrested as «enemies of the people». Ilya by then worked in Leningrad close to S.M. Kirov. Little Tamara (we'll hear about her later on) was arrested for some time, and my Grandmother Sima, lost her job. She told a colleague with whom she was walking to work that morning, that she was intending to go to the Communist Party committee, to tell about the arrest of her brother (that was required back then). Great was her surprise when she was called to the Communist Party committee before she was even able to get there! «I felt it was my duty to inform them» - declared her colleague to her without a shade of embarrassment, that same colleague whom she had trusted with her plans. Well, in those years (as well as now) such behaviour was not an exception. Human meanness has nothing to do with communism. And they all knew it, Little Tamara and my Grandmother, and their brothers.

The Grandmother's brother for ever remained a convinced communist. He settled in the Ural Mountains, eventually became the Honorary Citizen\textsuperscript{39} of a small town there and sometimes came to us on a

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{38} Nestor Makhno (1888-1934) was a Ukrainian anarcho-communist guerrilla leader turned army commander who led an independent anarchist army in Ukraine during the Russian Civil War.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{39} The title of Honorary Citizen was awarded in the Soviet Union to the citizens who actively participated in the revolutionary movement and establishment of the Soviet authority, shown high courage and heroism in the struggle against German-
visit. I remember how he, already elderly and absolutely bald, remarkably sang with a young, strong voice. And how he laughingly recollected his prison years: «For what we have struggled, into that we have run!»

He didn't have any rage, any hard feelings about Stalin. Interesting (by the way, has somebody ever collected memoirs of the ordinary people living at the time of the reforms of Peter the Great? I am sure, there were no less and maybe even more of «the offended ones» than during Stalin’s times!

...Pozdnyakovs got off lightly: the brothers were banished to the Ural Mountains for twenty years, and the sisters found other work. Little Tamara worked after that for over forty years in the regional sports committee as a secretary. She liked to recollect not the arrest, but how she had written a letter to Stalin, complaining of injustice, and Stalin sorted it all out, understood it all and «had given her a permit to go to a resort». Putyovka to the Black Sea. And for Sima her future husband helped to arrange a new job. They knew each other from her old work place. All their life he laughed at her and her sister: «Komsomol members, in red kerchiefs!» When the Grandfather wanted to tease them, he made a serious face and began like this: «Lev Davydovich (Trotsky) was so clear-headed... And what an orator, you know!» - and glanced at them cunningly with the corner of his eye.

In 1941 Grandfather departed to the frontline. Before that he asked my Grandmother to wait for him. The battles near Leningrad were so severe that he survived only because he was wounded and was carried to the hospital in time. According to him, nobody else from his detachment survived. I remember how he said that the anaesthetic they used for his operation, cuts life short by seven years. If Grandfather had lived for seven more years, he would have lived through the dissolution of the Soviet Union, through the Gaidar-Chubais robbery of our people, fascist aggressors during the Great Patriotic war, having special merits in the field of industrial, economic and cultural construction.

40 Putyovka - authorization to a sanatorium or health resort in the Soviet Union. In 1919, V. I. Lenin signed a decree transferring all health resorts and therapeutic localities to the republics to be used for therapeutic purposes providing rest and treatment for more than 19 million people. Patients were selected and sent for sanatorium and health resort treatment following the order established by the Ministry of Public Health, in collaboration with the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. Patients were sent to sanatorium and health resort establishments often without charge, at reduced prices, or sometimes at full cost.

41 Yegor Gaidar (1956-2009) was the Acting Prime Minister of Russia from 15 June 1992 to 14 December 1992. He was best known as the architect of the controversial shock therapy reforms administered in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union which resulted in mass poverty. Many Russians hold him responsible for the economic hardships that continues plagueing the country today.

Anatoly Chubais (born 1955) is a Russian business manager who was responsible for privatisation in Russia as an influential member of Boris Yeltsin's administration. His methods of privatisation produced gross unfairness and social tensions.
through all our today’s reality that is worth the pen of Gorky and Gogol⁴². Knowing his character, I can certainly say he wouldn’t have kept quiet and wouldn’t just have accepted it all.

And that means he wouldn’t have lived for long after it: Maybe it is even better that he hasn’t seen any of it?

After the war they had two children, my Mum and my uncle Shurek. «We had an amazingly happy childhood!» - my Mum recollects. «So interesting, so full of events and things to do!» And also, he inherited the upbringing of his niece, a fifteen year-old daughter of his sister, who was left an orphan. She lived together with Ilya and Sima for another fifteen years, until her marriage. And all her life she spoke well of him.

...When I was still a student, the Grandfather had a brain hemorrhage. Because he worried too much about the Grandmother who had to go to a hospital for a while. With the Grandmother all appeared to be in order, but the Grandfather was left paralysed. With great difficulty we pulled him out of a cellar where it happened to him. We phoned for an ambulance: it took us around forty minutes to find a working phone booth, and then three or four more hours we waited for the doctors. The doctors who were already «reconstructed» (by Perestroika - reconstruction), arrived, looked at him and told us: «Well, what do you want? That’s an old person...» - and left.

Grandfather still lived for almost two years, without getting up. His head was fully in order, and it was very embarrassing for him that he caused us «so much hassle» - in order to look after him. In some rare minutes of blackout he once asked my Grandmother: «Are you married?» From shocked surprise she had to sit down: «Ilyusha, what do you ask? Certainly, I am married!» «It is a pity», - he said. «Why?» «I wanted to invite you to the cinema...»

Mum tried to put him back on his feet - with various medicines, massages, therapies, - and they almost got there. If it wasn't for the attending GP who once came to our house, found my Granddad sitting in his bed and exclaimed with astonishment, without thinking: «Wow, Ilya Semenyich! You are sitting up! And I thought you will never get up anymore...». After that he didn’t make any attempts to get out of the bed anymore.

In November, 1990 my Grandfather died in his sleep. He was never a party member, he was critical, but he was a deeply Soviet person in his character, and he died just shortly before our country disappeared from the map.

One can say he was lucky in this sense: without suspecting it himself, he left our world along with a whole era... In many respects it was a tragic epoch, but even more so - a heroic and a wonderful epoch, unlike

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⁴² Aleksey Gorky (1868 -1936) - Soviet writer, a founder of the socialist realism literary method.

Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) was a Ukrainian-born Russian novelist, humourist, and dramatist. His most famous works "Taras Bulba", "Dead Souls", "The Inspector-General", "Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka" as well as his biography are studied in depth in all Russian Schools.
the one which has come to replace it: a lot more tragic, but also stupid to
the point of caricature, hopelessly dark and ridiculous in the senselessness
with which people lose their honour, dignity, health and life itself, every
day... An Epoch of Time Lost...

My name is Yevgenia. Yevgenia Kalashnikova. This surname I
inherited from my other Grandmother, a Kuban Cossack woman. And my
first name I got in honour of my aunt, cousin of my Mother, my grand-
dad's niece whom he reared.

I was born in the year of the 50th anniversary of the Great October
Revolution, and not only myself, but at that time my parents did not know
any other life except the Soviet one. As I already said, at that time we did
not yet understand to what extent we were lucky. To be born in this
country and in this particular period of history, if you compare it with the
world history of mankind, was far greater luck than to win some miserable
million dollars or euro in the lottery. The life around us - quiet, steady,
without fears and stress, without humiliations and tears - seemed natural
to us, like a fresh wind in springtime. It felt as if there simply could not
be any other life.

I come from an average size city in Central Russia. When I was
little, I sincerely did not understand, why Moscow was the capital of both
USSR and Russia. «Let Moscow remain capital of USSR, and let our city be
the capital of Russia!» - I was saying quite seriously to my relatives. (It
was much the same as with children's egocentrism: I was surprised, when I
met children younger than myself: why have them, if, after all, I was
already born! Why do people still want children?) Moscow was nearby
geographically, but at the same time it was far: it was associated with
something stately, solemn and bright.

I visited Moscow for the first time when I was two years old.
Naturally I do not remember anything about it. Mum tells me that I fell
asleep next to the monument of the first printer, Ivan Fedorov\textsuperscript{43} - and
then slept almost until we got home. Our small city - green in summer and
covered by snow in winter, with wide floods on the river in spring and
such tasty apples in autumn - consisted of the ancient two-storeyed city
centre, a couple of quarters with new high rise apartment blocks - five or
nine stores (for us they were such a novelty that my friends and I
sometimes went there - just to go up and down in the elevator!) And the
rest consisted of two ancient city working class semi-villages with one-
storeyed small houses covered with iron roofs and surrounded with
gardens and vegetable plots. In some places there was no asphalt yet, and
the roadway was paved with cobble-stones. When I grew up a bit, it
became a huge pleasure for me to go round our quarter on a bicycle. I
knew all the little holes on the road and imagined myself to be a
courageous horseman on a fiery horse - a fighter for the people's
interests...\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{43} Ivan Fedorov (1520-1583) - was a first known Russian printer. He is also
considered to be the founder of book printing in Ukraine. He worked in Moscow.
His first dated book "Apostle" was printed in 1563-64 in Lviv (Western Ukraine).
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My parents divorced soon. Separated when I was two, officially divorced when I was four. Divorces back then were still rare enough, but my mum was a very emancipated woman (she was one of the first women in our city who began to wear trousers), and if something was not to her liking, it was not on. There was no way to stop her. Sometimes it seems to me that it would have been better, if she, with her character, was born a man, and my father (in as much as I can form for myself a picture of his character from stories about him) - as a woman. Then, maybe, their union would have had a chance.

As a matter of fact, I do not remember at all what my father was like (except that I know what he looked like, from his photos), but never in all the years of my childhood did I feel I was deprived of anything. At home we had two wonderful men: my grandfather and my uncle Shurek, my mum’s younger brother whom I even stopped calling an uncle when I was about five: he became simply my best friend. And looking at some fathers of my schoolmates, in those years I sometimes just rejoiced that my parents had divorced! So, to feel sorry for me would have been not appropriate at all.

Mum worked at a factory as an engineer (when I was born, she was still a student, and my father was a post-graduate student), by the time I turned fifteen, she became the chief of a big factory department, she loved her work, she earned good money (and the further up, the better!), my daddy regularly paid the alimony and was not showing up (I was even grateful to him that he didn’t. Not only because I would not know at all how to behave myself with him and what to speak to him about, but also because he did not intrude upon the joys of my childhood. Nobody dragged me under compulsion into different houses during week-ends as happens with children of the divorced parents in the West, whether the children want it or not: because «the father too has his rights». I believe that all these court decisions about visits are made not so much in the interest of the child, as in the interest of the other parent, and they can even be harmful to the child. I am very grateful to my father that he was not such an egoist and did not disturb my happy childhood!

...Father came once to my school after lessons when I had already hit fifteen. I did not even recognise him at all at first. I just looked at him and thought: «Oh, what impudent eyes! Just like mine when I behave cheeky...» - and only at this thought I guessed it was he. He came to congratulate me with my 15th birthday and he too felt awkward. Both of us, predictably, did not know what to say. He pushed into my hands some technical book: «Of course, you will not understand anything here, but it is one of my scientific publications». He was right: resistance of materials did not interest me too much, though I was the A pupil in all the subjects, except for PE (I did not take after my dad: he in his youth was the regional sprinting champion!) «Well, and what’s your character like?» - he asked. I have shrugged my shoulders. How can I possibly describe briefly to a stranger my own character?

«I often have mood swings. Sometimes I feel good, but then for no particular reason I feel like crying» He nodded: «It is familiar to me...»
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Now I have normal good relations both with him and with his new family.

...Sometimes my other grandmother, a Cossack woman speaking with a strong, nearly excessively sweet southern accent, came to visit me by car, together with my other grandfather. She used to call me «my little fish», using an Ukrainian caressing expression. When my parents still lived together, this grandmother-Cossack received a nickname from me, «The Wall» because we used to play like this: I banged my feet at the high white tiled wall of her furnace (the only thing I remember well from her whole house!), and she swore at the furnace for that: «Bad Wall, do not beat little Zhenya!» Then after me my whole mum's family began to call her that name her that: «Zhenya, go, your grandma The Wall has arrived on a visit!» And for me each time it was a bit awkward: from my mum I heard a couple of uninhibited stories about this grandmother (two women, probably, simply could not get on together, but in childhood, of course, you trust only your mum and only her version!). «Your grandma wrapped you in old rags from granddad's garage instead of a nappy», «your grandma is a pathological liar: she tried to palm off to me a rabbit for dinner instead of a chicken, knowing I do not eat rabbits!» ...If she really was this type of a woman, why did I still have to meet her? «It is necessary, Zhenia, it is necessary!» - sighed my relatives and sent me out to see her.

Grandmother the Wall strongly smelt as perfume (she was one of those grandmothers who always remain «just forty five»), and she brought me all sorts of tasty things, like hard smoked sausages (she worked as a cashier in a grocery shop). And she also brought some exotic things: Georgian sweets called churchkhela (hazelnuts covered with dried grape juice that tasted a bit like rubber) and a multi-coloured long eared Abkhazian knitted hat made of sheep wool. Her mother, my great-grandmother, a Cossack woman too, was married to a Georgian, and they lived in Abkhazia on the Black sea coast. People said the great-grandmother Nastya had such a stern temper that the whole village was rather afraid of her, despite the fact that she was small and thin. The Georgian husband laughed behind her back: «You know, how I became the real boss in the house? I never contradict her, but then I always do everything my own way! And that's how I became the real boss in the house...» Grandma Nastya who was a bit hard of hearing heard only the last phrase: «Who is the boss in the house? You are the boss in the house?!» «No, no, I didn't say anything, darling...» - backed down grandfather Vakhtang... Their Georgian daughter-in-law said that when grandma Nastya goes to them for a visit, their dog senses her from the other end of the village, howls and hides!

I ate the smoked sausage with pleasure, and the Grandfather - my grandmother's second husband (whom she married after the father of my father, a handsome young Soviet officer originally from the Volga region, was killed at the frontline in Poland in 1944) - tall as a telegraph pole, thin Ukrainian - drove us around the neighbourhood in his white «Volga» car, to delight of all my street friends. He too was a frontline soldier - a war time driver and he brought from the war a couple of beautiful Hungarian handmade embroideries (which, according to my mum, and
grandmother, the Wall was giving out as her own needlework at some competitions. Even if it were so, did it do anybody any harm?) and a ridiculous phrase book, that taught our soldiers how to give refined compliments to Hungarian girls. By the way, it was published certainly not by the Soviet command, but by Hungarians themselves! At home we laughed loudly, even to tears in our eyes, when we read it!

The Grandfather took great interest in hunting and sometimes brought me as a gift soft hare tails which fell down so funny, spinning around, if you threw them from a height. He spoke little, but smoked a lot. Everybody called this grandfather by his patronymic - «Porfirich». Nobody was bothered at all that one of my grandfathers was Ukrainian, and the great-grandfather Georgian. Just as it didn't bother anybody that my great-great-grandmother on the other side was Polish. Or that the best friend of my second cousin was Korean (more than that, this friend of his was literally adored by the whole city! It was almost as if they would carry him shoulder high). On the ethnic question people were innocent and pure: only the personal qualities of anyone counted for them. «Izya, so, who are you, a Tatar?» - asked one of my mum's classmate, another classmate with the name Israel, quite seriously. «You, silly woman! I am a Jew!» «Oh, really? A real one?» - she exclaimed with delight. «Well of course, real - what do you think I am, a toy one?» «And it is also written in your passport that you are a Jew? Listen, let me have a look at it, will you? I have never seen it!»

Once the grandmother and the grandfather brought with them a snotty black-eyed chubby boy and told me that it was my younger brother. The boy was called the same as grandfather - Petr, Petrusha. He was five years younger than me. We were asked to hold hands, and to both of us it was very awkward - after all, we actually did not know each other. Though I always wished to have brothers and sisters - but to me it somehow automatically concerned my mum.... And my mum did not want more children. "Look, how good it is: you don't have to share anything with anybody!" Later on I eventually got used to this idea myself. And I became quite an egoist, like many in my generation...

Soon grandfather Petro became ill and died, the car was sold, and the grandmother could not come to me any more. Not that it was absolutely impossible: though she lived quite a distance from us, she could reach our house within an hour by bus and tram. But, probably it was already difficult for her. And I just sighed with relief and did not see her anymore (nor Petrusha either) - till I became twenty seven...

I try to recollect at least something of how we lived before the divorce of my parents - but nothing emerges in my memory, except some latent feeling of anxiety. I remember only that I was brought all the time from one house to another, from one grandmother to the hostel where my parents then lived, and from there to another grandmother and back. I did not like the hostel very much, my stomach started to turn when the tram only approached it. And when mum divorced my father at last and returned to her parents, I was just glad about it, because I finally had a home. I didn't have to leave for anywhere any more. It is a great thing, guys - a feeling of being home!! You don't even know how great. It is such
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a thing, even the memories of which make you happy - doesn't matter how big your actual house was and what the furnishings were like...

I do not remember any parental quarrels or scandals. Only from my grandmother Sima I heard that once my mum came home with a black eye and cried bitterly, but when the grandmother began to console her, she said proudly: «I cry because I feel so sorry for Gagarin!» That day our first cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin has died in a plane crash...

...And that's how we began to live: me, my Mum, the Grandfather, the Grandmother and Shurek.

Grandmother's sister, Little Tamara (Little Tamara) was another person in our household, a visiting member of the family. «Tamara-hospital attendant» as I called her, after children's verses «Me and Tamara walk in pair, hospital attendants are me and Tamara». Little Tamara and Shurek were my best friends. About Shurek we'll have more later.

Little Tamara was quite an eccentric woman - with an angel-like character. She could easily go out of doors with two different socks on - if she had not found a pair. I think that in all her life she did not hurt even a fly. To me she seemed a person without age, though actually she was three years older than my grandmother. Small, thin, with a hairstyle of the 1930s, she was able to carry out all household tasks a man might do and often did something eccentric, like do-it-yourself «restoration» of an old icon which she had at her place: «I freshened up that icon a bit!» - she told us, showing a brightly painted Holy Mary: «It became far too faded!»

I always waited with impatience for the weekends: on both Saturdays and Sundays Little Tamara came to us for almost the whole day. When she was on her annual leave, she came to us every day. But she stayed overnight only once a year - for New Year's night. And I really loved to visit her, in her old house on the other end of the city where some pieces of my mum's furniture still stood (she received it after the divorce, but at our house there was simply no place to put it). In the backyard Little Tamara had old cherry trees and plum trees and an old neighbour Tonya - in a separate house (she and Little Tamara had a common backyard). Little Tamara could bake extremely tasty, piping hot, light as air pancakes (for some reason, my grandmother's pancakes just never turned out like hers) and she played hide-and-seek with me. She, of course, knew perfectly well where my favourite hiding place was: behind her wardrobe, but each time she pretended she could not find me...

In her house she had a heap of interesting knickknacks which aren't really of any use, but are so great for children to play with: on Saturdays she liked to search for any amusing souvenirs in shops with marked-down prices. And another thing we liked to do together was walk around the quarter, observing different cars passing by (trying to guess what colour the next one will be!) and classifying chimneys of the houses we were passing by, according to their shape (in our classification there were about twenty different kinds: from «candle end in the wind» to my favourite «old Boyar house»), and we also went for a ride to the city on trams. The
The tram ticket cost only three kopecks (the price of a glass of sparkling water with syrup from an automatic machine - very tasty, burning your tongue, not to compare with some «Coca Cola» tasting like soap!) And with this ticket we could go for a ride in circles, on that one tram for the whole day long! Only if you changed it for another, you had to buy a new ticket. I had favourite places where I went with great pleasure by tram. For example, around one wooden house in Zarechye (over the river) - the tram passed so close to it that it almost touched its fence, and made a full circle around it! I was wondering a lot what it was like for the people to live in that house. In our quarter there was also one such unusual house: a two-storeyed, brick house that stood literally end-to-end to the railway, and next to a bend. This house was covered with huge trees on all other sides, I never saw anybody either entering or coming out of it, and this made it even more mysterious. But people certainly lived in it: there were fresh plants growing behind the windows, the curtains were clean, and from time to time somebody changed them... Interesting, but was it scary to be there at night? Then one day Mum told me that before the war a girl lived there in whom my grandfather once took a great interest, with a strange name «Rufa»...

Little Tamara also took me to the park for amusements. The park was far away, and I went there, but not every week. Each visit there was like a kind of holiday. To get me ready for this visit, they put on my head huge stiff ribbons, as people did with all girls of my generation back then. I loved the swing most of all, and the most hated bit for me was the «big wheel» because I am awfully afraid of heights, just like my father. In the one where you could drive around on hired little pedal cars I loved tremendously. Cheerful music played there the whole day, children ran with balloons, and their enthusiastic squealing accompanied their feeding of cheeky nice little red squirrels with nuts and cookies. And then we ate wonderful fruit ice-cream in small wafer «horns» for seven kopecks and went home by tram...

Mum took me to the park also - on her days off and sometimes in the evenings after work when she went there with her colleagues on a VPW- Voluntary People's Watch44. «Combatants» as they were called using an old Russian word, walked usually in threes, slowly as if on a promenade, with red bandages around their arms. They were armed with a whistle - in case of need to call for militia. Their task was to keep an eye on good order and prevent any hooliganism. But there was nothing to prevent, really. For all the time I was with my mum on this watch I remember only one occasion when their intervention was required: it was with a drunk citizen who has sprawled asleep on a lawn. That was serious...

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44 Voluntary People's Watch were voluntary detachments for maintaining public order in the Soviet Union similar to the Neighborhood Watch. The VPW were not subordinated to militsiya and the management staff was established from various Soviet organizations: Soviets, trade unions, Komsomol, etc. The patrolling volunteers themselves were often accompanied by police officers, for general guidance and official support. Although the organisation was informal, volunteers could perform citizen arrests of various petty offenders: drunkards, hooligans, etc.
for those times, a «state of emergency»! And there was also in our
everyday life a district militiaman whom we all knew by name and
patronymic and who also knew everybody who lived in his district and
often just came to people for a chat, to get to know them, to find out if
they had any complaints. The militiaman was a well-respected person, not
«a cop» like today. He was an authority figure even for disobedient
children: to tell them, «I will tell the militiaman about you "was an
extreme measure" if all other measures failed.

And when many years later, during the days of perestroika, for the
first time in my life I saw a militiaman in Moscow with a baton hanging
from his side, at first I could not believe my eyes. Whom was he going to
beat with it? What need was there to do such thing? Back then there were
neither mass riots yet, nor hooliganism, nor such criminality as today. This
sight seemed to me so ridiculous that I was simply choking with laughter.
The militiaman did not see me - I walked behind him and could not resist
taking his picture with my camera that I had in my hand: to show at
home, otherwise they might not believe me. Passers-by noticed what I
was doing, looked at the militiaman and they too began to laugh, but he
was still unaware of the whole commotion.

But there was nothing to laugh about... The thing is that it was no
longer our militiaman, not a Soviet one, and now there was somebody he
had to protect from the people with baton charges. We simply did not
know it yet, at least that should have given me food for thought. It
looked like in order «to return to the civilised world», to move on to «new
thinking» and to adopt «universal human values», it was necessary to arm
militiamen with batons, first of all. Nice «universal values» they were,
needless to say...

...Just like my Grandfather, Little Tamara told me a lot of
different stories that she made up herself. Her stories were about Vicka: a
naughty red haired little girl from whose mischief nobody could escape.
Vicka was the daughter of «a widow called Tamara» (I have made it up
that Tamara was a widow: after all, she did get Vicka from somewhere!) and
younger sister of a reasonably serious girl called Toma. Vicka did all
the tricks I wouldn't have dared to do myself: ate sour cream with a shoe
instead of a spoon, secretly remained at the cinema after the end of the
film for the following session and fought with Swedes (Swedes at that time
temporarily became my invented enemy No1, thanks to the Latvian film

Of course, Little Tamara wasn't a widow at all. She did not have a
family. In her youth they called her in the street «Tamara - The Trendy», and,
alike her sister Sima, she had a set of boyfriends - in the old, non-
physical sense of the word. Especially the military. But exactly for this

45 Riga Film Studio was founded in Latvia by the Soviet government in 1940 on
the base of several smaller private studios. The Studio was making from 10 -15
films a year, out of which half where full screen movies. Its screen pavilions were
and still remain the biggest in Northern Europe. Since the end of 80's however film
production has virtually stopped. The film «Servants of the Devil on the Devil's
Mill» was made in 1972 and became one of the favourite Soviet comedies.
reason she never married: to marry a military man would mean having to move along with him around the country, and her mother became ill with cancer... And Little Tamara who by then was the only one of her children still living with her, stayed to look after her....

Some say that old spinsters are some kind of evil, frustrated creatures angry with life who do not know how to deal with children. Those who say so have never met our Little Tamara. There was not a drop of resentment in her that her life happened to be the way it was. With laughter she told us about her old «boyfriends». She considered my Mum and Shurek to be her children, and me to be her grand daughter. Mum and Shurek called her «Godmother» (they were still christened in childhood, out of habit or tradition), and I - the only non-baptised one in our family - called her more informally: just Tamara. Little Tamara was the only one in our family who knew when Easter was each year. And the only one who once a year went to the church: on Easter's eve, to bless Paskha and Kulich46. In spite of the fact that our family was not religious at all, we did celebrate Easter at home: with the preparation of these special Easter foods and painting hard boiled eggs. I liked two things at Easter: Paskha - white, sweet cheesecake with raisins (you could eat it only once a year) and that on this day, apparently, you could kiss anybody: with words «Christ has risen!» (I imagined myself kissing with these words Gojko Mitic47 who was kidnapped from the Earth to join the crew of my spaceship!). You had to reply, «Truly so, he has risen!» Who was this Christ and why he had risen I knew vaguely. Probably it was that fellow who was painted in the old icon hanging in the corner of our house (actually, in this icon it wasn't he, but St. Nicholas).

But Little Tamara did have another family too: all the sportsmen of our region! All of them knew her from her work. She was well respected, people consulted her on different questions, even about their private lives.

To go to her place of work was extremely interesting: and not just because it was possible there to meet without ceremony any local sports celebrity, but also because it was a unique place where I could use the typewriter! Of course, I typed all sorts of nonsense, like a daily schedule for the crew of my spaceship..., but it looked to me like a very important and interesting place to work. Little Tamara spent forty five years behind her typewriter...

Little Tamara got us tickets for the velodrome. From time immemorial cycling was for our city what football was for Manchester. In this velodrome my grandfather and grandmother spent all the weekends...

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46 Paskha - a traditional Easter dish made from tvorog (unsalted dry and crumbly cottage cheese).

Kulich - is a kind of Easter bread, traditional in the Orthodox Christian faith - Russia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Serbia. In recipe kulich is quite similar to italian panettone.

47 Gojko Mitic (born 1940) is a Serbian director, actor, stuntman, and author. He is known for a series of Westerns from the GDR DEFA Studios, featuring Native Americans as the heroes, rather than white settlers as in American Westerns.
of their young years. There spent all their childhood and youth there, my mum and Shurek. And I have practically grown up there too. Though none of us was a cyclist (only Shurek used to cycle on the highway in the summer - for pleasure!). We were fans!

It was almost impossible to buy tickets for important competitions. The people sat even on the trees around the velodrome - on high poplars. People came to the velodrome with their whole families, in their best festive attire - as if going to a theatre. If during the competitions the rain began, the people did not disperse, but sheltered from it, hoping it would stop. And then they sat and patiently waited until the track would dry up...

The finals usually began near evening on Sunday. The sprinting was my most beloved part of the programme. I remember as if it was yesterday, the sprinters frozen in their places on the track bend, under the reverent silence of the spectators. The light summer evening breeze was passing over our heads, cooling the skin. The sprinters were still standing, their well defined muscles rippling under the suntanned skin of their calves. Then finally, for one of them it became too much, his nerves snapped, and he darted off... I remember the ring of the bell, announcing the last circuit (in everyday life this very bell lay behind the door in Little Tamara's office!). Sprints were showing such miracles of reckless bravery on bends that it would take your breath away! Naturally, they were our heroes. The medal ceremony often took place when it was already twilight, and we went home, when lanterns were already lit.

Little Tamara and my Mum knew all our champions personally. With Little Tamara we could easily pass under the tribunes into the dark boxes. And the local cyclo-celebrity - blond and red skinned from sunburn, Uncle Vova with an Estonian surname to my pride, introduced me to everybody as his «bride». I was three, «Uncle Vova» was about twenty years old. I liked to exchange jokes with him. But my favourite was the swarthy and brave sprinter with an exotic name Omar Phakadze, inaccessible to fans, whom Little Tamara tenderly called «Omarik». Cyclists, especially the velodrome ones, up to this day seem to me to be very special people.

In my childhood I liked very much to go to... polyclinic. Sister Lidochka was my favourite community nurse. «I will go to have a chat with the doctors!» - I used to say, in an important tone, getting ready to go there. In general, during my childhood I very much liked to talk to strangers. For example, in the queue in the bathhouse where we went for a wash because our house didn't have a bathroom. (Washing in a bath in the bathhouse is something absolutely different than at home in the bathroom. You come out of doors steamed up literally to your bones and you can sleep so well afterwards! The only thing I found to be awfully unpleasant was to come out of the bathing room into the locker room that was so mercilessly cold!)

I quite embarrassed my mum once when I started to retell to women in the bathhouse queue one of the dreams she saw: «Mum was running along the street, and behind her were the Georgians, and she was crying as loud as she could: Misha! Nozhkin!" The poor women took my story seriously and for a long time still looked disapprovingly at my mum.
For a Soviet child to speak with strangers did not in itself bring any danger. There was no need at kindergartens and schools to protect us from terrorists and loonies. We knew well that we were children, and that adults looked at us accordingly. Children in the Soviet society were loved and protected. And though I was warned that I shouldn't take sweets from strangers - just in case, there weren't any «cases» of that kind in my memory, neither with me nor with any of my acquaintances. Under my Mum's supervision I even «chatted up Georgians» in the market (that's how I described it myself, but in fact, it was just ordinary childish talk with them on my part). Most of the people were kind, though sometimes a bit grumpy: often they gave you advice in the street, without even knowing you: even as far as to what would be better for you to wear. But they did it not maliciously, but because they cared about others. They were not indifferent.

Social control was developed very strongly, and I can tell you, it wasn't such a bad thing! If somebody got into trouble, people did not turn away pretending they had not noticed it, but hastened to help. We were taught: do not just pass by! If a hooligan attacked you - show resistance, instead of giving to him your purse as they teach you in the West where the state has the monopoly on use of force and does not want people to trust in themselves and protect their own dignity. After all, the majority of hooligans are cowards, and often it is enough to tell them off in no uncertain terms.

The most important thing was that in the USSR you never had the feeling that you were on your own. That nobody will come to the rescue, if something happens. (Therefore I can never understand or like the heroes of American films - heroes who always act alone). This inspiring feeling gave a person unbelievable strength. It is important not to be reconciled with evil, and all they try to knock into my head in this «civilised society» is the necessity to be reconciled with it!

We, pre-school children, ran on the streets in very short dresses from under which panties sometimes flashed. Nobody paid any attention to it. It did not «excite» anybody, nobody considered it to be «sexy». Even conversations with children about «grooms» and «brides» in our environment were considered to be something for the intellectually underdeveloped. «Village people!» - one would say to those who spoke with children about such things, with a slight contempt.

When somebody asked me what would I like to be in the future, when I grow up (and for us it was the most important question, not some idiotic one in relation to a child «do you have a girlfriend/boyfriend?»!), at first I answered that I will be a «ballerina»! When I was five, Mum took me for the first time to the theatre, to see «Swan Lake». Ballet conquered my imagination, and the whole summer long I and my friends played «Swan Lake» in the street (from my description of it): we ran around the quarter, swinging with hands as wings, and Marusya's brother Andryusha pursued us as the Malicious Wizard!

I was also crazy about figure skating. Every time when winter began, and broadcasts of the championships began on TV - from the «Moscow News» Prize Tournament to the National, European and World...
championships - I got a special notebook and wrote down in it my own marks for the performing sportsmen. My own results were not always the same as the official ones. I had my own favourites. For example, a German from GDR, Sonja Morgenstern⁴⁸. (I liked her to such degree that for a long time I seriously demanded from my Mum to officially change my name to Sonya!) And, of course, all of us loved our Irochka Rodnina⁴⁹ and all as one condemned Alexey Ulanov, her partner, when he left her, and rejoiced for her when she won again, now with a brand new partner, Sasha Zaytsev. Figure skating as well as ice hockey, were watched on TV by the whole family. I remember matches of our guys with the Canadian professionals - the long-haired player called Phil Esposito, how the Canadians often started fights on ice and the indignant voice of Nikolay Ozerov⁵⁰: «No, such hockey we do not need!»

I tried to learn to skate, but it wasn’t so easy as it appeared. The problem was with shoes: at first I got only the ice hockey ones, with short tops in which my feet were unstable and I felt like a cow on ice! Then they bought me the real figure skating ones, and things became much easier. My uncle also built me a snow slide in the winter near our house and sprinkled it with water, and then he and I together with all the neighbourhood's children went for a slide on it, at the speed of the wind!

When I was five, I decided I would become a famous writer (not just a writer, no - a famous one!) That is when I wrote my first book: with printed letters. It was called «Adventures of Vicka» (yes, that one, from Little Tamara’s stories!). I did not know yet the rules of spelling (it was before I went to school), I wrote as I heard, and so now it is especially funny for me to read it. I learned to read when I was four, and my first book was... You will never guess! «Uncle Tom’s Cabin». Not the whole book, of course: it was far too thick for a four-year old, but nevertheless, the fact remains. And now I see in it a deep symbolism. I learned to read from toy bricks with letters, but my family did not know yet that I already could read, when one day Grandmother suddenly heard me sobbing from under the table.

In panic she glanced under the table, thinking that something had happened to me: «Zhenechka, what's wrong?» «I feel sorry for Eve!» «What Eve?» «Here, in the book». And I gave her the book with crumpled pages, wet from my tears.

It just happened that in early childhood I socialised more with adults than with children.

⁴⁸ Sonja Morgenstern (born 1955) is a German figure skater and figure skating coach.
⁴⁹ Irina Rodnina (born 1949, USSR) is one of the most successful figure skaters ever and the only pair skater to win ten successive World Championships (1969–78) and three successive Olympic gold medals. Irina initially competed together with Alexei Ulanov.
⁵⁰ Nikolai Ozerov (1922 - 1997) won nation-wide fame and acclaim as an all-time Soviet-era sports commentator. Millions of soviet people literally fell in love with sports thanks to Ozerov’s energetic and emotional reports that made him a household name in the Soviet Union.
When I was three, I went to a kindergarden, but not for long. The kindergarden belonged to my Mum's factory, it was far from our house. Mum brought me there on the way to work and picked me up after work. I had to get up awfully early. At the entrance I did not want to let my Mum go for a long time every morning: «Mummy, wait a minute, just a minute, please!» I was frightened by the prospect of having something for breakfast I did not like (in a kindergarden there were three hot meals a day, included in the monthly payments for it. The amount of the payment depended on the salary of a parent. My mum paid twelve roubles for me (out of a salary of one hundred and forty roubles). I was depressed that other children were what I called underdeveloped: I simply did not understand what was amusing in giving each other some silly nicknames. It was below my intellectual level. I was a bit ahead of many other children in my development, and it was unpleasant to me that teachers tried to teach me what I already knew without them. That after the lunch we had to have a sleep - no matter if you wanted it or not, under compulsion. Although I liked the small creaking folding bed. I was lying down with my eyes shut, pretending to be sleeping, and listening as our teachers gossiped and discussed some new fashionable styles. Then I retold their conversations at home. Sometimes my grandmother clutched her head when she heard it...

Every day in the evening I came to stand at the window in the kindergarden - alone, without toys, without paying attention to other children - and began to dream. It was then that for the first time I imagined myself the captain of a spaceship. The spaceship was huge, eight - storeyed, like an apartment block in shape. It took me and my brave crew to faraway planets. But my most vivid memory of the kindergarden was rather trivial: the only day I did not rush to get out because there was a favourite pudding with hot kissel\textsuperscript{51} for supper, and it was precisely on that day that my Mum came for me early from work, and I had to go home without having eaten it up...

Since I started attending kindergarden I started to get sick with the usual children's illnesses. I remember, how for the first time I was having hallucinations from a high temperature. I distinctly understood that I was talking nonsense, but my tongue did not obey me, as if it spoke by itself. I remember yet what I was saying then: «Mum, and the Pencil was for the Frost?» - and my own thoughts: «Oh, what kind of rubbish am I saying?!» The Pencil was one of heroes of a children's magazine «Cheerful Pictures» that I very much loved.

On Mum's big bed there were numerous bundles of old clothes and pieces of material from which Grandma from time to time sewed something new. Every time we made the bed ready for sleeping, we had to remove all of this from it and put it somewhere for the night. When I was sick, I was allowed to build a high «wall» from them on top of the bed for myself, and I lay behind it and imagined I suffered from thirst in a besieged fortress.... At that time my imagination was captured by Soviet

\textsuperscript{51} Kissel or kisel - is a jelly like fruit soup, popular as a dessert in Eastern and Northern Europe.
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«Easterns», and I tried hard to braid my still very thin hair into many, many plaits and wanted to be called Zulphia.52

While attending kindergarten I was sick so often that Grandpa felt sorry for me, and finally said to Grandma: «Listen, mother, we are together at home all day. Let Nadya (that's my Mum) keep Zhenka from that nursery school for good, the child has suffered enough». Grandma tried to tell him that in a nursery school I can learn something useful. «Nonsense!» - Grandfather was, as always, categorical. - «What can she learn there? That «Miron is a snotty dumbhead»? (It was one of my nicknames I picked up from other kids). I did not have to go there anymore, and I was very glad about that. At present I am ashamed that I was too much of an individualist to fit into the collective - and at the same time all my life I never wanted anything more than to be a part of a good, normal, healthy collective!

Friends of my own age appeared in my life a bit later. In 1972 the summer was terribly hot. I do not remember such a summer either before or after that. The earth in front of our house cracked from the heat into small squares. When you ran along the street, you got hot wind into your face, not a refreshing one. There was a drought in some places around the city districts, the forests were on fire. New inhabitants arrived into the neighbour's house in our street. They had a daughter - my namesake, she was two years older than me, a dark-complexioned girl with severe face, deep voice and unusual, oblong Asian eyes (the new neighbours were Chuvashs from the Volga). She first approached me in the street and said: «Let's play together!» And that's how it began. The next day she soon gathered around herself all our neighbourhood's little girls. Zhenya Nikolaeva was a born street leader. All of us were crazy about her. Zhenya was the soul of any company! She knew loads of games and was able to lead us. We played classical hide-and-seek and catch-and-run, «edible-inedible» (my favourite game!), «smitten chains», «deaf person’s telephone», «boyars, we have come to you...» and millions of other games. And of course, «mothers and daughters» and «a shop» - with our dolls. Most of all I liked to make «fruit juice» for the shop, mixing different coloured water paints in a cup.

So we were friends for about a year when I noticed that something wasn't right. Zhenya had left us for a month (she went on holidays to her native village), and in her absence I and other girls, Marusya and Lyusya, played perfectly well without her and never quarrelled with each other. Not even once! There was such harmony between us that I involuntarily recollected how we constantly quarrelled - sometimes because of this and that, but in general, always because of some nonsense, when Zhenya was around. And it hit me like lighting: I recollected how she turned us against each other, in turns, stealthily, persistently! Why she did it, I do not know to this day. But the fact remains. I told Marusya and Lyusya about my discovery, and they too were surprised that they did not notice this before. We decided unanimously not to play any more with Zhenya, and

52 Reference to the 60's popular Soviet adventure film "White Sun of the Desert". Zulphia - is a cameo role in it.

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that the one who would break our joint decision, would be considered a traitor. I have never regretted this decision. Marusya and I remained friends for life, we have never quarrelled any more, and as a matter of fact, we did not really need anybody else. Lyusya was «both to ours and to yours, let’s have a dance» and from time to time she still played with Zhenya, and we forgave her too in time the same, after a light scolding. And so I had got in the person of Zhenya the first enemy in my life... But it did not frighten me. At least since that time I would never allow anyone to manipulate me anymore!

...A couple of years later, when all of us began to go to school, I found by accident in our vegetable plot an old homework book of Zhenya’s with marks. Our ringleader and street authority continuously had «C» for Russian! And she finally and definitively ceased to be any authority for me and became just miserable and ridiculous in her attempts to show off. For me it was such a discovery that a leader in the street can be a C-grade pupil at school! And what is there to be surprised about, just look at those who now rule our country and declared themselves to be our «elite»! All "C" - graders, one after another. And all of them - just as Zhenya was - with aplomb. Trying to manipulate us. That is why we live in such a beastly way now - because we have not put them in due time in their place.

...The generation of my Grandmother and Grandfather is amazing. All the difficulties that were dropped into their share of life, they perceived as due, as a part of life, without whining from failures and not accusing anybody of them. And they never asked themselves the question, would they like to do something or not: if it had to be done, it had to be done. «If you don’t know how - we will teach you, if you do not want - we will force you, but we’ll never let you to dishonour/shame the group!» For them there was nothing impossible in life. And that is why they were capable of working wonders! My spoilt generation which has grown under the motto «if it is not allowed, but I want it very much, that's OK then» is now simply incapable of imagining what pleasure it is to create, what joy to construct a new society, without «so, what's in it for me?»

And I envy my grandmother and grandfather so much! I was born too late. If I only could exchange places in time with some speculator subjected to repressions in the 1930s or some other conman! He would become “a respected businessman” in our time, maybe even an «oligarch», and I would get the possibility to live not just only for myself.

How can I explain it to you? No charity work will ever replace this. Charity is itself humiliating already and serves not so much as a help to those who need it as to calm the conscience of those who engaged in it. And I wish to live in the world where «one is a zero»! Where, if a newspaper writes about any wrong deed, measures are taken there and then, instead of just moaning together and then dispersing again, as they do in “the free” world! And, unlike those who are twenty now and have grown up, stuffed with horror stories about Stalin and about communism - up to the point of fully blocking intellectual ability to ask any questions on this subject, - I remember well that such world is possible... I have lived in it only a little bit. But it was such a bright, such a humanly beautiful
world that no artificial neon light of «Coca-Cola» advertising would ever be able to eclipse it. I am a human being, not a ruminant and not a rodent. And I want to live for the people, not for dragging nuts into my own nest!

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...I was distracted from thinking about my childhood by a phone call. I quickly looked at the display of the office phone. Thank God, it was not a client! Today it was actually unusually quiet: silly company! We worked for the Dutch market, but were closed for the Irish holidays, and on the Dutch national holidays we worked. Today was just one of them - Queen’s Day. Well, what idiot would call us from Holland on such a day? Clients did not know that they had called abroad. They dialled a local number - and were unpleasantly surprised, when, for example, on March the 17th the answering machine informed them that the line was closed «due to a national holiday»!

...When I just started to work on the phone, I was constantly in a state of emotional pressure. Not only because I had to talk to complete strangers, and I had just finally begun to dare to choose products in a supermarket for myself (see above). Phones were showing how many calls were in the queue (depending on the company it could be from one or two to fifteen!) And it very much worked on my nerves. It made me want to solve the problem of a client as quickly as possible and finish the conversation so that the others would not have to wait for so long. Probably that was affected by my Soviet upbringing too. I was used to taking other people into account automatically.

That’s the way I was brought up. Whatever I do in life, first of all I always think how my actions will affect others. It became such an automatic thing for me since childhood that not only do I not turn music on loudly in my apartment, but also while I’m in a queue in a shop, before I even approach the counter, I try to count up in advance the sum I will be paying, and to find the correct amount so that I will not need the change.

That’s in order not to delay others. And nothing irritates me more than when somebody does not consider others! Sometimes I feel as if in Ireland people go to the post office, to the shops and to the banks just in order to have a chat with the employees. To share the news and gossip. The queue is growing behind them, and all people have things to do, but they just calmly continue their cheerful «blah-blah» for about ten minutes - about the weather, or how are things with old Mary Doherty who has arthritis, and whether it would be good to open a new savings account now, or it is better to wait a bit. In Russia people would already long ago have put them back into their place, and, probably, not in the politest of ways («woman, hurry up, you are not the only one here!»), but in Ireland it is unacceptable. In Ireland it is unacceptable to «upset» a person you talk to, no matter how he behaves; it is unacceptable to say «no» openly (it is better to promise the world, and then to make nothing of it happen!). That’s what’s called «cultural differences».

53 St. Patrick’s Day, national holiday in Ireland.
But the thing is that this quality - the ability to think of others first - is dying out in our country too. Because it was a Soviet, not just a Russian human value.

After I was away from home for five years and returned to the new Russia that adopted so-called «universal values», I was deeply shocked by a scene in the shop: a boy of ten years or so roughly pushed everybody around with his elbows, and his father instead of telling him off for that, only encouraged it: «Come on, push them! That's how you should be in life!» And everybody was silent, as if they had become mute. What happened to our people? Where were our brave, ubiquitous Grandmothers - keepers of public order?

Myself, I was not going to be silent. When some impudent type grabbed my knee in the street, I immediately hit him on the head with my umbrella with a crunching sound. And then I saw horror in the eyes of passers-by: not because of his rudeness, but because I dared to reject his advances. People, what's wrong with you? Who turned you into zombies? The boor himself was inexpressibly surprised: «Whoa, whoa, what's the matter with you?...» - and hastily retired. So! And of that they had to be afraid like rabbits?

What kind of life is this? Who shouts till they are blue in the face at the Russian-speaking forums on Internet, about «a worthy life»: when you receive three thousand dollars in America for washing somebody's cars instead of the one thousand and five hundred you would receive in Russia for being an airline pilot? What is it - human dignity, and the possibility of living «a worthy life» if you have to be humiliatingly afraid of everything - no matter how much you are being paid?...

I grabbed the phone.
- Shall we have lunch together? - it was my colleague Koen, a short, almost a head lower than me, curly and funny Flemish-polyglot who was very valued at work for his knowledge of languages.

Koen was a lot like me in relation to Ireland. («I am Belgian Irish!» - he used to say quite seriously about himself. - «Call me Seamus!») Also because he too, was divorced. He hardly ever talked about his former wife (and I, of course, did not ask him), but in his tone you could feel sarcastic bitterness. And he also was such an emotional person - simply a volcano of passions! If something or someone were not to his liking, all feathers would fly. The Flemish are completely different from the Dutch though speaking the (allegedly!) same language. They have this sparkly sense of humour. I felt it a long time ago, from the Flemish films. To describe this sense of humour with words is impossible: it is too refined. And listening to Flemish speech with its soft pleasant accent (my Mum once me that the Dutch language from the mouth of the Dutch themselves sounds as if a person is constantly chewing on a raw cabbage leaf), with pure Dutch words where the Dutch have used English words for a long time instead, sprinkled with occasional French words which, I feel, the Flemish are using not for the sake of «showing off» («look, I can speak French!»), but when people wish to express certain attitudes to the subject being discussed, I often regretted that I learned the Dutch language in Twente instead of Limburg. The Dutch often took me for a Belgian because of my
accent, but the Belgians, of course, could hear from any distance that it wasn’t so.

Once Koen and I were on duty in the office on Saturday. We were called by a rather annoyed Dutch client. Happy clients never phoned us, but I noticed that Dutch clients are much more impatient on the phone and more rough than the Belgians in expressing discontent.

When I started to speak with him, he discontentedly interrupted me:

- Mevrouw\textsuperscript{54}, do you have only Belgians there at work? I just spoke to a Belgian, and now I have you...
- Excuse me, mijnheer\textsuperscript{55}, but I am not Belgian. I am Russian.
-...

At the other end of the telephone there was intense silence; and then the client sharply told me:

- Forgive me, mevrouw, you are probably very clever, but this is just too much for me...
- And he hung up.

...«Groe (-n-) tjes» (les petits legumes)\textsuperscript{56} - Koen humourously used to write in his e-mail to me.

- Let’s go! - I agreed. We had lunch on the ground floor in a smoking-room, having taken some hot food from a chippie van outside. This time I took a baked potato. Plain. Koen took a potato for himself too and the Irish stew.

It was easy and simple to talk to Koen. He did not make advances and was himself. He was full of interesting stories. He was one of those foreigners in Ireland who never stop wearing their Aran jumper. He was quite happy with life here, did not wish to go back home, but very much dreamt of moving his elderly mum to Dublin. Only on such salary as we had, it would have been impossible not just to take out an Irish mortgage, but even to rent a decent apartment with more than one room. I sympathised with him. In Belgium he and his mum had their own house, but his mum, naturally, did not wish to sell it and "to burn her bridges". Such things you do only when you are young, and even Koen himself was six years older than me. Looking back now at how I ended up in Holland, I am not sure I would dare to repeat this experience at the more mature age. Such adventures would be too much for me now. Back then, I was only twenty three.

- Well, are there many calls today? - asked Koen, coughing and disgustedly waving away with both hands the deep smoke covering the smoking-room. The same smoke constantly hung in all Irish pubs, so before entering them, I always took a deep breath of fresh air, like before diving in a pool. After such a visit your clothes would stink of tobacco for the whole week. A separate canteen wasn’t provided in our office. In the smoking-room it was stuffy, and at least twenty people, if not more were

\textsuperscript{54} Madam (Dutch).
\textsuperscript{55} Sir (Dutch).
\textsuperscript{56} Game of words: groetjes – little greetings, groentjes - little vegetables (Dutch).
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jammed behind the tables. We were barely able to find a place for ourselves. People did not notice each other, everyone was preoccupied with himself: in general here very few people knew each other. In this office there was a constant flow of personnel.

- No, of course, not, absolute silence. It’s Queens Day, after all. And thank God for that. Sjoerd is on holidays for two weeks, and people constantly call me about the program, which he’s the only one of us to support. What shall I tell them? «We did not have training for it, please call back in two weeks?» Listen, I can’t take it anymore, Koen.

They did not prepare us for any of this, at all. Promised us such great training when they hired us, but... I was just thrown on the phone on the third day of training and told I «will learn everything myself, in the process of working». Well, that isn’t the way to do things, is it? The clients are simply raging. I have now developed immunity from their abuse. But I have a sore head from it. In the mornings I don’t even feel like getting up for work.

- Yep, and yesterday there was a corporate party - for that they have both time and money. You did not go? I did not see you there anyway...
- No, such things are not for me.
- And you were right, you did not lose anything. There was a stripogram. Both female and male.
- In Ireland?!
- Yep, I was fed up with this filth myself back home.
- Well, this is the last straw! They’d better hire a training specialist, idiots that they are! Next week I have two job interviews in other companies. I will leave this place, and that’s final.
- Maybe you’ll stay for a while, heh? Without you life here will become absolutely intolerable. I won’t even have anybody to talk to. And with whom will I eat my potatoes?
- That’s right, «stripograms» don’t eat potatoes, do they?...

Both of us imagined a stripper dressed as a policeman, red skinned from artificial suntan (the Irish are like my Mum: from sunlight their skin becomes not darkish, but red as a lobster!), greedily eating a hot potato that falls apart in his hands - and laughed. Cosmopolitan office people looked at us. Here worked Italians and Portuguese, Germans and Frenchmen, Spaniards and Dutch. And even one girl from Aruba. When I said to her «Konta bai, dushi?», she was delighted as if I were her compatriot. She came to Ireland because of her Irish boyfriend. Before that they lived in Germany for a long time where Germans took him for a local, and took her for a Turkish woman. That’s exactly what forced them to move out of Germany eventually...

There weren’t any Russians though, except for me. And there weren’t any Soviets, even more so!

...In the first month of my stay in Ireland I once noticed that one of the girls working in a local rural pizzeria, in terrible solitude, was

57 How are you, darling? (Papiamento)
obviously not Irish. Back then there were so few immigrants here that it was simply impossible not to notice.

- Where are you from? - I asked her out of interest.
- I am from Turkey - she answered.
- Oh, we are neighbours then! I am from Russia. - exclaimed I.

And then her eyes enlarged, and she blurted out in pure Russian:

- I can't believe my eyes!! How is it possible? I am from Baku!
- And why do you say you are from Turkey?
- That's because people here do not know what Azerbaijan is...

Socialising with compatriots abroad never filled me with any special enthusiasm. Perhaps it is usually a certain type of people who want to emigrate: a reason that doesn't appeal to me much. (To all rules there are exceptions, but in this case they are so rare that it's not worth to bothering about). More than that: to be honest, I tried to avoid their company.

The Irish do not understand it: for them, it is usual to rejoice if you meet a compatriot in another country, even somebody who only had an Irish grandmother like Che Guevara. How to explain to them, that when we meet a compatriot abroad, one way or another sooner or later we inevitably start to talk about politics, and people almost grab each other's throats if their political views do not coincide? And that I do not find particular pleasure in socializing with conmen and crooks hiding from a mafia, with wives of foreigners who begin every phrase with words «and my husband», ritually inflating cheeks from their own «achievement» - as though by themselves, without that foreign husband, they are not human beings at all - and with deserters, ready to give out to everybody any secrets and cast any slander on their own country, if only that will provide them with their treasured residence permit (there was one such type in Dublin - a former Soviet Navy officer). Remember the verses of Mikhalkov:

«The third comrade couldn't take it,
The third one has untied his tongue».
There is nothing for us to talk about!» -
He said before his death».

Before death or not, we really didn't have anything to talk about. I noticed, that in «our» emigrant circles while getting acquainted with a new person, men first of all reckon «Would this person be of any benefit to me?» The benefit each of them may understand differently: from desire to match you for marriage to their younger brother, so he could move abroad («my Guena is a nice fellow; he is a doctor!») to desire to set up a «joint business venture for delivery to Holland our girls of loose morality «as was offered to me back in the mid-nineties by one immoderately enterprising former Komsomol worker from Moscow called Valentin. But one thing is certain: as soon as they understand that there is no benefit to

58 Sergey Mikhalkov (1913-2009) was a popular Soviet and Russian author of children’s books and satirical fables.
expect, their passionate desire to communicate with you (which I didn’t have in the first place, quickly disappears. And thank God, to be honest).

I did not plan to emigrate at all. And when I married Sonny, marriages with foreigners still were if not taboo for us, then at least a phenomenon rather unwelcome. «I wouldn’t say it was a heroic deed, but in general there was something heroic about it»59. In my time people avoided foreigners like the plague. As the devil avoids church incense. Now probably only very few people remember that time, but «to marry a foreigner» became a status symbol among our women only four years after my romantic acquaintance with Sonny. But today it has become such a status symbol that they shamelessly offer themselves «to the highest bidder» in large numbers. To say to these women, you married not just out of love but also because you wanted to build a better life with him in the native land of your spouse oppressed by colonialism; that you do not want to live in the West, and you weren’t in the slightest interested if your husband has any real estate or cars - and they will have a short circuit in their brains. Their brains will start smoking from overstrain.

And I also wanted to see the world. But while I was away, «enemies have burnt my native hut»60, and it appeared there was just nowhere to come back to...

In the office of my new employer complete chaos reigned. I changed my job not so much because they paid one thousand pounds a year more, but mainly because they promised to make technical support specialists out of us linguists. But there was not a chance... People came to work here and left with such speed that Abebe Bikila61 himself would envy them. Because of such a flow of personnel the company did not have the time to train the new workers properly for work on the phone - to familiarise them as they should with products and so forth. Instead of that they were thrown on the phone lines as on to an enemy pill-box. There weren't many of those whose mentality would sustain such refined psychological attack: when for eight hours a day, five days a week people absolutely unfamiliar to you angrily accuse you on the phone of complete incompetence, and you don't even have the right to tell them what is really going on! The personnel left - just for this reason alone!.. Left to go to other companies sometimes - in large numbers, almost whole departments! It turned out to be some kind of vicious circle: the company was forced again to hire new ones who did not have even those few skills that the «escapees» barely managed to achieve with their own efforts. And all of this began and was repeated again! Who was crying out then, in the days of perestroika, about «the efficiency of private companies»?..

59 “That very Munchausen”, play by Grigory Gorin.
60 Reference to a 1945 Soviet war song. It begins with the words: "The enemies have burnt his native hut, they killed his family. Where does the soldier go now, who will he tell about his grief?"
61 Abebe Bikila (1932-1973) was a two-time Olympic marathon champion from Ethiopia. He was the first black African in history to win a gold medal in the Olympics. A stadium in Addis Ababa is named in his honour.
I managed to stay there a month or two. But my patience also came to an end. The company of Koen was pleasant, but not enough to suffer for the sake of it, so much so that my stomach began to ache badly every morning, just at the sight of our office building. And anyway, how won't I see him any more? After all, we live in the same city...

Today it was Friday, and on Monday I intended to phone to the office and say I was sick. At 10 o'clock on Monday I had an interview with an employment agency specialising in «experts of customer service and technical support», for a big computer company, and at 12 o'clock in the call centre of an equally well known airline... I could hardly wait for the end of the working day!

Koen was already waiting for me at a bus stop. Ours was the terminus. It took about 45 minutes to get to the city centre from there. There was not even a roof over your head: only a single little green sign to mark the stop, in the middle of a field. Buses were green double-deckers. Usually on the way home I went upstairs straight away and chose the most convenient place for dozing off until we arrived in the city. But this time Koen was next to me, and to sleep would be a bit impolite. We got upstairs and went to sit down in the front seats, from where you had a wonderful view of the surroundings.

The bus took off. We were looking out of the window at how people were going home from work. Many turned into a pub directly from work. Irish women in strict business suits coming out of work habitually changed their high heeled shoes for dirty trainers and splashed in them along the streets walking in a manner rather unpleasant to look at: faintly resembling sports walking - with elbows going in large circles. Unlike among the Irish men, there were plenty of pretty and even beautiful faces among the Irish women: that’s until they would open their mouth. I remember how deeply shocked I was the first time by one such Celtic beauty: a tiny brunette with a tiara on her head, in an evening dress, with a beautiful face, densely smeared with tan foundation from under which her neck was seen white as chalk. She stood at a bus stop, shaking out a stone from a shoe and using such foul language that my ears simply cracked. It seemed that in her lexicon there wasn't place for many human words, except for variations of a word «F ***». But she did not swear at all, she simply gently talked to her boy friend (who was a lot more restrained in his expressions). And when I saw, how they easily drink five to seven pints in one evening... (I could never drink more than two and if I tried, I'd probably become sick!). The Irish women were hard-working, independent, strong and wouldn't accept it if somebody (mainly the Irish men!) would try to take them for a ride. But at the same time, it was difficult to accuse the Irish young ladies of an abundance of femininity. It is interesting how our girls manage to keep it, even despite post-perestroika vulgarity artificially cultivated in them and the reputation of Russian women widely known from pre-revolutionary times: «She will stop a horse at full tilt, she'll enter a burning log hut».\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{62} The quote is from the poem "Moroz Krasniy Nos" ("The Red Nose Frost") written by a Russian poet-realist Nikolai Nekrasov (1821-1878). The poem...
I noticed that Koen too looks at them through the bus window and laughs.
- Yes... Just like the Amazons, aren't they? Listen, did you know many Irish people before you arrived here?
- Not at all, Koen. I only had pen friends. I started to get acquainted with them personally when already here - and after my first month in Ireland I almost came to the conclusion that all people here are either improbable clowns, or just simply are a little bit mad!
- Why? Well, well, tell me more in detail, it's interesting!
- Ach leave it, Koen, will you? You will laugh!
- When did I laugh at you? I laugh exclusively at the cheese heads! It's my prerogative.
- Well, OK then.... Just don't complain afterwards, because I warned you! For example, the first of my pen pals was a former monk, a school teacher, a Christian Brother who had spent almost 40 years in the church and then somehow suddenly understood that this life was not for him, and left it for the worldly life. But of course, you could still smell the church miles away from him! The second one was in his 50's, still living with his mum and had devoted all his life to an Indian tribe in Mexico to whom twice a year he brought cooking pans and warm blankets. «Wow, what a noble, altruistic individual!» - that's what I thought when I first heard his story. But during our next meeting he hinted that one of these days he was going again to one of his dangerous expeditions for delivery of blankets to the long suffering red skinned brothers, that he does not know, whether he will return from there alive, and that he would like before departure, now for the first time in his life to experience a little bit of female tenderness... It was very hard for me not to begin laughing out loud! Then there was a boozer from Cork with a romantic name Pierce who assured me that a local lady millionaire was crazy about him and wished to marry him, but he stoically did not give in to her. He presented me with an Irish brooch worth 5 pounds, and then became pissed in a pub to such a degree that he did not have any money left for a way back to Cork. I refused to pay for his ticket and a few days later he sent me a letter, angrily demanding the return of his present: the five pound brooch! Probably he was going to take it to a pawnshop...

Then there was a baker from Donegal who wrote to me about himself that he was an important person in his village.

When I informed him that I had arrived in Ireland, and wrote to him sending my phone number, he did not even bother to phone me, he simply sent me a card: «On Saturday I am coming for you!» Naturally, I was indignant: what if I had some other plans, and he did not even ask me at all if I was free! And I deliberately left the house for the whole day. The describes hardship endured by Russian peasants, lovingly describes 19th century rural Russia. In one of the parts of his poem Nekrasov writes about Russian women. "In the game even a horseman won't catch her, In trouble she won't loose courage - she'll save you, She will stop a galloping stallion, She will enter a burning house!" N. Nekrasov's works are studied in Russian schools.
Poor creature dragged along such distance in his pickup truck and ended up empty handed!

- Ouch, apparently, you are an awful woman! - Koen could hardly restrain himself from bursting out laughing. We spoke to each other in Dutch, so other people on the bus did not understand us.

- Oh the Irish men, mysterious and misunderstood human beings! - I continued ironically. They can kiss you on the very first evening of acquaintance without any reason for that, all of a sudden, and then just as all of a sudden begin hanging up on you when you phone them, assuring you that tomorrow they will be leaving for Spain for two years (men of other nationalities at least would have tried to achieve something more material first!). What about a farmer who ingenuously says to you he started to correspond because his mother wants him to get married at last? And a security guard at the airport who in a voice that would freeze your blood says he has to tell you about something awful? You prepare yourself mentally to hear at the very least that he is a maniac-murderer or that he has an incurable illness and only has a few days left to live, and he tragically tells you: «The trouble is that I am married!» - though it is unclear why ever he decided that this should be such a tragedy for you.

And a hotel owner from Kerry from whom his Polish wife has just run away, and who self-confidently inquired, would you very much like to take her place as quickly as possible? «Why are you vegetating there, in that Dublin? What have you left behind there? Do you know how nice it is over here?!» ...And what of a bank clerk without any formal education who when he was slightly younger, was a big goof - constantly was truanting from school, until finally his father who was fed up with it, took him by the hand and led him to an acquaintance of his in a bank: «That's it, enough of your stupidities. You will work here!» - And that's how his career began! Or a red-skinned gardener from Galway, sincerely believing that this red colour of skin achieved in a suntan salon, would make him more attractive, despite all the suffering from burns he received, who offered you his hand, along with his greenhouse, on the first date? There was also one student - named Brendan I think... I always thought the Irish were talkative people by nature, but this one was silent all the evening, as silent as a guerrilla under interrogation. I thought: well, I will start speaking myself, and hopefully, he will get talking too. And you know what, Koen? I entertained him the whole evening with long stories from my life, like a real clown! And he was just sitting there and only from time to time mumbled to himself: «Yes, that’s right: yes, that's right». I thought my company was not to his liking but he did not dare tell me directly about it, and I finally decided to say goodbye. And then he suddenly opened his mouth and blurted out: «Maybe we should go to my place to have some coffee?» My jaw just drooped at these words... There were also two Englishmen: one was as boring as unsalted fish, persistently calling the Irish village of Avoca «Ballykissangel»63, and the other was a

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63 Avoca – a village in county Wicklow where BBC has filmed its soap opera “Ballykissangel”.

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sales manager for Eastern Europe who considered himself to be a huge expert on Russia, without knowing a word of Russian.

I remember his story about his first trip beyond our two capitals - I think, it was to Chelyabinsk. At the end of November. Our «expert» had gone there in his British winter clothes. He arrives, and in Chelyabinsk it is -23 C... Nobody is waiting for him at the station, nobody speaks English and not a single public phone box works! They should send such saboteurs to us to these remote places more often: to teach them that one cannot understand Russia just theoretically! Somehow he got into his hotel and was dying for a bite to eat. He went to a restaurant. At the restaurant there was just one only waitress recounting the eggs. Waitress with a bored face. He waited, waited for when she will run to serve him - no, still zero attention. After about ten minutes he couldn't take it anymore. With a phrase book in his hands, on his fingers he explained that he would like something to eat. The woman looked at him like the Snow Queen: «We are closed!» He arrived from there back to Moscow barely alive, with tonsillitis. It looked like he calmed down for a while. But then he started shouting again: "You had a military dictatorship before! But now at last you have personal freedom!" Well, once this «free person» decided to walk in Moscow in the evening through a park - he wanted to take a short cut... He regained consciousness in a pile of snow, without his wallet, without his passport and without his set of false teeth. Thank God, some granny of ours pulled him from there all by herself all the way to her apartment, otherwise that would definitely be an end to sales of the mobile phones of his company in Moscow...

It looks like the granny was idealistic - a vestige of the times of «military dictatorship». If that was me, I would have left this dung to lie in that snow pile - hopefully, he'd come out if it at least a little bit wiser! I said to him: «Perhaps it was a dictatorship that we had, but at that time at least your teeth would remain in place!» In Ireland he pulled unhappy faces every time «A nation once again» was played in a pub - but he managed to remain unbeaten! The thing is that during such moments he always turned his face into the shadows: so nobody could see it. That's your «freedom»! And he was lying non-stop, like a grey gelding - even about such silly things as his age. He diminished it by two years - big deal, two years, as if it would make any difference! He was a pathological liar, and I don't know up to this day whether it was because he was a manager, or because he was an Englishman, or because of both. Most likely, the latter! Just look at Tony Blair, the same diagnosis. Clinical. I complained to my mum about all of them: why are they like that? Are there any normal people at all? And my mum told me one thing about which I had never thought before. «What do you want? Normal fellows don't write letters!»

- Enough, enough, you were right, I can't take any more! - In his seat Koen was bent in two with laughter. By then we were approaching St. Stephen's Green.

...And there was also a Frenchman who escaped to work in Ireland because of an unhappy love life back at home: ugly, long-nosed and awfully well-mannered. He was the only one from all my new
acquaintances who kissed my hand at parting (I almost attempted to shake his!) and also who did not start to hint that he would like to come in for a cup of tea...

Then there was an Irish military man - the big-bellied corporal called Paul, suffering from attacks of talkativeness; there was a black-eyed and empty-headed prattler-broker called Frank who was posing as a «successful professional» and who just a month later was thrown out of the house by his own friend after that friend handed over to him 20,000 pounds and Frank lost it all on the stock exchange...

There was a seller of car paint in Cavan called Seamus - cheerful, with an easy temper, to me superficially resembling Adriano Celentano64, who for some reason was very shy of his own hairiness. From time to time he assured me that he was leaving the mother of their child (they had a difficult relationship and a mixed relationship: he was a Catholic, she was Protestant). The first time we met was when there was a rugby match in Dublin between Ireland and Scotland, and the city was flooded with Scottish fans. For some reason not just all the men were wearing kilts, but all the women accompanying them wore trousers! Ireland won, but none of the Scots began to fight with the Irish because of it. Instead, they went to the pubs together where, having got drunk, they suddenly started to chant in a choir: «We hate the English! We hate the English!» One of the Scots - a fellow big as a wardrobe in a dark blue tartan kilt - suddenly pulled me by the hand for a dance! Seamus told me colourfully about how he was a rugby star of the local school in his youth, and I mistrustfully glanced at his thin legs even though they were accompanied by broad shoulders...

There was a snub-nosed bearded guy from the local multi-storeyed ghetto called Ballymun who invited me to admire the great views from the balcony of his apartment on the 16th floor (by Dublin concepts, it was a big rarity: Dublin is a city of very low buildings). And that was really all we were doing in his apartment: for several hours we admired the panorama of planes flying up from Dublin airport, and of Dublin Bay (it was visible up as far as Dun Laoghaire). Then he treated me to a self-prepared supper and politely brought me home on his motorcycle! And some days later he sent me a touching e-mail which I keep until this day. «I wasn't sure at all that it was you - in that street near a pub, but decided to take the chance and approach you. And I so am glad I did it! The woman I met at the pub was much more beautiful than the photo you sent me by e-mail - in every respect. You were definitely two different two persons. Not many nowadays have in them all the qualities of a true lady, and you have plenty of those qualities».

And to this day, when I feel especially bad, I re-read these lines. I have printed them out specially at work. Thanks, Chris. To a person with such defected self-esteem as I had after my 7-year-old marriage to my Latin macho, your words were simply necessary...

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64 Adriano Celentano is an Italian singer, songwriter, comedian, actor, film director and TV host. His music was incredibly popular in the 70's Soviet Union.
But if I tell about all of this to Koen, he could draw wrong conclusions about me. As Anita drew them in due time, hastily, still not knowing at all any real life outside of books. «Always there are some men phoning you» - she hemmed disapprovingly, hinting that in my position: mother of a sick child - it was indecent and frivolous. But the child wasn’t still with me, despite all my diligence, and I did not know precisely when she would finally be... And the days off rolled on regularly, and every time by evening on Friday when there was finally nothing to do, such mighty melancholy came over me, in a mighty wave so I would just like to sob all night long and all the day long without a break into a pillow. But it was impossible to sob; the only way to begin to cry for me consisted of drinking at least half of bottle of red wine. Then I started to lament loudly «Sonny, Sonny, why, why, but why has it turned out so?» - And tears poured now as if hailstones, without a stop. Naturally, I could not allow myself such behaviour living in the same house with strangers. And that is why whenever possible I ran from them at the weekends: ran into the city, ran into meetings with pen friends unfamiliar to me. It was also a flight from myself. I would like to feel that I was still alive when all inside of me had become lifeless. For the first time in my life I finally understood my namesake Zhenka Komelkova. «And what about the colonel, Evgenia? How could you?» ...«I just could! I could. Will you begin lecturing me now or after the end of the duty?»

Yes, before this I did not understand Zhenka Komelkova. Now I do.

I was very lucky that none of my pen friends happened to be either a maniac, or a pervert. I feel that statistically in Ireland there are much more normal decent people than in the Netherlands or than in what appeared now in place of my country. At least, it was so when I arrived in Ireland. Nowadays it is inevitably pulled into so-called “pan-European progress”... But anyway, to be honest, I was taking risks, meeting all these people absolutely unfamiliar to me, only back then I did not think of it so. I was preoccupied with something else: to forget this awful pain. To feel that one is not alone. At least for a short while. The same as Zhenka...

It was just plain terrible for me at the weekends. During the week I simply did not have time and energy left over to think about it. It was terrible because I was absolutely alone in this, though in such marvellous country.

From realising my huge responsibility for the future of my sick daughter responsibility I could not share with anybody. Because nobody really cares about us. Consequently if you remain all the time alone with all these thoughts and this melancholy, you can simply go nuts. And I did not have the right to do that. I had to survive. Not for the sake of myself - I totally ceased to be afraid for myself now. After what I’d already been through, it could never be any worse. For the sake of Lisa - because who, except me, will need her now? All of this you cannot explain to a person, who hasn’t been in a similar situation himself. And I also understood for

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65 Zhenka Komelkova - one of the main characters from the Soviet book and film "The Dawns Here Are Quiet" (1972).
the first time in my life that you cannot judge others superficially because different people react even to similar stressful situations in a different way!

...Yes, an absolutely different life began for me now than the one I had in Holland - an independent, interesting one. I stopped being afraid to choose products in a supermarket and plunged with pleasure into a new world: the world of contacts with people! I felt as if the years of my youth had returned. But no, it is impossible to compare, because in my youth I was far too serious for it. «You have such a look as if you are ready to sacrifice yourself all the time!» - contemptuously a classmate who wasn't famous for her good behaviour said to me, when I was about eighteen... I gradually ceased to be afraid of people and after such a long period at last I was becoming myself. Like I was in my pre-school years, still in the Soviet period. Karlsson would say: «Cheerful and playful, like a young seal!»

God forbid, I wasn't even thinking about any «new love» or even about searching for it. I am not one of those who leave Caribbean husbands in search for «British gentlemen». I simply began to learn again how to communicate and simultaneously learned a lot new to me about human nature. Sonny always repeated to me that he was only protecting me from the harm of this world, and I decided to find out for myself, whether there was really something out there that he had to protect me from to such a degree.

And also: maybe, I missed something in life, being all these years so silent, so introvert and so well-behaved? Perhaps, I was really deprived of something, as they try to convince us now? I did not need much time to come to an unequivocal conclusion: of course, not at all! Been there, done that, got that T-shirt - and now I know for certain that all those «freedoms» of behaviour with which they try to tempt our young people, are not worth a dry dead fly!

...It was time to get off the bus.
- If you want, we could go for the weekend together to the Aran Islands? - offered Koen when we parted.
- Thanks, some other time - definitely!

I did not know it yet, but that was the last time I saw him. On Monday both companies at once offered me to begin the new job straight away...

And never had it even crossed my mind in all the time I knew Koen, that apparently he was silently in love with me! Well, «silently» is probably not the right word. He was never silent, not even for a second. But he never even hinted to me about his feelings. Later on, much later he admitted it to me by e-mail: when he was already back in Belgium (because of his Mum) three and a half years later!

66 Karlsson-on-the-Roof is a fictional character in a series of children's books created by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren. The cartoon adaptation became popular in the USSR with its release in the 1970s. To this day, the adaptations are still celebrated as an integral part of the Russian cartoon industry, with Karlsson being recognised as a national icon.
I felt very awkward about it, though it was a bit flattering. I did not answer him: what I could answer? But deep inside I was very surprised: how is it possible? You think you know the person, but you don't notice such elementary things... But he really didn't show any signs of it at the time...

...There was one more pen friend I didn't tell Koen about then. «Australian» Conor from Portobello. Because I did not know precisely, should I cry or should I laugh about him.

Conor was a native of Dublin's working class quarter Rialto. He did not like to recollect his childhood: an eternally drunk jobless father, a sister who ended up in a psychiatric hospital, a girl he had to marry at the age of 16 because he had made her pregnant (as if somebody forced him to do it!) ...Briefly, it was a life «at the bottom». Soon the newly weds left for Australia, and Conor spent most of his life there. I do not know what happened to their child, but it was unequivocally clear that he or she was no longer alive: when I told Conor about Lisa, tears began to shine in his eyes, and he turned his face away. Later on he and his wife got divorced (luckily for him, in Australia, unlike in Ireland, it was possible), and he began to live by and for himself. He became a refrigerating machinery engineer, with his own business. But 20 years later something pulled his heart strings to get back home. He wanted to change career.

«Computers are the future!» - he liked to repeat. Conor bought a tiny house in cosy Portobello and was sitting inside for days, mastering the art of CAD through self-study books. He did not want to sign up for any courses out of principle, and it did not bother him that self-study occupied so much of his time (by his own calculations, it would still take him at least half a year to complete the study) - he did not work, but «his money was working for him», as they used to say in that idiotic TV advert in Yeltsin's Russia: he was renting out a house somewhere, and someone supervised his small firm in Sydney in his absence...

Conor was short, like the majority of Dubliners, his height compensated by means of high heeled cowboy boots a la Crocodile Dundee that he wouldn't take off even at home. He had a big blond head with the delicate facial features that pointed to Viking genes. His face had the colour of red brick, the same as that of the majority of those Irish who had the misfortune to sunbathe, only in his case it wasn't temporary sunburn anymore, but a result of his 20-years stay in Sydney and consequently Conor was like the fir-tree in our children's riddle: «The same colour in the winter as in the summer».

Like many Irish men, Conor considered himself to be a philosopher, especially when he was drunk. His favourite pub was «The Barge Inn» on Charlemont Street. He never looked drunk: he simply started a long speech on abstract subjects. He very much liked to brag of how he shocked some American Irish during his trip to America when he pointed out similarities between the IRA struggle (which so many of them supported) and the struggle of Palestinians (whom the same Yankees of Celtic blood considered to be terrorists!) with the Israeli occupation. What sort of dumbs they must have been in the first place, to need an Australian to point it out to them!
Irina Malenko

Conor surprised me first of all when he persistently started to offer me help - if I just even hinted, for example, that I should be in some place at a certain time, he suggested to me straight away to bring me up in his car (I still lived in Maynooth at the time). Or he offered to repair something for me when it broke. Surprised, I agreed: who would refuse, if the person in question apparently offers it so sincerely? Also, he didn't demand anything in return. But after a while, as if some sort of a demon got into him, he'd start to shout that everybody uses his kindness, is sitting on his neck, because he can't say No to people (not only to me, to his relatives, for example, too!) And he should really be sitting with his computer, and all of us are only disturbing him... I would take offence - excuse me, sir, may I remind you that I did not ask you about any help at all, it was you who very much forced it on me! - and leave. And after a while he would call, and the story would repeat itself in the old fashion. It was very interesting to talk to him: he was so wise with his life experience, in some way melancholic and even unhappy, and I was lonely, and we went to «The Barge» together again and again... «Beware, God forbid, or you'd end up as alcoholic there, in this Ireland!» - My Mum expressed her worries to me on the phone.

Things derailed when Anita's boyfriend came to visit her for five days from Holland. She has asked me «to move somewhere from our mutual room for this time...» «You have so many friends here!» - was her argument. Friends?! Of course, I couldn't ask any of them for something like that. Except for Conor. He had 3 bedrooms in his house, he lived alone and treated me politely and friendly, plus I promised not to distract him from his computer. «I will just go from here to work and after work I'll get here and go to sleep, at once - that's all».

Good intentions... Conor himself didn't want me simply to go to sleep straight away after work. He was dying to come off the computer for a chat!

One thing after another, a small bottle of red wine... A couple of Irish songs (he adored singing «Only Our Rivers Run Free» and did it, despite not having a great voice, very musically and heartily?)... Somehow inadvertently our talk came to Holland, and I, not being fussy in choosing my expressions, stated to him exactly what I thought of it, and why I wanted so much to leave it for Ireland. But it is well known that «opposites attract», and Conor began trying to convince me, until his voice became hoarse, why Holland, in his opinion, was more progressive: because what had happened to him in his youth, would not have happened in Holland, it would have been possible for his girl friend to have an abortion! Of course, his arguments were rather ineffectual.

- You should have kept your trousers belted and zipped up, instead of making abortions! - I became angry. I can be pretty bad tempered if a conversation comes close to some sensitive subjects. - I do not think your former wife jumped at you herself when she was 16!

- He blushed and began with great passion to convince me, for some reason, how important it is to be «liberated» in this field. Well, you know what, Conor, I will make mince meat of you now!
- Oh yeah? - I said derisively. - There are things I simply don't like, even though your liberated «glamour» magazines assure us that all women are obliged to be crazy about them. And nobody would force me to believe I am abnormal only because I don't like something that so persistently is «recommended» by some idiotic magazine out there!

- Shall we give it a try? - he offered unexpectedly. - I bet you just simply have not met yet a person who is able.... H-m-m...

I just became dumb at such shamelessness. And then I became angry as hell. What does he hope, that I will run away from him in horror, making a sign of the cross as I go? Is that what he counts on?

- OK, go ahead. Look at him, what an expert!

And that's how it happened, something that shouldn't have happened...

- Well, and how is it? - asked Conor every five minutes.
- Well, so-so. Nothing special, - I answered honestly. - Maybe it's better not to? You are just wasting your talents, really.
- How is it possible? - He was sincerely surprised as if his professional pride was hurt. But I could hardly help burst out laughing. It just felt awfully tickly. - What about like that?...
- All the same... Listen, when is it going to finish?

I must say, Conor was not disgusting to me - if he was I, probably, would really have run away, making a sign of the cross on the move. And even though I did not change my opinion on this particular issue, despite all his attempts, my attitude towards him after that changed a little: I wouldn't mind our relationship remaining as it was, and did not see the reason for him to be against that. After all, wasn't it he himself who constantly repeated that he did not wish to bind himself to anybody?

I completely realistically understood that in my position I had no right to something binding - that is, a proper relationship with any man. It would have been the top of egoism from my part: first of all, in relation to Lisa. Not to mention that I was emotionally not capable of such relations at that stage of my life. I simply would like that there would be a person - and the main thing, not under the same roof with me! - a person with whom I could be myself: a person with whom I could from time to time talk about things and sometimes be a little bit close.

However Conor either did not understand it, or began to panic: he became obsessed with the thought that I might want a serious relationship with him. I listened to pure delirium that he spun out, and continued to be amazed: either he convinced himself that what he wished was for real, or he just ego-tripped through it in his own head: by firstly «taming» women through imposing his help on them, and then when they would really wanted something more (and let's face it, we, women, easily get used to a man!...), he would proudly reject them. And when I let him know that I accepted everything the way it was, that just ruined his little plan worked out in such detail: on how to achieve experience of nirvana at the expense of the humiliation of another new victim... And thus he tried to convince (not so much himself, as me!) that in reality I of course, would like more serious relations with him, only I was afraid to admit it openly!

Is he really having delirium tremens?
I felt deeply offended. To how many more victims did he sing his «Only Our Rivers Run Free», that frustrated son of an alcoholic with a heap of inferiority complexes unknown to me vented by him on the opposite sex? And what do I really have to do about him: cry or laugh?

...Today it was a Friday, but I did not go anywhere. I’ve had enough. «You need a respite, and a chest needs its cover to shut», - as a saying from a Turkmen fairy tale goes. At last I had a self contained flat, and now I finally had the chance to get drunk and to lament during the week-ends at home properly, without disturbing anybody. Two glasses of liquor did the trick... I could only hope that the landlord’s family had soundproof walls in the basement to which the wall of my room was linked. By about 10 o'clock I fell into a leaden sleep.

But around midnight a phone call unexpectedly woke me up. I got a fright: maybe something happened at home with Lisa? I jumped up and, seeing nothing, half asleep, bumping into furniture headlong jumped to the phone. But the receiver was silent, then I heard some far faint sound similar to weeping. And they hung up. While I was trying to understand what was going on, and who could it be, they called again. A female voice with pleasant French accent after some hesitation asked for my name. I was absolutely confused: who can it be, and why would this person need me at the weekend in the middle of the night?

- Do you know Will? - the stranger unexpectedly asked me.
- Will who?
- Will Sharkey from Roscommon.

Being still half asleep (and not 100% sober), I was thinking very slowly.
- Ah, yes. He is my pen friend.
- Are you seeing him?

God was merciful, I did not even have the time to meet this one yet. Will Sharkey from Roscommon wrote poems, played, so he said, a guitar and was of romantic nature. An unsuccessful poet at 40+ - as probably half of Ireland claimed to be!

- No, of course not. I haven't even met him in real life yet. I saw him only in a photo.
- Is this the truth?
- Listen, young lady, excuse me, I do not know your name, why would I lie to you?

And then on the other end of the phone the dam burst. The unknown Frenchwoman began to sob and told me that her name was Amandine. She began to tell to me how madly she was in love with Will Sharkey and how until recently she did not even suspect that apart from her, he writes also to other women, and that the letters are almost identical, as if written through a carbon paper. She accidentally found out one of my letters among his papers too, with my phone number and she decided to phone me in order to expose that Irish bastard. Bastard or not, she, apparently, was really completely mad about this type: because a second later, after angry charges in his address she then started to tell me how wonderful he really was. I did not argue and just listened more than I spoke. I felt pity for her.
- What can I do for you, Amandine? If you want, I will stop writing to him all together, and all his letters I have, I can send to you.
- Really? - she sobbed once again and almost calmed down.

That's how oddly I got acquainted with my first female friend in Ireland. By the end of our conversation we agreed that on Sunday Amandine would come to Dublin, and together we would go to the zoo! Just like two schoolgirls.

...I sighed. I didn't want to sleep anymore. I got up, put on my clothes and under the cover of dark night went to Conor's house: to hang on his front door a huge bra (each cup was nearly as big as my head in size!) that I bought in a charity shop for 50 pence. We'll teach these Irish how to break hearts of poor foreign girls!

As my former spouse Sonny Zomerberg used to say, «do not mess with me!»
Chapter 3. "Why did you come to us?"

"I dreamed of seas and corals,
I wanted to eat turtle soup,
I stepped on board of a boat, but the boat
Turned out to be made from yesterday's newspaper".
(Little Boat song)67

...Saturday. Not to wake up in the middle of the night - that’s the most important thing. Because if I do, then different thoughts keep creeping into my head for hours. And memories from which it’s impossible to get rescued, the ones that you want to dive into and never ever emerge back again. The same feeling I have when I watch old Soviet films; it’s painful and sweet at the same time. I often burst into tears, incomprehensible for anybody who isn’t from the Soviet Union, at the end of even the most light and cheerful of those films: and the reason is precisely because they are over, and I, like Ivan Vasilyevich from the movie “Ivan Vasilyevich changes his profession”68, am suddenly pierced by the thought: "Gosh, I really forgot where I am now! I forgot!" And yet at the same time I feel happy: because I have experienced this kind of life myself, not by just by being told about it. I have actually lived it, and I know that this life and the people shown in these films aren’t a fairy tale. And no Gorbachev can ever prove to me that "Little Vera"69 was true and “The Tigers on ice”.70 Was an invention. If someone had the misfortune to grow up in a pigsty, it doesn’t mean that there are only pigs in the world! Or that the pig’s lifestyle should become the norm for people. And even more, how could The Bad Guy from Gaidar’s “Malchish Kibalchish”71 ever properly understand Soviet reality, sitting on his box of biscuits hugging a jar of jam? How could he ever understand, this "pioneer" who voluntarily

67 "Little Boat" is the song written in 1973 by the Soviet poetess and bard Novella Matveyeva (born 1934). Perhaps because of her simple poetics and guitar she became associated with the founders of the bard genre in the late Soviet Union. Her songs are an escape from reality into the world of fantasy.

68 “Ivan Vasilyevich Changes Profession” is a Soviet comedy film produced by the state film company Mosfilm in 1973. This film is based on a play by Mikhail Bulgakov and was one of the most attended movies in the Soviet Union in 1973 with more than 60 million tickets sold.

69 “Little Vera” released in 1988. The title in Russian is ambiguous and can also mean "Little Faith", symbolising the character's lack of hope. It was one of the first Soviet movies with explicit sexual scenes.

70 "Tigers on Ice" - Soviet children's television film (1971) about a boy whose dream to become a hockey player comes true. The film reflected an optimistic view of Soviet childhood.

71 see ref. 4
warmed sauna water for the Nazi occupiers in his village and grazed chickens for them and probably through all his wilful life was secretly dreaming that people would stop calling him “comrade” and began calling him “mister”?

... Well, I am certainly awake now. I felt thirsty. It would be so great to have a cup of grandfather’s home-made sparkling water... Even if I pour a glass of sparkling mineral water into blackcurrant syrup here now, it won’t be the same. The very process of its preparation was full of mystery. Firstly, he did use not syrup to make it, but my grandmother’s Blackcurrant filling: a layer of black currants from our own garden, then a layer of sugar, then again a layer of black currants, and so on, in a 5-liter pot that she left to stand for a few months before the filling was ready. A few spoonfuls of this sugary and tasty filling in a metal cup that would leave a strange taste in one’s mouth were poured by ice-cold water from a bucket, and then grandfather would solemnly get a small jar of citric acid from one of his shelves with the reagents (in his heart he was still a chemist, even in retirement!), and add a tiny little bit, less than half a teaspoon, of this white powder into a cup. Finally, he would take a jar with drinking soda from another shelf, and I, to my delight, was allowed to stir it into the cup with a spoon. A stormy foam rose in the cup in front of our very eyes, and you had to stop stirring just in time, in order to keep it from pouring over, and quickly drink it before the foam was gone! The bubbles immediately hit my nose and I squealed with delight caused by the combination of the noise of the rising foam, the tickling sensation in my nose and the taste of what I managed drinking before the water calmed down, and began to have the distinct flavour of drinking soda. To try to prepare it here by myself would only be a pale shadow of the original, and not only because of the ingredients. It will be more or less like in Zhvanetsky’s72 story: “You can serve yourself coffee in bed. But for that you’d need to get up, get dressed, make the coffee, and then get undressed, lie down and drink it”.

It’s just that there is no one is here to share this feeling with. Even if there was somebody here, I simply have no common past with these people. I never understood before how important this could be. Recently, a Dublin taxi driver asked me in all seriousness why people in the USSR wanted to study to become a doctor, for example, if a doctor received no more and sometimes even less than an ordinary factory worker. And to get into his head that a man might want to study and help people not only for monetary gain was much harder than it was for Shurik to explain to Ivan Vasilyevich that he wasn’t a demon73. Even after my attempt to explain he simply couldn’t get it. Why should you strain your brain, if it wasn’t to make “loads of money”? Well, how can I explain it to you, Cheburashka74?

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72 Mikhail Zhvanetsky (born 1934) is a popular Soviet and Russian satiric writer and a stand-up comedian.
73 Shurik - a character from a Soviet comedy "Ivan Vasilyevich Changes Profession".
74 Cheburashka - is a character in Soviet children's literature, from a 1966 story by the writer Eduard Uspensky. He is a funny little creature, unknown to science,
...Well, and now, of course, I'll spend hours tossing and turning from side to side. At such moments it’s particularly disgusting to remember precisely all those things that usually help me here to forget myself. It’s disgusting to remember all these Connors and Seamuses. All this is empty, so empty that I want to erase it from my memory like a dirty spot from the table. And also to disinfect it properly!

Intergirls and interboys of all sorts and shapes enjoy making fun of the fact that "there was no sex in the USSR", while saying nothing about what there actually was: something that they themselves are totally lacking. To explain this to them is like trying to explain the fragrance of a rose to a person with chronic congestion. In an article or programme on the subject of "love during war" they quite seriously (and with open delight!) describe something that all normal people actually classify as war crimes. These "heroes" of our time, who have been trying so hard for well over a decade to force the Soviet people to become beasts, don’t even realise that they remind one of a passage from the book by Yuri Bondarev: “someone shining bald, abnormally bent, also naked, peeped out of the bushes and maliciously, filthy laughed, spinning his hairy legs.”

One can only feel sorry for these defective creatures. For them, love is lust. For them, passion is just physical desire. For them, “any woman will be yours, if you use our medication to increase your penis size”. For them “erotic is part of world culture”.

How about the culture of feelings? You don’t even know what that is? How about the idea that love means the same as the Armenian word “tsavatanem” (“I’ll take your pain on me”) and not some stupid panting and sweating under the blanket? That love is not when he “fires” his “giant love gun” and she moans in every manner, like Carlsson pretending to be a ghost: god forbid if he suspected that she didn’t quite like it? Have they ever heard of "Die but don’t give a kiss without love!" by Chernyshevsky? These poor prostitutes of the soul can’t imagine something like this, even in their dreams.

In the Soviet Union the concepts of love and hate were totally different: spiritual, inter-twined, inter-related. One pre-revolutionary poet wrote: “That heart won’t learn how to love, which is tired of hate.” And I was never tired of it: I was brought up in such way that for me, love who lived in the tropical forest. Once he fell asleep in a box of fresh oranges and was transported to a big city, where he finds good friends. Cheburashka is a protagonist of the stop-motion animated films made in 1969 after the release of which he became a cult character.

5 "Intergirl" - is a screen adaptation of the eponymous story by Vladimir Kunin, set in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) in the time of Perestroika during the 1980s. Main character Tatyana is a Russian nurse who gets fed up with her hospital job, so she turns a prostitute catering to international tourists.

70 Yuri Bondarev (born1924) is a Soviet writer.

77 Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) - philosopher, writer, critic, and socialist. He was the spiritual leader of the Russian revolutionary democratic movement of the 1860's, and an influence on V. Lenin
Irina Malenko

itself can’t exist without hate. You can only truly love people by hating all those who don’t allow you to have a life worthy of a human being. To love people means to fight for them and for their future, rather than to light a candle in church for them. To make sure that there will be no homeless and hungry people on the streets. To ensure that those whose proper place is on a prison bunk will never become masters of our streets after darkness. That no mothers would abandon their babies in the streets because they can’t feed them. That no human beings will ever be sold like cattle on the market. That no one would be afraid of losing his job and of being left without a livelihood. That there would never be need for parents of critically ill children to throw themselves at some “sponsor’s” feet to beg money for a life-saving operation. That the pensioners would not need to fear having to survive on bread and water until the end of the month. That squandering thieves, whose true place is in the same shit hole in prison, with pimps and killers, couldn’t blow off on yachts and villas all the wealth of our country, created by years of labour by these same robbed pensioners.

I have to laugh when intergirls and interboys buzz that I hate such people because I “envy” them. Envy means you would like to step into the shoes of the object of your envy. Do they really believe that I would like to end up in the company of ordinary thieves of an especially large scale, in some exclusive bar or castle from which they promptly chased away its former British owners, quickly replacing those owner’s portraits on the walls with their own? One may envy Svetlana Savitskaya, Yuri Gagarin, Che Guevara, Fidel, Amilcar Cabral, Yegorov and Kantaria, Dean Reed, the builders of BAM, or even those who attended a concert of “Boney

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78 Svetlana Savitskaya is a former Soviet female aviator and cosmonaut who flew aboard Soyuz T-7 in 1982, becoming the second woman in space some nineteen years after Valentina Tereshkova.
79 Amílcar Lopes da Costa Cabral was a Guinea-Bissauan agronomic engineer, writer, Marxist and nationalist guerrilla and politician. Cabral led African nationalist movements in Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands and led Guinea-Bissau's independence movement. He was assassinated in 1973 by Guinean native agents of the Portuguese colonial authorities.
80 For millions of Soviet people Mikhail Yegorov and Meliton Kantaria symbolise the USSR’s victory over Nazi Germany in Great Patriotic War. The two men were Red Army soldiers who unfurled a red banner over the battered Reichstag in Berlin on 30 April 1945.
81 Dean Cyril Reed was a popular American actor, singer and songwriter who lived a great part of his adult life in South America and then in communist East Germany. His progressive music and many songs were very popular in Socialist countries of Eastern Europe.
82 The Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) is a broad gauge railway line in Russia. Traversing Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East, the 4,324 km (2,687 mile) long BAM runs about 610 to 770 km (380 to 480 miles) north of and parallel to the Trans-Siberian railway. Due to the severe terrain, weather, length and cost the Soviet Union government described BAM as the construction project of the century. Tens of thousands of young Soviet people volunteered to go and help with
There are just people in this world who are enemies: not my personal ones, but enemies of all working mankind. And that’s not because you’re such a “bad guy” that you have enemies; no, they just objectively exist, and they will not stop being there because you turn the other cheek, because of your vows of “Christian love” for them or even from their political rehabilitation. It’s like a bedbug that emerged in your mattress: it will not stop sucking your blood, no matter how many educational talks you have with it. Of course, it’s your personal business if you want to turn it your other cheek. But I’m too fond of people to do this and I’ll deal with the bugs that prevent them from living a worthy life, as long as I have the strength... Up to burning the mattresses. Hatred could be sacred, as a “Sacred war”. The main thing is that it has to be ultimately aimed at something positive, at creation, not just fruitlessly corroding you from inside like nitric acid. And the ridding of humanity of parasites, not necessarily getting rid of them physically (some can eventually be re-educated) is also creative work!

As for love... Love is what’s in your heart, not what’s below your waistline. Love is what gives you wings, what frees you from fear of math tests at school and gives you bravery in front of an enemy’s bunker embrasure. It’s your most beautiful secret, not some letter to a tabloid newspaper with question “how can I get him into bed?” It is the joy and the sadness of your life, not a reflection on the “Where shall we put our wardrobe?” Do you understand this, or is it already too complicated for you?

Apart from the slight fancy for clown Oleg Popov that I experienced at the age of three, my first great love in my childhood was the French actor Jean Marais. I mean, not Jean Marais himself, of course, but his character Fandor from films about Fantomas. Children under sixteen weren’t allowed to see this film (so that a hooligan like Fantomas wouldn’t set a bad example: a bad example is contagious, as we know!), but my mom convinced the people in the cinema to let me in, because I wasn’t even seven years old yet: what kind of a bad behaviour could be expected from such a gosling? - and they let me in.

Fandor attracted me so much, not because he was a hero but because he was noble and in need of protection: in the opening scene, Fantomas henchmen put a brand on his chest. I felt my heart flickering building of the railway. The work and life there were tough, weather conditions difficult, but the overwhelming mood of people who were building it was romantic and enthusiastic.

83 Kola Beldy (1929-1993) was a pop singer from Siberia the Soviet Union who had a number of Soviet-era hits, most famously "Увезу тебя я в тундру" ("I Will Take You to the Tundra").

84 The author refers to one of the most famous Soviet songs written by Vasily Lebedev-Kumach about the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945. It was written in 1941 in the first days of the German invasion of the Soviet Union and immediately became a peoples' hymn to the defenders of the Motherland.
strangely and beating fast as never before. I wanted to protect him, even when during the film it became more and more obvious that he was perfectly able to standing up for himself. I wanted to hover over him when he was in trouble, to give him some water when he was thirsty. And when I came out of the cinema, I didn’t want to rob jewellery stores wearing a blue sock over my face: I wanted to catch the Fantomases! On my way home I felt as if I had wings!

I was in a cinema only once before that: my mother took me to watch the comedy "Gentlemen of Fortune"85 when I was three years old. I was so happy that I was big enough to go to a real cinema. Remembering the fiasco that happened a year earlier in the circus, when I began to cry as soon as the orchestra began to play loud, I did my best to be calm during the newsreel. And when the opening credits of the actual film came on the screen and a camel spat in the face of the hero of Savely Kramarov, and the audience began to laugh, I thought that my mission had been accomplished and I said loudly to my mum: "Well, the movie is over, so let’s go home!" And my mum, afraid that I’d cry if she would start to explain to me that the movie was only beginning, immediately got up and took me home. I didn’t even think of crying: I was just sure that the film had ended! Soon I forgot to even think about this.

But to my surprise, I did not forget the film about Fantomas the next day. Fandor was the first one I thought of when I woke up. The desire to become like him and deal with Fantomas only became stronger through the night.

I kept imagining how I would manage even what Fandor had failed to handle and how he would be amazed by my courage and dexterity, and a wonderful feeling arose in my heart: that I have some bright and solemn mystery unknown to anybody else on Earth except me! And it made me in some ways marvellous, different from others. When this feeling didn’t pass the next day, I was even more surprised and said to myself: “Zhenya, are you in love or something?”

It was such a strange feeling – love... Naturally, I didn’t realise that Jean Marais was the same age as my Grandma and that I was still so small that I could “walk under a table”. For me he was ageless. And that he wasn’t really Fandor didn’t matter either. I didn’t care if I would ever see him in reality (because he was with me more than in reality: he was even in my dreams, which really meant all the time!). And I cared even less what his sexual orientation was (at that time we didn’t know about such nonsense, thank God. This was a case where knowledge wasn’t necessarily power, and “the less you know the more soundly you sleep”). For me, it was enough to know that he existed somewhere in the world.

Soon Native Americans appeared in my life, and Gojko Mitic. There was nobody in the world more noble and handsome than his heroes! And since then “pale-face” became one of the worst curses in my lexicon. While I was still a preschooler I learned what the colonialists and imperial “civilizing” are like: things that in the West even secondary schools

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85 "Gentlemen of Fortune" is a Soviet comedy, made at Mosfilm. The film was the leader of Soviet distribution in 1972 having more than 65 million viewers.
graduates don’t really know: they don’t teach them about such “small
details”. Because if they would study properly about all the millions
of human lives wiped out by the West across the globe, then there would be
no place left in the school curriculum for the Holocaust.

- Mum, was all of this true? Can it be true that the Indians were
murdered out like that? And why? Wasn’t it easier just to live next to
them? What bastards these colonialists were! And how only the Earth can
carry them! Are there still Indians now? - I asked. That’s how I learned
another new word - "reservation"...

The heroes of Gojko Mitic needed protection much more than
Fandor, despite all their fearlessness. With my hair loose (which according
to my grandmother looked very messy, but otherwise how could I look like
an Indian?), I tied a ribbon around my head, painted my face with mum's
old lipstick and with hallooing chased about the street with my friends,
armed with homemade bows and arrows. We rescued whole tribes from
the reservations, and the pale-faces, those who were greedy for other
people’s lands, we put on their ships, - after a good flogging with nettles,
that would teach them to hurt the weak! - and we shipped them back to
their filthy Europe! Let them sit there and don’t rock the boat.

A worn picture of Gojko’s Mitic as Vigilant Falcon lay under my
pillow at night. Yes, this is real love - when you and your hero have
common goals and ideals!

I didn’t yet know in detail what was happening in the world. But I
understood very quickly that we were on the right side of the barricades.
That there is a terrible evil on our Earth but this evil is somewhere far
away, almost on another planet. Still, you have to fight it; it is like a
cancer, if you allow it to spread, it will eventually seize a healthy body.
And I had no doubt that our body was healthy. People around me, not just
my relatives but even strangers, were good; life was unhurried and calm,
without fear and doubts. People were discontented only about minor
things. Sometimes we listened to "Voice of America" - out of curiosity; but
when the tedious voices began to read some church sermons or the boring
“Archipelago Gulag”, we quickly switched the radio off. Not because of
some kind of fear, but simply because no one in our house was interested
in that.

In the "Time" news program it was reported solemnly that at last,
after a long and heroic struggle, yet another African country has achieved
independence. Among these countries I remember Guinea-Bissau, Angola
and Mozambique. I also remember - though vaguely - the revolution in
Ethiopia. I was too young to know the details of the apartheid regime in
South Africa, and sometimes I mixed it up with Southern Rhodesia. But
two events at that time especially left their imprint on my memory: the
celebration of the victory of the Vietnamese people over the U.S.
aggressors (it appeared on our television “live”, and I remember how we at
home screamed "Hurraa!" in chorus when the Vietnamese flag was hoisted
over Saigon); and, the black storm cloud that fell on Chile, in September
of 1973, the assassination of President Allende and the ominous Pinochet,
his eyes hidden behind sunglasses. We contemptuously called him Pinya.
The song «El pueblo unido jamas sera vencido» literally surrounded me at
Irina Malenko

that time. I got goose bumps on my back from it. Then we began to receive the news about torture, about Victor Jara\(^\text{86}\) and saw his head severed by those local Nazis hands…

- Mum, but why hasn’t our country done something to prevent this abominable Pinya and his junta from making that coup? - I tried to find out when I was six years old. How could mum answer me: to lecture me about the "Brezhnev doctrine"? Of course, she could tell me about the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries (which, by the way, nobody has abolished today either, you, "civilized" Western gentlemen!). But in that case I would have certainly asked: "Then why do these arrogant Americans go crawling everywhere, as if they are bees and there is honey in each country for them?"…

At home I had wonderful children's books: “Masha’s big journey” in which a Soviet doll called Masha arrives as a present from Soviet children to militant Vietnam, to a Vietnamese girl Tran Thi Vee; and “Perlita” - about the youngest Communist in the fascist Paraguay. To this day I remember almost every word in those books. I almost wore their pages out.

It was probably from that time, the time of Vietnam, Allende, MPLA\(^\text{87}\) and FRELIMO, ZANU and ZAPU, the ANC and Mengistu, Gojko Mitić, Fandor, Black Tulip, Yanosik\(^\text{88}\), Kolya Kondratyev\(^\text{89}\) and Zorro, that I became such an incurable romantic.

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\(^{86}\) Víctor Lidio Jara Martínez (1932-1973) was a Chilean teacher, theatre director, poet, singer-songwriter, political activist and member of the Communist Party of Chile. Soon after the Chilean coup of 11 September 1973, he was arrested, tortured and ultimately shot to death by machine gun fire. His body was later thrown out into the street of a shanty town in Santiago. The contrast between the themes of his songs, on love, peace and social justice and the brutal way in which he was murdered transformed Jara into a symbol of struggle for human rights and justice across Latin America.

\(^{87}\) MPLA - The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola is an Angolan political party that has ruled the country since Angola's independence in 1975. The MPLA fought against the Portuguese army in the war for independence from 1961 to 1975 and against UNITA and FNLA in the civil war from 1975 to 2002.

\(^{88}\) FRELIMO - The Liberation Front of Mozambique, political party which was created to make colonial Mozambique independent from Portugal. After ten years of fighting FRELIMO managed to control 2/3 of the country. In 1975 Mozambique became independent.

\(^{89}\) ZANU - The Zimbabwe African National Union is a militant organization that fought against white minority rule in Rhodesia, ZANU won the 1980 elections under the leadership of Robert Mugabe.

\(^{89}\) ANC - African National Congress, the oldest political anti-apartheid organisation in South Africa. Since 1994 it is the ruling party.

\(^{89}\) Mengistu Haile Mariam - state leader of Ethiopia, one of the leaders of Ethiopian revolution.

\(^{88}\) Yanosik - The Robin Hood of Polish legend, Yanosik was a leader of a band of outlaws in the Tatra Mountains, robbing from the rich and giving to the poor.
I went to the cinema to watch “Zorro” with Alain Delon twelve times! I knew the words by heart, but I just couldn’t get enough of this film.

Up till now I have a lot of similarities in character with its heroine Hortensia. There is nothing more awful than an impulsively romantic woman. Women's romanticism is an unclaimed quality, almost like a burst of workers enthusiasm under capitalist conditions. Later in life I often thought that it would have been better for me to have been born a man, with that kind of mental attitude. Women at least appreciate romantic men who can surprise them with non-trivial acts; and such men are rare. But men, what do they know about romance! At best they make faces when you bring them a bag full of fresh apricots in winter. (“I hate to look at you when you drag about with heavy bags like an old woman”, that arrogant Ethiopian, Said, used to say while he was gobbling up the fruits that I brought him.)

When you almost magically managed to find out their home address and mailed them a giant gingerbread for their birthday (they did not even know that you knew when their birthday was!), when you did a “victory lap” around their house (in another city!) when you travelled there, confessing only to your best friends that you were going to see the “home town of my hero”, and the “hero” himself is naively surprised to hear about this: “Why don’t you come in for a cup of tea?...” And in the worst case a man would be utterly frightened if you sent him a Valentine’s card with your own verses! Not because the lyrics were so bad, but because he never experienced such courtesy before!

My Mum was often in love too. But not in the same way as I, though she fell in love with people who were just as out of her reach. With the famous ice hockey player Vyacheslav Starshinov and the Belgian singer Salvatore Adamo, whom my Grandfather, dissatisfied with her fancy, stubbornly called “voiceless”. She made a drawing of Adamo (my Mum can draw very well), and we would sing together “Tombe la neige”. And I also remember how I cried for my mum when Starshinov finished his sport career. How was she going to live without Starshinov now?

Many years later, when she met the biggest secret love of her adolescent years, a well-known cyclist in real life and he invited her to dinner, mum was terribly scared and refused. “I had such beautiful dreams about him. But what if in real life he turns out to have just a single cell in his brain?” I didn’t have such fears: if I was in her shoes, I wouldn’t have missed a chance to meet my idol in person! He might be single-celled, but you’ll never know that for sure if you refuse to meet him. What if he is very smart and is even better and more interesting than your old dreams about him?.. From my early years I liked the

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89 Kolya Kondratyev - character from the 1976 Soviet film "Born by the Revolution" about history of Soviet Militia. In the film the former young worker from the Putilov factory Nikolay Kondratyev begins his new life as a volunteer for Petrograd Militia Criminal Investigation Department.
Dagestani proverb - "Better to take and regret, than not to take and still regret".

My mum was red-haired, cheerful and very beautiful, almost like Zhenya Komelkova. She was so beautiful that I am not fit even to hold a candle to her. But that never bothered me; by nature we are very different, my mum always enjoyed the attention of the opposite sex, and I wanted to stay in the shadows, I didn't aim to be admitted to the ranks of beauties and was quite happy with my appearance (if only I could be a bit more tanned). I didn't care about fashion to such an extent that I was upset if I got new clothes for a birthday present; it was better to buy a good book or a record!

In the late 70's many people mistook my Mum for Alla Pugacheva because of her hair. I thought it was an offensive comparison, because my Mum was so much more beautiful! Her natural hair colour was the same as my Grandfather's: mahogany - like the colour of thick buckwheat honey. Only when she finally started getting grey hair did she bleach it. Despite her very feminine look, she always had an iron will and an analytical, masculine mind plus incredible, typically Russian flatness. (If I seem to be categorical, then imagine a person hundred times more categorical than me.) Mum is one of those people whom you could well admire at a distance and with whom it would be quite difficult to get along under the same roof. But, of course, for any child his mother is the best. Marusia cried a lot when I accidentally blurted out to her what my relatives said at home about her mother: that she was silly because she had six children. I did not understand at the time what was so offensive about that? After all, if my mom said it, it must be true. When I discovered for the first time that my mum could tell a lie (she lured me to the clinic for vaccination, saying that she needed to go there herself), it was a great shock for me. I was deeply hurt, especially because there was no need to deceive me so shamelessly. Of course, nobody likes vaccinations but I would complain for a while and then get on with it. There were things much more unpleasant than vaccinations: pricking a finger for a blood test, for example.

Periodically my mum had real male friends, not imaginary ones like Adamo. But to my delight, it didn't happen often. As a child I honestly did not understand why my mum needed someone else beside me. The fact that she did need somebody else just reinforced my low self-esteem. Am I really not enough to make her happy in life? We lived so well with grandmother, grandfather and Shurek, and we even had the pigeons...

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90 The Russian Republic of Dagestan, which translates as "land of the mountains", is situated in Russia's North Caucasus with Chechnya and Georgia to the west, Azerbaijan to the south and the Caspian Sea to the east. The republic is also famed for its traditional, ethnic and linguistic diversity, being home to more than 30 languages.

91 One of the main characters from the Soviet film about the Great Patriotic War "The Dawns Here Are Quiet".

92 Alla Pugacheva - 70's Soviet pop-star.
When a new male friend appeared in her life mum started to come home from work later and often go away for the weekends, which obviously upset me. Her attempts to get me to be friends with the object of her infatuation usually didn’t work.

Most of all I remember Dima the Poet: “a tall blond in a black shoe”\textsuperscript{93}, as I called him behind his back, who had a wrinkled face despite his young age (he was about five years younger than mum), with a sour-dreamy expression, as befits a true poet He gave me a lot of good children’s books and even once dedicated a small poem to me, which he personally branded on a wooden board. After he and my mother parted, my grandmother used this board under the kettle instead of the placemat.

“The road to Parnassus is hard!
And muse did the order for us:
To marry a gust of passion with
Suffering, joy and sorrow!”\textsuperscript{94}

This was written on it. Dima knew about my dream of becoming a writer. But even creative writing didn’t bring us together. I was terribly embarrassed if my mum would come to pick me up after school “with this idiot.” Although at that time divorce was still a rarity, I didn’t have the slightest hang-up before my classmates about the absence of my father. But when this very strange creature with his absent poetic eyes would come to pick me up from school, and other kids started asking: “Zhenya, is that your dad?” to me this crossed all limits of decency! Wasn’t it obvious that we couldn’t possibly have anything in common?

At the age of six or seven I began to write poetry too. Frankly I was a rather weak poet, but the creative process itself gave me great pleasure. My first poem was called “Anthem of the spaceship”: the same spaceship whose captain I imagined myself to be for several years already. By that time the spaceship’s crew got additional members from the characters mentioned above. Periodically the spaceship was attacked by terrible space monsters called Chepurysly. That was Shurek’s idea. “Kubrisans were flickering, Gekurabs were sparkling. But suddenly the Chepurysly began to chooh” - he wrote in the one of his stories that he invented at my request. We both had no idea who the Chepurysly were or what they looked like, and even more so, how did they chooh, but the phrase itself was so funny that the image stuck in my head. Each of us imagined them in his own way. But we both agreed that some very ugly, unpleasant person could be called a Chepurysla.

In my poetry, I was particularly inspired by one actress in our local drama theatre who captivated my imagination at that time: of course in the role of a Princess, in “Troubadour and his friends”\textsuperscript{94}. Little

\textsuperscript{93} “The Tall Blond Man with One Black Shoe” is a 1972 French comedy film starring Pierre Richard, Jean Rochefort and Bernard Blier. Funny Pierre Richard with his blond curly hair instantly became popular with Soviet cinema lovers.

\textsuperscript{94} “Troubadour and his friends” - Soviet 70’s musical which later was made into a full animation film. Music was written by G. Gladkov.
girls of all ages and nations, even Soviet ones, like princesses. By that
time, thanks to my mum, I had become a big theatre-lover. Perhaps
that actress wasn’t special but the fact is that I hadn’t had a chance to
see her even in one more play: she had disappeared. Mum’s colleague,
who himself acted after work in an amateur theatre, was an
experienced theatre-goer and knew people who worked there, and he
told us that Anna Mikhailovna vanished because she had a baby. She
was married to one of our local actors, who naturally just continued
acting as if nothing had happened. And from that time I hated that
motherhood deprived us, the audience, of Anna’s Mikhailovna’s play,
and marriage began to seem to me like some monstrous slavery into
which no right-minded woman would ever go voluntarily... I was angry
at her husband fluttering about on the stage and wrote the sad verses
that began with: "Do not worry, you’re my sweet snowdrop..."

"The snowdrop" of course never knew about my feelings. A year
later, never having appeared on the stage after her maternity leave,
she and her husband moved out of our city - to the Riga Russian Drama
Theatre, I think - and I never saw her again. But the memory remains
with me to this day. Recently, I found her on the internet and sent her
a postcard for her 55th birthday! If she ever found out about this whole
story she probably would laugh greatly. And as for me, a cold sweat
breaks out at the thought of what could have happened to me if I had
written this poem growing up in a country like Holland: in fact, I would
have definitely started to wonder whether I was of an unconventional
sexual orientation, because I loved this woman so much that I even
wrote poetry about her. When I was in 4th grade I blissfully fancied the
tenth grade’s pupil Alla Obraztsova. I even cut out her photos from a
school wall newspaper when nobody saw me. Alla was a small and
narrow-eyed blonde with a low voice and high cheekbones. She
impressed me in the role of Motherland in some school play. She never
knew about it, of course. After finishing secondary school, Alla married
Janusz, a Gypsy boy from our school; even such "exotic" marriages
didn’t amaze anybody at that.

Who knows how many young men and women in the West come
to wrong conclusions about themselves this way in their early years... A
person at this age also tends to look for an idol, for a role model among
older people of their own sex, and there is no any kind of “sexual
motive” in this. It is more like “Based on whose example shall I live my
life? Based on Dzerzhinsky!”95 - this is where these feelings are from!

Although I had a lot of dolls at home, mostly beautiful kewpie
dolls made in the GDR with closed eyes and luxurious hair, that could
say “mama” if you tilted them, the older I got, the less I played with
them. I much preferred pictures from magazines or my mum’s drawings

95 Felix Dzerzhinsky (1877-1926) - Russian revolutionary, the son of Polish
aristocrat, Soviet State official, founder of The All-Russian Extraordinary
Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage - Cheka. In 1918 its
name was changed, becoming All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for
Combating Counter-Revolution, Profiteering and Corruption.
Irina Malenko (copied from photos or created just by her imagination), cut out of paper to the contours of figures. And I also liked a set of figurines "Friendship of nations", with the dolls in the costumes of the peoples of the USSR. (I still can easily tell a Latvian costume from a Lithuanian one, and an Armenian one from an Azerbaijani one.) I arranged my home theatre out of those paper figures. On the back of the clippings I wrote their actors’ names and I also assigned each one a role that they played in my theatre. I was the only one who could understand these scribbles. I could play with those clippings for hours. They were my most precious treasure and were safely stored in a box under my bed. If ordinary dolls were for playing together with my friends, the clippings were my personal toys that I didn’t share with anybody. When a new good movie emerged on the screen, or something interesting was on TV, I immediately began to ask mum to draw the new heroes for me. Depending on her mood she could draw them the very next weekend, or saying that she had no inspiration, she would procrastinate about it. That’s how not only Yanosik and Marina, but also Zosia from the “Tavern with 13 chairs” and Silva from "The Czardas Queen" (we had just seen a wonderful movie with Anna Moffo in the main role!) appeared in my collection. I remember how I really wanted to become a nun for a while after watching the “Sound of Music”, and now in Ireland I occasionally tell real nuns about it with pleasure! Of course, I had not the faintest idea about religion, I just realised that nuns were never going to marry and I really liked this idea...

By the time I went to school, I already knew a lot of operettas and ballets. I was taken to the opera, a little later, unless you count the movie-opera "Prince Igor", which I watched breathlessly at the age of five. After that I became obsessed with the East and the mysterious Polovtsians, their khans and their dancing.

There were three theatres in our city: The Drama Theatre, Young Spectators Theatre or YST and the Puppet Theatre. The Drama Theatre became my favourite. In summer it used to go on tour and then some opera house or ballet would come to our city for a month, some other drama theatre for another month and the operetta theatre for the next month. I can recall the craze when the Kazan or Saratov Opera House performed in our city. Everyone wanted to see and listen to

96 "Tavern "13 Chairs" - humorous programme on Soviet television broadcasted from 1966 to 1980. The scene was set in a small Polish restaurant and featured favourite Soviet comedy actors. Pani Zosia was one of the waitresses in the Tavern. The premiere of the programme was so popular that the producers started receiving bags of letters from viewers from all over the country - from Sakhalin to Brest with demands to continue the programme. Subsequently in 15 years there were made 133 programmes.

97 Die Csárdásfürstin or A Csárdáskirálynő (literally The Csárdás Princess; translated into English as The Riviera Girl and The Gipsy Princess) is an operetta by Hungarian composer Emmerich Kalman. The operetta is widely beloved in Hungary, Austria, Germany, all of Europe and particularly in former Soviet Union, where it had been adapted into a hugely popular film.
Renat Ibragimov\textsuperscript{98} and Leonid Smetannikov\textsuperscript{99}, who were my mum’s favourite performers. The prices were low, so that any cleaner could take her children to the theatre. For children whose parents were too busy to go to the theatre (of course, there were people like that too), schools arranged special cultural outings to the theatres and the prices were even lower. This way my best friend Marusya went to the theatre for the first time.

Marusya was the oldest child in the only big family on our street. There were five girls and one boy in this family. Their mother, we called her Aunt Tanya, worked at the factory in shifts. Their father, Uncle Valera, formally didn’t work because he looked after the children, but actually he was busy with his own things (he was a pigeon fancier and a drinker, he also read a lot of books from the library). And so the children were more or less left to their own devices. It is terrible to think what might have happened to them if they lived in our “civilized” time! But in those times the whole street helped them out and looked after them. Somebody gave them old clothes, others tucked buns and candies into the children’s pockets (otherwise they just went to the garden, pulled out the onions and ate them), someone lent their mother money until payday (God forbid, nobody would even think of asking for interest!). The younger girls ran about the street with dirty but cheerful faces. While they were still toddlers, their whole yard was littered with excrement; it looked like a fairytale battlefield covered with bones of warriors. Their father began to build a new house, but they were the only ones who really believed that he would actually finish it soon. He was too lazy for that. The house rose above the street with its windows boarded up (the little house where they lived stood in the yard), it already had a roof but inside there were not even walls. It was dark and mysterious. We loved to play there. A dog called Cheburashka ran in the garden. It was rather angry and shaggy, but it didn’t bother people it was familiar with. Marusya’s garden was huge but densely overgrown; there were plenty of apple trees there. Most of the apples were eaten before they got ripe.

At home we sometimes had to fight for apples as well. When apple trees began to blossom already in May, I began to keep an eye on two apple trees in front of the house and to sigh: “Oh! This year is going to be a bumper-crop again...” There was a path to the river that passed by our house, and in summertime a lot of people went there for an outing. On the way back some of them loved to pick green apples from our apple trees. If we let them do it, there would be nothing left on the trees! When I was small, I asked my grandpa to help me to defend our trees, but when I grew up a bit, I began to protect these two trees myself. The apples from those trees were the late sort, the apples from one tree only became tasty after being kept in the shed for

\textsuperscript{98} Renat Ibragimov (born 1947) - opera singer, People's Artist of Russia and Tatarstan.

\textsuperscript{99} Leonid Smetannikov (born 1943) - is a Soviet and Russian opera singer (baritone). In 1987 he was awarded with the title of the USSR People's Artist.
several months, so it was an awful waste if somebody picked them when they were still green and sour. Moreover, a lot of apples already lay under the tree, so one didn’t have to huff and puff and break the tree branches. So I stood on the roof of our house, armed with one of my mum’s old bottles of hair lotion, filled with water. Every time I saw somebody who wanted to have a go at the tree, I immediately sprayed them from the roof with cold water! Men, curiously enough, were kinder. When they saw me, they usually started laughing and stopped picking the apples. Some of them even apologized. Women (although there were significantly less women “pluckers” than men) sometimes started to snarl, but rather sluggishly: “If this apple tree is yours, then why isn’t it behind the fence?” To this grandpa had an irresistible argument: “Was it you who planted it, perhaps?”

But if somebody would knock on the window and kindly ask for an apple, grandpa and grandma would never refuse. The nastiest “pluckers” were the teenagers, those who were a little bit older than me. For them, alongside the cold shower, I had some “killer” exclamations, aimed at shaming them so that they would never do it again. “The apples are soaked with chemicals!” - I shouted as loud as I could - “Tomorrow you will be on the toilet for the whole day. Get the phtalazol ready!” Modern people, who practically lack any sense of shame, can hardly imagine this, but this “battle cry” always worked. Guys blushed to the roots of their hair and ran away. Public talk about the toilet and everything related to it were taboo, absorbed with mother’s milk. I have no idea where Alla Pugacheva was born and what sort of parents she had, if in the whole Soviet epoch she so desperately wanted to say the word “ass” out loud, and this was her greatest “lack of freedom”... This word was deeply indecent; people talked about the toilet allegorically (“I have to go to a certain place”), women never asked men where the toilet was, and men didn’t ask women about it. I still don’t. I can recall how shocked everybody was in the early 90’s by my Dutch friend Petra, a robust, red-cheeked woman in trousers, a full head taller than any local man. Every man in Moscow who grabbed her in the street to ask this question simply scattered.

...I wonder what would today’s people do if they were the “pluckers” of that time? Shoot me down? Burn our house down? I wouldn’t be surprised. Because now we live in a “free world”, right?..

Marusya and her sisters taught me how to eat the resin from cherry and plum trees: it appeared on the trunks of the trees like teardrops. We ate it not because we were hungry, but because it was delicious. Especially cherry resin! Yummy! We spent the whole day playing outside until nightfall. From time to time my grandma came out to check where I was, I waved to her and she walked away. We played outside until nightfall both in summer and winter - “until the street lights turn on” as we used to say.

100 Phatalazol (Phthalylsulfathiazole) - the drug is a broad spectrum antimicrobial that can treat different types of infections including intestinal.
Aunt Tanya came back from work in the afternoon or at night - depending on her shift. She walked fast in her oil-stained overalls. Her children waited for her at the street corner in anticipation. I remember that she would be very angry: children got a hiding from her without any reason. Only now I realise that she was just exhausted after work. But Marusya very rarely got a hiding. Being the oldest gave her some privileges. One of them was visits to the theatre: of course not as often as I visited it, but she visited it with her classmates and with me and my mum. We both were so in love with the theatre, when we were about 10 years old, that we even organized our own summer theatre behind the vegetable plot. My grandpa dug in two lampposts to which we tied the curtains. That was our stage. I wrote the plays. Our first premiere was my anti-alcohol fairytale “The Tzar of Bottles”. I played all the men’s parts, because there were no boys on our street of our age. I wore grandpa’s old cap under which I hid my long hair. Marusya’s younger brother Andryusha was the only boy in our company, but the only role he could be given was the evil wizard from “Swan Lake”.

In early childhood I loved running: it didn’t matter where or why. As soon as I learned how to open the garden gate, I rushed out with the speed of a whirlwind in any direction, noticing nothing around me. And although traffic on the street was fairly rare, and the road itself was not right next to the house, I could easily run there, to the corner of Karl Marx Street. Our street was an old dirt road, which got muddy from rain and thawed snow (sometimes between seasons we had to put wooden planks over the mud in the courtyard to reach the gate without getting soaked feet), and on Karl Marx Street civilization began: it was asphalted. My relatives had to lock the gate so that I couldn’t reach it, open it and run away. But I still kept running whenever possible. Even around the monument to one local writer, whom at that time I mistakenly took for Granddad Lenin (both were bald with small beards). Around the monument pansies were growing inside a granite border; it was my favourite place to run about. Until I was eight years old, my knees were constantly covered with scratches and patches, and then I discovered a simple truth: if you don’t run, you don’t fall! This thought struck me so hard that I stopped running, and my hurt knees were left in the past. However, I still broke a thumb once: I was showing off before our sworn enemy Zhenya, showing her that I could ride a bike without holding the handle bars... The bike was my hot battle steed! (In Marusya’s family there was only one bike and she had to share it with Andryusha and Dasha). I embarrassingly fell face down, and that was the end of my showing off. It was very painful but I didn’t show it. Marusya ran over to me, took me by the arm and we proudly passed by Zhenya and her cohort. She didn’t even dare laugh. After that I walked around for a whole month in a plaster cast. That was certainly not the best feeling in the world.

My parents didn’t consider Marusya to be inappropriate company for me due to the difference in our social status (my parents were engineers and hers were workers). No one could even think of such an absurdity. Marusya was a nice girl with whom I could share all my
Irina Malenko

dreams - even about the spaceship: she could understand anything. She was a very loyal friend and I could always rely on her. Also we both loved reading. If one of us discovered a new good book, we read it aloud to each other and it was as much fun as any game. I can’t imagine modern kids doing that. But it was so great! We couldn’t wait for the new issue of “The Pioneer Truth” newspaper, where the new adventures of Alisa were published, written by Kir Bulychev.

Later, when we were about twelve, Marusya’s family finally got a flat (they just hadn’t applied for it before), so they moved. We didn’t part on purpose; Marusya promised to come to the old house for summer, but time went by and her visits became more and more rare... After finishing the 8th grade, she entered a teachers’ training college, though she could continue studying until the 10th grade, she was a good pupil. She became a primary-school teacher, and I think she found her calling. All of her sisters and her brother are also fine. They were lucky because they had time to grow up in the socialist Soviet Union. Alyonka, the youngest, was born when Marusya and I were 9. Right at that time we had a quarrel: I don’t remember what it was about, but it was our only quarrel in all the time we were friends. I remember riding a bike past Marusya’s house when I heard a desperate cuckoo from her garden: Marusya wanted to make peace and thus attracted my attention. There were absolutely no cuckoos in our woods, and we were the only ones who cuckooed! We made up quickly, but still it was too late to name Alenka after me, as Marusya asked her parents.

Marusya’s sisters adored me, especially Lyuda, who was 6 years younger than we were.

But Dasha took offence when we offered her a role of Marquis Forlipopolli in one of our plays. She cried: “I’ll tell mum everything! I want to play with you and you are calling me names!”

I rode Lyuda and Natasha on my bike’s frame, to their delight; I spun them around, grabbed them under both arms; played ball with them. I had no experience in dealing with children, so I just treated them as if they were my own age. But probably that was just what they liked about me. Surprisingly, I was always a little afraid of children, but they felt attracted to me! When they grew up, these girls became a seamstress and a dressmaker. Andryusha also works. It is funny to look at Lyuda with her wide swimmer-like shoulders now and recall that she was such a puny creature with a very thin neck.

...A few years ago when I was still married to Sonny, I took him to the theatre in our city. After the play a woman wearing glasses came to us and cheerfully greeted us. “Zhenya, you don’t recognize me!” - she started laughing. Then I recognized he, by her voice. “Marusya?.. Is that you?” She still works at a school. She finally got married (quite late, by Russian standards), to a policeman. They have a son. She wanted to know more about living abroad, while I didn’t want to even think about it, never mind talking about it. Well, maybe just for the sake of our friendship...

We had normal, good relations with our neighbours. Many of them used to study at the same school with my mum or Shurek, and so
my grandpa and grandma knew their parents. The only thing that clouded the atmosphere from time to time was, as I mentioned, grandpa’s unpredictable “explosions” after a binge. The combination of a binge and rain was especially dangerous: after the rain a ditch near our house frequently overflowed, and grandpa would go out into the street with a shovel, and if he was under the influence, he would imagine that our neighbours were digging their ditches so that the water flowed into our side ... It is better not to remember what he blurted out then! But my grandmother heroically blocked his way and didn’t allow him to do anything silly.

In the street it was easy to distinguish who was born and raised in the city and who was of rural origin. Anyone who moved into the city after the war was considered rural. Rural people really had a different culture and different way of speaking. Sometimes it seemed that they were from a different nation! Gradually the formerly rural population in the cities grew larger and larger, and eventually the native city folks became a small minority. Urban customs and manners became almost forgotten as well.

There was a pretty nasty old lady living in the house across the street. Her name was Agafya. When children began to run around her house, she drove them away with a broom and yelled: “Don’t you walk on my footpath!” And when in winter we built an ice slide, from where I slid into the road between our house and hers, at night she threw rubbish on it.

Neighbours invited each other for weddings and funerals, they lent each other money, shared news with each other and went together to get water from the water pump. There were factory workers and cooks, drivers and engineers, soldiers and saleswomen, policemen and music teachers. Most families had lived in one house for three generations: grandparents, their children and grandchildren. Periodically, the families were joined by new members: daughters or sons-in-law. I remember the wedding of a neighbour, Uncle Volodya and his bride, a redheaded young girl called Inna. I remember loud cries “And now a kiss!” and music... Now they are already grandparents themselves.

Often, neighbours gathered on a bench in front of the Motovilovs house to play dominoes and bingo. We knew all about each other; well, if not all, then the most important things. If in the summer someone carried a lot of water in buckets from the water pump, they must have been watering their vegetable plot. Everybody had vegetable plots. No one stole potatoes from anyone else, even when it was a bad harvest year. One night 5 beds of potatoes were dug out of our vegetable plot, but it was done by strangers, not neighbours. Now, with the mentality prevailing after “perestroika” there would have been simply nothing left of those vegetables at all!

My grandfather was on friendly terms with Antonovich, as we called our often drunk neighbour with a Lithuanian surname. Antonovich was a great joker: I left everything and ran into the street when I saw him, saying to my family with an air of importance: “I am
out for a chat with Antonovich!” Antonovich was married to Shura - the only woman who drank that I knew in my childhood. At that time women who drank were as rare as a weeping Bolshevik from one of Mayakovsky’s poems! Drug users were virtually non-existent. Of the half a million people in our city, we personally knew only one: the brother of one of mum’s co-worker.

Shura was a former actress. She had a red face, beautiful dresses and a scarf rolled into a tube, which she tied around her head. When she walked down the street tipsy, it was a sad spectacle. “Don’t look!” - My grandma would close my eyes and bring me home. One day Antonovich literally burst into our house, flung himself at grandpa and wept: “Shura died!” It was the first funeral on our street that I remember. I was terribly scared of the funeral orchestra playing heart-rending music, so I started crying and huddled under the table, closing my ears, just not to hear it anymore.

Some of the neighbours, Aunt Tonya and Uncle Vasya, kept goats and rabbits. One could smell them a mile away from their house. Uncle Vasya Naumenko was blind and crippled, with a beard almost reaching his waist. He was blinded in the war. In the evening, they chased goats past our house to graze behind the railroad track. I was very much afraid of the goats: what if they suddenly butted you? In the afternoon Aunt Tonya often walked along the street by herself: to collect burdocks for the rabbits. If this had been filmed by a Western correspondent, I suppose he would have trumpeted that people in the USSR were eating grass because of hunger, as they now say about North Korea! Nothing could be further from the truth. But at this point you could be calm. They won’t be able to lie: Western correspondents didn’t come to us, because ours was a closed city. I didn’t know about it when I was a child, and even when I found out, I wasn’t much interested in why. Working at a military industry plant was called “working in the mailbox” (because instead of giving one’s full address one only gave out a PO Box address). Sometimes in the evenings a distant roar of cannons was heard. “Mum, what is it?” - I asked. “Oh, they are just breaking refined sugar into pieces in the sugar factory!” - she replied with a calm face.

Even before going to school, I managed to travel around the country; I first saw the sea when I was four. It was the Black Sea. It was my first trip on an overnight passenger train, and I desperately wanted to sleep on the top bunk! But mum only allowed me to sit on it during the day: apparently she was afraid that I could slip down while sleeping. I loved drinking strong black tea in the train, and even refined sugar pieces there seemed special, tastier than at home. I remember that I didn’t move away from the window even for a second and I woke up at night hearing a strange loud voice from the loudspeaker on the platform of the train stations. I remember how this voice announced such mysterious, unfamiliar names: Armavir, Tuapse...

Actually, we were going to Sukhumi, but then ended up in Gagry. Mum took me to the relatives of her institute's athletics coach’s wife, who rented their house out to tourists for the summer. Marina,
the mistress of the house, was half Georgian, half Armenian, and she heartily burst with laughter when I seriously explained to her: "At first we wanted to go to Sukhumi, but then we decided that the Georgians there would be courting us too much, and therefore we came to you". "Oh, they certainly would! They are just like that!" - she said, and never stopped laughing. Naturally, nobody went after us, unless you count as courting the shy and handsome local fishermen who were trying to attract my mum’s attention by putting a small live crab on the fence of the house where we lived in.

According to my mum, when I saw the sea for the first time, I closed my eyes for a second and then with cries of joy I began to run straight into the water and kept running until I got into it completely, with my head under. Good that mum rushed to me just in time... And then I started to collect smooth sea stones which I also had never seen before. I collected a huge bag and quite seriously intended to bring them all home! Mum secretly threw half of them away.

The house was very close to the sea: a five minute walk along the dusty streets, where bats and fireflies circled in the air in the evening. We could hear the roar of the waves in the house during a storm. Actually, there were two houses: the main one, in which the owners lived during the winter, and the tiny one, which one couldn’t enter without hunching over, where they moved in for the summer. We were once called to watch TV there. Between the houses there was a garden with incredibly fragrant tea roses and other plants that I had never seen, such as cypresses and laurels.

"Is that a bay leaf that grandma uses when she cooks soup?" - I asked my mum the very first day, surprised. I also tried sickly sweet mulberries there for the first time. We ate at a local cafeteria: food was delicious and cheap and queues were short. My mum would buy fruit at the market, and tasty Tbilisi sausage and the Georgian Lavash bread that also stuck in my memory. Beautiful local traditional houses with overhanging balconies above the street and the mountains I also saw for the first time. I was struck by the view of the clouds hanging over the mountains, and the mountain top towering over these clouds. Here and there the roofs of huts and the white skin of sheep flashed in the mountains. Once a donkey ran out into the roadway in front of our bus, to my delight! Behind him, puffing, ran his owner. Everybody in the bus began to laugh.

I thought it was very amusing that many words in the Abkhazian language were the same as in Russian, but with an "a" at the beginning: abazar (a-market). So I experimented with it: "apochta" (a-post), "apoezd" (a-train), "asamolet (a-plane)"...

I didn’t distinguish whether the people around me were Abkhazians, Georgians or Russians. My father’s best friend in our home town was an Abkhazian. My father grew up in Abkhazia. My great-grandmother was married to a Georgian; grandmother’s brother was married to a Georgian. At that time none of the ordinary people cared. Thanks to Gorbachev’s “universal values”, apparently borrowed from Margaret Thatcher, Abkhazia became a sort of local Northern Ireland.
Grandmother’s brother - the one who was married to a Georgian and lived in Abkhazia all his life - was killed by his Abkhazian neighbours in the early 1990s: they wanted to “ethnically cleanse” him from the house which he built with his own hands. The old man said: “Guys, are you crazy? I’m not going anywhere. This is my home.” Two days later his body was found thrown across the Russian border... His children now live in Russia as refugees. And Georgia is invaded by “civilized humanists” - rag-and-bones men like that Dutch missionary, Sandra Roelofs\(^1\), who is trying to teach the locals how they should live their lives...

We lived without that sort of people, and we lived a whole lot better without them. If you don’t believe me, go and ask any ordinary Georgian, Uzbek, Chukcha or Russian, who remembers that time: not some textbook published with Soros’ money, not from Radzinsky’s\(^2\) books, not from Svanidze\(^3\) TV programs and most certainly, not according to the tales of Sandra Roelofs or her husband.

The following year, my mother took me to Leningrad to visit our relatives. Aunt Ira, daughter of my grandmother’s brother Ilya (the man who was exiled to the Urals), still lived there with her family. She and her husband were railway engineers. They lived in the city centre, on Griboyedov Canal. Their daughter Olga was graduating from secondary school that year. Olga was a clever, sharp-tongued girl. She treated me as her equal, even though I was only a kid. I remember how impressed I was by the white nights, the opening of the bridges at night, the Hermitage, and especially, of course, like any child, the palaces and fountains of Peterhoff (Petrodvorets) and a trip there by the boat with underwater “wings”! Leningrad was a large, spacious city, thoroughly penetrated by wind, cold and very clean. I first saw the legendary “Aurora” and the Smolny. The personality of Peter the Great impressed my childish imagination enormously. Strangely, after all the legends and stories I heard about him, for me he was like a living person, so I was even a little afraid of the Bronze Horseman, when I met the stern gaze of his bronze eyes\(^4\). In the evenings I read Olya’s books: the poetry of Robert Burns and Shakespeare in the translation by Marshak\(^5\)

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\(^1\) Sandra Elisabeth Roelofs is the Dutch-First Lady of Georgia, the wife of President of Georgia Mikhail Saakashvili. Roelofs acquired Georgian citizenship in January 2008 and is now a dual Dutch-Georgian citizen.

\(^2\) Edvard Radzinsky (b. 1936, Moscow) is a Russian rightwing writer, playwright, TV personality, and author of numerous film screenplays.

\(^3\) Nikolay Svanidze (born 1955, Moscow) is a rightwing Russian TV and radio host. His anti-soviet historical programs are mainly based on conscious mind manipulation and hearsay.

\(^4\) The author refers to the famous Russian poem "Bronze Horseman" (1833) by Aleksander Pushkin, which Russian children study at school. The statue of Peter the Great came to be known as the Bronze Horseman because of the great influence of the poem. In it the statue comes to life and chases the hero of the poem through the city of St. Petersburg.

\(^5\) Samuil Marshak (1887 - 1964) was a Russian and Soviet writer, translator.
and four volumes of political cartoons by the Dane Herluf Bidstrup\textsuperscript{106}, who gave me a very clear idea of what was happening in the world.

When I came home, I overwhelmed Marusya with all these stories. We also started to play Alexander Menshikov\textsuperscript{107} and Catherine\textsuperscript{108} in Peter the Great... Peter seemed to me a terribly attractive character. He was so powerful and wilful!

...I feel my head falling onto the pillow. A familiar black-moustached face appears above me. Peter! Hey, Peter, you didn’t live in Holland long enough to understand what it’s really like... When I was only there as an exchange student for a couple of months, I used to like it too... I try to open my mouth to tell him what his “Promised Land” is really like - and fall asleep...

...I wake up with a heavy head about 11 a.m.... There you had it, your nice liquor ... Hurry, get up! At 1 p.m. Amandine will be waiting for me on O’Connor Street, and we are going to the Dublin Zoo!

Amandine was a pretty, short, round brunette with lively brown eyes. A sweet and shy girl. Her parents were Portuguese immigrants, but she was born in France. I remembered a photograph of Will Sharkey from Roscommon. Hmm, what did she find attractive about that stuffy goat? Love, apparently, is really a cruel thing. She obviously was nervous about our meeting: she incessantly pulled about the corner of her bag - and therefore she didn’t come alone. Her companion was a cheerful and talkative Irish guy: it was obvious from the first sight of his curly red hair. A freckled Francophile named Tadhg. Tadhg spoke French masterly, which is very unusual for an Irishman: there are very few locals who know any other language beside English. It turned out that Tadhg was an engineer and he was fond of France and everything French. They were just friends, he and Amandine. She kept trying to speak English, to practice, but he interrupted her and spoke French: he also wanted to practice. I knew both these languages, so I didn’t care what they spoke.

I have perhaps an absurd habit: when I meet someone from another country, I start remembering aloud what I know about that country, what films from that country I have seen, what books I have

\textsuperscript{106} Herluf Bidstrup (1912-1988) - Danish artist and cartoonist, member of the Communist Party of Denmark. He travelled to the former GDR and the Soviet Union. In addition to political cartoons he produced other works depicting everyday life and human foibles. He is still very popular in Russia.

\textsuperscript{107} Aleksandr Menshikov (1673–1729) was a Russian statesman, whose official titles included Generalissimus, Prince of the Russian Empire and Duke of Izhora (Duke of Ingria). A highly appreciated associate and friend of Tsar Peter the Great.

\textsuperscript{108} Catherine I - the second wife of Peter the Great, reigned as Empress of Russia from 1725 until her death. The author refers to the two series Soviet film "Peter the Great" made in 1938 about life and work of the Russian emperor Peter I.
read, whether I have any friends there. Sometimes it makes an impression on people: for example, Ethiopians are pleasantly surprised by my knowledge of Tewodros and Menelik\textsuperscript{109}, the Battle of Adwa and Axum\textsuperscript{110}. Incidentally, I’m not the only one with this habit: my half-brother, in effort to impress Sonny with his knowledge, prepared a long talk on the history and geography... of Venezuela for Sonny’s first visit to Russia. Sonny could not understand what was happening, and why Petya told him who was the president of Venezuela, and which parties were in the Venezuelan parliament. Petya just couldn’t find any information about the Netherlands Antilles and decided that information about a neighbouring country would make just as much an impression on his sister’s husband...

When I mentioned the names of Louis de Funes\textsuperscript{111} and Alain Delon, Amandine’s face brightened:
- Ooh-la-la! Here nobody knows that! Except of Tadhg, of course, cause he is already almost a Frenchman.
- Yes, I grew up with these movies... We know them all back at home. Even those who don’t know a word of French!
- You know, Alain Delon is such an arrogant character! He speaks of himself only in the third person: "Alain Delon believes...", "Alain Delon decided..." Fu! - Amandine laughed so sincerely that the ice melted between us completely.
- We know so much about France since childhood that I don’t know where to start! I thought that the French classics, at the very least, must be well known to everybody - but no, in English-speaking countries French films are virtually unknown, just as is French music. Here nobody knows about Edith Piaf or Charles Aznavour, Mireille Mathieu, Jacques Brel (not to mention that nobody knows he was Belgian!), or Joe Dassin\textsuperscript{112}. Here, no one has heard of the Paul Mauriat orchestra. They haven’t see movies with Lino Ventura, Jean-Paul Belmondo and Pierre Richard. They don’t read Emile Zola (I read his "Germinal" when I was 14), Victor Hugo, Honore de Balzac and Antoine

\textsuperscript{109} Ethiopian emperors.

\textsuperscript{110} The Battle of Adwa (usually known as Adowa, or sometimes by the Italian name Adua) was fought on 1 March 1896 between Ethiopia and Italy near the town of Adwa, Ethiopia, in Tigray.

Axum or Aksum is a city in northern Ethiopia which was the original capital of the eponymous kingdom of Axum. Axum was a naval and trading power that ruled the region from ca. 400 BC into the 10th century.

\textsuperscript{111} Louis Germain David de Funès de Galarza (1914-1983) was a very popular French actor who is one of the giants of French comedy alongside Bourvil and Fernandel. His acting style is remembered for its high energy performance, a wide range of facial expressions and an engaging, snappy impatience.

He was enormously successful in several countries for many years, but remained almost unknown in the English-speaking world.

\textsuperscript{112} These are popular French singers from different times. Their music was well known in the late Soviet Union. Soviet radio broadcasts often included music from all over the world.
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de Saint-Exupery; even Alexander Dumas is known only from the lousy Hollywood version of “The Three Musketeers”. I remember how I wept after reading “Notre Dame”. And English speaking people are sure that this is a cheerful animated-musical with a traditional happy-end...

You only hear songs in English on the radio here. It seems like these people are just organically incapable of perceiving music if they don’t understand the words. I noticed many times that they have a sort of panic when they hear a conversation in a foreign language: apparently, they believe that foreigners are only talking about them and always saying something unflattering. While our whole country can sing “Hafanana” by Afric Simon and “Marina” by Rocco Granata (performed by Claudio Villa): we sing what we hear, including the words, without knowing a word of Italian, or Swahili, and absolutely nobody cared that he didn’t understand what those songs were about.

This incredible self-inflicted cultural poverty of the English-speaking world you really notice when you find yourself on the continent: in France, in the Netherlands or Russia, and you turn on the radio. Why are the French not afraid to listen to songs in Greek or German? Poor English! They don’t know how much they are missing. They are so fond of talking about the Soviet “iron curtain”, and yet we, who lived in the Soviet Union, if you think of it, could become acquainted with the best of the culture of the Western countries. What we had was not “an iron curtain”, but ”an iron mesh” that kept all the rubbish out! If we didn’t see something, in practice, it was usually not worth seeing. I was convinced of that again after recently watching a movie that I wanted to see since childhood - “Saturday Night Fever”. What a meaningless, empty drag! What worthless dummy-like characters! The only interesting things in this movie are the music and a couple of dance scenes. But we had all that music in the Soviet Union too: on the radio and in the magazine “Krugozor”.

And what do the English do with poor foreign names! It is hard to believe how they manage to mangle them. I have never even once heard BBC or CNN pronouncing even the most ordinary Russian name properly. Kurnikova they certainly call Kurnikóva. Boris becomes Bóris. Luckily though, Stalin was not Stalin. For some reason, they call him Joseph, not Iosif. And it is not only about Russians, even Michael Schumacher became “Michael” (Ma-ykl instead of Mikha-el’)! And Schumacher himself apparently accepted it. How absurd! Why, we don’t call Tony Blair “Anton” or Margaret Thatcher “Margareeta”.

Another annoying thing is that nobody here even tried to pronounce my name properly. I understand that there is no “Zh” sound...

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113 Afric Simone (born 1956) is a singer, musician and entertainer from Mozambique. He entered the European charts with his first hit “Ramaya” in 1975, which was followed by another well-known song "Hafanana" (1975). He was very popular during 1975 - 1980 on both sides of the iron curtain. Simone also toured the USSR, Poland, the GDR and Czechoslovakia.

114 "Krugozor" was a musical magazine with flexi-discs issued in the Soviet Union by the public music company Melodiya.
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in English. But somehow Africans can pronounce my name, Vietnamese and Chinese can, Dutch and Spanish people also can say it, no problem, but English-speakers, poor creatures, can’t do it. How about at least trying: “Yev-gue-nia”? No I am not Eugenia, God damn it! And it is not Jenny. They are just so incredibly spoiled by all those who helpfully refuse to use their own names, all those Charles Bronsons and Helen Mirrens, who are actually Yelena Mironova and Carolis Buchinskis. I have already mentioned the English manager, the self-proclaimed “expert” on Russia (the one who got his teeth knocked out in a Moscow park) who fondly called his Russian wife “E-lee-na”. The poor girl’s name was Yelena... To correctly pronounce a person’s name or at least try to is elementary courtesy, Mr. Ee-van (that’s instead of John!) Williams!

... I’m telling you: break up with him! He is not worth such a nice girl as you, this twaddler! - Tadhg’s voice brought me back to reality.

- Tadhg, he has changed. Now, when I will prove to him, with his own letters in my hands, that I know about his escapades...
- Oh, you just listen to her! How old are you, fifteen?
- No, Tadhg, twenty nine, but you don’t really know Will...
- No “buts”! I am a man myself and I know these kinds of guys well...
- Our bus was approaching Phoenix Park, but they were still bickering.

Tadhg treated Amandine as his younger sister. I was very impressed with such a relationship. It was nice to see normal human friendship. It’s so rare nowadays.

Unfortunately, everyone has to make his own mistakes in life. Even entire nations can’t learn anything from someone else’s historical experience; I’m not even talking about individuals. Some of them manage to trigger a back flash to their own lives. The only thing they can do then is to sing favourite chastooshka of my best friend Lida Basina:

“Oh, Mama, I rode
On sledge with a wrong guy,
Oh, why did I kiss Grisha
Under that little cherry tree?
Oh Mama, oh Mama, why?”

It is useless to discourage them, not because they will not believe you, but because even if they did, they would still have the illusion that they could be right. Only bitter personal experience convinces people that others were right. But this doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try to prevent people from committing a great folly. If they have a head on their shoulders, they will listen to you and at least think about your words.

At the zoo Tadhg began to tell us funny stories about his own life, and I realized for the first time how rancorous and vengeful the Irish can be. It is really better not to tease them, like that sleeping dog
from the proverb: they don't forget anything! And they act accurately, sharply and in an underhanded way. Like real guerrillas!

- I was sitting in the library, minding my own business, not bothering anyone. I walked to the shelf to get a book, but some guy came and sat down at my place, although the library was almost empty. I came back and said: “Sorry, I was sitting here.” He arrogantly looked at me and said: "So what, just take another seat!" I didn’t argue, I moved, and thought to myself: "Well, you won’t get away with this!" After a while he went to the restroom, I grabbed any two books from the shelf and put them into his bag! Then I deliberately stood at the exit and waited for the alarm to be triggered. While his bag was searched, I stood at the exit saying indignantly: "Oh, Lord, what is happening to people! Such shameless folk nowadays: they steal books from the library!" He almost turned green, but he couldn’t prove anything!

- Frankly, I liked it. It is much more interesting to live like that than to call the librarian to move that guy to another seat or start a fistfight with him right in the library.

We decided to have a picnic. The sun was warm, Amandine brought sandwiches and a small blanket and I had a bottle of soda. Local mineral water with fruit juice is very popular in Ireland. Tadhg had a bag of candies. As I promised, I gave Amandine Will’s letters. She put them in her bag without even looking at them. Her face lit up. Apparently, they made peace again. Tadhg looked at her sympathetically, then at me and, so that she couldn’t see, twirled his finger beside his temple. I just made a helpless gesture. You can’t pass your own experience on to other people.

We all three got to talking. Amandine couldn’t find any work she really liked. She worked as a secretary in a small firm. Tadhg only dreamed about moving to France as soon as possible: apparently, France was the same for him as Ireland was for me. Well, I... I didn’t know. What do I want from life, besides Lisa’s recovery? My thoughts for the last few months were only about that: it was the purpose of my existence here, so I didn’t plan anything far-reaching. First I needed to overcome this most important obstacle. Even if she didn’t recover completely (I tried not to think about that possibility), at least she could feel better she could speak again. I remembered how 4-year-old Lisa burst into tears after she got out of a coma, opened her mouth and realized that she couldn’t speak, but more importantly, couldn’t sing any longer... I usually try to block this episode from my memory, but now it stubbornly came back to my head, and I felt my eyes dim with tears. I tried to swallow them before they got out.

- What’s wrong, Zhenya? – Amandine anxiously asked. However, I had no desire to tell that story to anyone else. At first, when it just happened, I believed that if I spoke about it, I would really feel better. But time passed, my companions to whom I decided to tell this story just gasped and sighed, listening to me as if I told them some sentimental lady’s novel. “Wow, wow! And what happened then?” And I didn’t feel any better.
- How can one explain this to people who are happy enough not to have experienced anything similar themselves? Unfortunately, many people have a morbid interest in other people's misfortunes. I am not a psychologist, so I do not know why. Maybe they just like the idea that it happened to someone else, not to them. And now I can’t listen to any stories that even distantly remind me of my own. I don’t read stories about accidents.
  - It’s nothing. Something just got into my eye.
  - Well, what do you want from life, then? Or is it a secret?
  - I finally coped with my feelings and thought again.
  - To be honest, the only thing that I want is to be able to choose the way I live. After what has happened to our country and to other countries in Eastern Europe, we have “no alternative”. We were deprived of that choice: we were deprived of our own way of life. Not without our own help, of course. Well, it's a long story... I just want to have the right to live in accordance with my norms and values, raising children, passing on the same values to them. Not to be afraid of people around me. Not to be afraid of the future. To be reassured every day that not everyone is for sale and not everything can be bought. Maybe you don’t quite understand what I mean?
  - Well, why not? - Tadhg said. - Freedom of choice is a great deal! To freedom of choice! - And he raised his plastic cup of mineral water.
  - The sun started to hide behind a cloud.
  - Guys, let's get packing; it is already 4 pm and we haven’t seen anything yet! - Amandine shouted like a child at the zoo for the first time. - I want to go to that farm!

At the corner of the zoo there really was a mini-farm with domestic animals. Amandine jumped up and ran off like a child. Tadhg and I packed the blanket, rubbish and remnants of food.
  - Pigs! Pigs! Look at the Irish Pigs! - Amandine suddenly shouted joyfully with a charming French accent, so that the whole zoo could hear her. We rushed to her shouting, looked into the paddock - and I almost sank to the ground. Tadhg turned even redder than his hair. There were little lovely ginger pigs running around the pen...
  - We parted as friends. I had a nice feeling after all the laughter, simplicity and innocence that we felt today. Amandine hurried back to Roscommon.
  - Don't work too hard! - Tadhg told me at parting. It is a favourite Irish way of wishing someone to have a good day... - I can see your life is not easy. If there is something I can help you with, just call me. - And he pushed a piece of paper with his phone number into my hand.

...On Monday morning when I went for my interview with the computer company, a Jamaican who was a bit tipsy came after me. He wandered onto Grafton Street and complained aloud that the Irish are racists and treated him poorly. My heart trembled. In the past I just liked them, but now since I had Lisa, all dark-skinned people, especially those from the Caribbean, became like family for me in a
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way. (They also treat us the same way: if I walk on the street with her, even strangers among them greet us with a knowing smile, especially Lisa - “We’re of the same blood, you and I!”.) And exactly the same thing as yesterday happened; I had the imprudence to address this Dublin Rastafarian and told him that I not only know all the songs of Bob Marley by heart, but that I was at a Mutabaruka’s concert in Amsterdam. Plus, I read a lot about Marcus Garvey. And when in 1979 Michael Manley came with a visit to the USSR...

That’s when it all began!

- You’re my sista! - a Jamaican shouted, grabbing my hands. He was a poet, just like Mutabaruka, and he recited a couple of his poems for me. Meeting a soul sister on the banks of Liffey, he began to pour out to me all his grievances:

- You just look, sista, how they look at me! It’s all because I’m black.

I looked around. Indeed, the passers-by were looking with curiosity. Black people in Dublin were rare at that time, you could probably count them on the fingers of one hand, and if a Black person was a Rastafarian and drunk as well... How could you not be curious? No, I don’t want to say that the Irish are not racists. The thing is that if this particular Jamaican was not drunk, they would still look at him, but not as much as they did.

There are a lot of racists here; just a different type of racists than the Dutch: more old-fashioned, open. I was lucky that I don’t look much different from the Irish, but those who do look different can tell you quite a different story. I honestly don’t know what is worse: when people are openly racists, or when they pretend to be tolerant, while at the same time they literally radiate hatred for you, twice as strong since that they can’t express it openly?

The Jamaican was talking enthusiastically about something else; then we both sang a verse from the “Redemption Song”. People looked at us with ever more undisguised interest.

At first I thought that we were just walking in the same direction. After 10 minutes I realized that the Jamaican was just tagging along. It was not the best time for this. My interview started in a quarter of an hour. But it was useless to try to explain this to a person who was not very sober, no matter what nationality he was. I tried. It didn’t work.

- Sista, I am going with you! - and he went on.

I barely managed to get rid of him by giving him the first phone number that came into my head. I think it was actually Connor’s number. But I felt very bad for a long time after that. Well, now he will probably say that I am a racist too...

After some time in Dublin I met an Angolan who spoke Russian: he used to study in Minsk. People who say that we have a lot of skinheads should have listened to him! The Angolan recalled Belarusians and Russians with so much warmth. “Your people are wonderful, responsive. They may seem harsh, but once they get to know you better, you will be their best friend. They will share the last
thing with you." I heard the same opinion from an Afghani refugee, who was travelling with me in a bus to Wexford. Probably they thought this way because they met Soviet people, not the "new Russians". I remembered a definition of friendship that I had read somewhere, based on the concepts that we seem to have in our blood. "True friendship is when you can call a friend at 3 am and ask him to be a 100 kilometers away at 6 am - and he won’t ask why..." It takes your breath away when you remember that such friendship really existed, and there really were such friends. Because now we have mainly the likes of Vampilov’s Silva: "You burn, if they set you on fire it’s none of my business". 

...The Irish have their own version of the Dutch standard conversation on the topic “Mag ik iets vragen?” (“May I ask something?”) (See above). But here it consists only of one question: when you say "I’m from Russia", a true Irishman is supposed to ask you: “What part of Russia are you from?” At first I just couldn’t understand why they were asking that: the majority of the Irish people, mille pardons, have such a poor knowledge of geography, that even if I told them the name of my city, that would not mean anything to them. Later on people who knew better explained to me that Irish who were unaccustomed to foreigners were simply used to asking each other this question and to Americans of Irish origin: in their own country they quickly learn what kind of a person you are depending on what Conway family you belong to: from Westport or from Castlebar. You can even find mutual relatives: Ireland is an extremely small country in this sense! And then there will be something to talk about. Asking the same question to a foreigner with whom they don’t have any relatives or even friends in common, of course, is the height of absurdity, and perhaps that is why the conversation fails to begin at this point. (“I suggest changing the subject”, as the unforgettable Charley’s Aunt Donna Lucia.) But a habit is second nature, and the Irish obstinately continue to ask you that same question.

They can also ask you the same question at a job interview. “Om je op je gemak te stellen” (In order to make you feel comfortable). Also Irish interviewers love and appreciate a sense of humor. In Ireland, you can be a little late for an interview; it is no big deal. After working in the same sort of business for some time you know what questions you will be asked on an interview - and, of course, you know what kind of response they expect. An interview is one big glaring formality and hypocrisy, because even if you know how to deal with customers, it doesn’t mean that you’re actually going to handle them this way once

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115 Alexander Vampilov (1937–1972) was a Soviet playwright. His play "Elder Son" was first performed in 1969, and became a national success two years later. Many of his plays have been filmed or televised. His four full-length plays have been translated into English and "Duck Hunting" has been performed in London.

116 many apologies (Fr.)

117 Heroine of Brendan Thomas’ play “Charley’s Aunt” (Soviet film version of it was called “Hello, I am your Aunty!”)
you get the job. It reminds me of Lena, a girl from my student group, who somehow managed to pass the entrance exam in French with an A grade. Then for all her 4 years study at the University she hardly managed to get a “C”.

An interview means that you should

a) look good (I had a suit especially for this occasion: a sky-blue wool skirt that slightly exposed my knees, and a beautiful soft sweater of the same colour),

b) smile a lot (you can practice for a couple of days in front of a mirror) and c) know how to answer questions.

For the first part - “why do you want to work in our company?” - you should read the information about the company on its website in advance and shamelessly flatter the interviewer a lot. To the question “why do you think that you are suitable to work for us?” - you should even more shamelessly describe your real or imaginary merits. The last item is especially difficult for a Soviet person: we were brought up modestly - people will notice your good qualities from your deeds anyway, and words by themselves mean nothing. It seems to sound right... But only after much suffering, you learn that no one in the capitalist world will give you a chance to show what you are capable of if you can’t “sell” yourself. I finally learned to boast about myself: for that I mentally shut my eyes and clenched teeth. No one notices anyway that you are doing it through clenched teeth, and for this process a fake smile is strongly recommended. After that the interview turns into a game of ping-pong: you are thrown the question of how you would act in a particular situation, and you in turn throw back to them an answer prepared in advance.

That’s all. The rest is technicalities. Usually you don’t need anything else, and if the company really needs a worker, they will hire you. After a little practice you learn to feel during the interview whether it is going smoothly or not. Living in Dublin, I registered with so many employment agencies that somebody always called me with new offers. Sometimes I went to an interview - I repent, I repent! - just for practice, without any serious intention of changing jobs. “And we shall live, there will be other!”118.

When you get older, you begin to feel an aversion to this process. You get tired of playing these stupid role-playing games. The fact that some man or woman, who probably knows less than you, but is full of himself (or herself), is sitting in front of you and feeling that he or she has unlimited power, watching you like cattle on the market (thank god, at least they don’t check your teeth!), and all this based only on what is written in your papers, how you are dressed and what you say. “And who are the judges?” - Chatsky asked119. They sit and wait

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118 From Pushkin’s poem “Stone Guest”.
119 The author refers to the famous phrase by Chatsky - the hero of the comedy in verse "Woe from Wit"b written by Aleksander Griboedov in 1825, a satire upon Russian aristocratic society. The play is studied at schools and it gave rise to numerous catch phrases in the Russian language. One of them is "And who are the
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insolently, as you have to entertain them, to figuratively crawl on your knees, trying to prove that you are so wonderful. How does all this relate to the job? To professionalism? There is a growing feeling, similar to what the hero Vladimir in the film “Kin Dza Dza” felt: “You know what? You dance yourself... Mister!” Especially when you finally understand that any of the employees of the companies is just a number and whether you are going to keep your job for long doesn’t depend on your efforts or diligence. That for the Big Boss all of you are just bums in the seats. So, stop putting on an act.

That day I had two interviews, and both went smoothly. I went out confident that I would soon be offered at least one of these jobs. I had two offers - on the same day! I had to make a choice. One job was permanent, with a huge discount on airline tickets as a bonus. The other offered a one year contract, with the possibility of becoming permanent after that, and paid slightly better than the first job, but most importantly - it offered the possibility of getting good technical training in the field of IT. I didn’t have to think long and phoned back the second company.

Sonny was a computer geek. An obsessive computer network engineer, a Novell certified one. He was one of those few people for whom this is a genuine vocation. He really enjoyed not only playing at his computer late at night, but disassembling and assembling it, he assembled computers from individual parts he bought himself, and even soldered parts onto the motherboard himself. If he faced a computer problem, he didn’t rest until he found a solution. That’s what distinguishes a real IT person from an ordinary user like me: if I encounter a problem, I will try to solve it, but if I can’t, I give up. Not only because of panic, but because I’m not really that interested. But Sonny was interested! He played on the computer too much as well: when I went to bed, he was still pounding the keyboard. When I brought him breakfast on a Sunday morning, he was already sitting in front of the monitor and swearing at me: “I lost this game because of you! You broke up the session!” When our relationship was in crisis, he would say demonstratively: “I’m going to shoot some Russians!” - and wheeled his virtual F-16.

But Sonny didn’t have any pedagogical ability. Everything he knew he couldn’t convey to others. He didn’t have the words. Several times he tried to explain some computer trick to me, and each time it ended in nothing. If I didn’t understand something the first time or, god forbid, asked him a question, he was furious, called me “stupid” and stopped explaining. Gradually I developed a hang-up about this: am

j udges?” where Chatsky denounces the high society which dares to judge him.

120 "Kin-dza-dza!" was a 1986 Soviet comedy-science fiction film released by the Mosfilm studio and directed by Georgi Danelia. The film is a dark and grotesque parody of human society and may be described as a dystopia. It depicts a desert planet, depleted of its resources, home to an impoverished dog-eat-dog society with extreme inequality and oppression. It is a cult film, especially in post-Soviet countries, and its humorous dialogue is frequently quoted.
I really as stupid as he tries to convince me? So it became a matter of honour for me to learn all the things Sonny couldn’t teach me, but now I would be able to speak with him on equal terms. However I didn’t think that we would ever talk again.

I didn’t regret my decision. For the first three weeks my new company sent us to a special course where we were taught all about computers, starting from the very beginning. Our teacher, a cheerful blond Englishman, didn’t call any of us names and explained the material so lucidly that only a wooden pole wouldn’t understand it. The new company was situated on the other end of town: in a chic coastal place with a beautiful name: Dun Laoghaire. It was written in Irish on buses driving there from the centre. The peculiarities of the Irish pronunciation and writing rules seemed to me much more difficult than any IT. From Dun Laoghaire ferries left for England and Wales. The combination of the sea, harbour, nearby hills and almost tropical-looking plants such as palms, despite the quite non-tropical cold, evoked a feeling of celebration. It was pleasant to get out of the office for lunch and stroll along the waterfront. And in Dun Laoghaire there were a lot of small charity shops that sold different interesting things which were unnecessary to their owners – for peanuts. Soon I had a whole collection of colourful Scottish kilts.

I was in a great mood. It was interested in learning all the new stuff, and even taking up to 150 calls per day, as we did when we started working, wasn’t frightening. I came from work tired but with a sense of accomplishment. The only thing that clouded my new life was the uncertainty about how to bring Lisa to Ireland and where to get her medical treatment. That is, bringing Lisa technically wasn’t a problem, she was a European citizen. But who would look after her in her condition, with whom could she be left when I was working? I could only trust my mother to do that. And that was where the troubles began.

At that time there were so few immigrants in Ireland that, in fact, no one knew exactly what laws there were about it, and whether there were any at all. Proper Irish legislation on that subject dated from the pre-war period and therefore it wasn’t absolutely elaborated. In practice it meant “I just do what I want today”. There weren’t even lawyers specializing in immigration legislation. Women from the Citizens Information Bureau, whom I asked for advice, stared at me as if I had fallen from the moon. They phoned somewhere, tried to find something out. The Department of Foreign Affairs said it was not within their competence. The Department of Justice said they didn’t consult on that issue. Then these good women, who sincerely tried to help me, advised me to make an appointment with a local member of Parliament, from the Labour Party, and so I did.

The Labour Party man appeared very friendly. He promised to make a request about my question in Parliament. I must say that I had absolutely no idea who was who on the Irish political scene. Before coming here I have heard of only one Irish political party: Sinn Fein. I noticed that when this name was mentioned, many people in Dublin
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twitched strangely. In general, the attitude of the South to the North was incomprehensible to me: it would seem that in any country people dream of restoring its territorial integrity and reunifying the nation, even despite the problems this brings with it (as in Germany). But many southerners were not simply afraid to go to the North: they said with some disgust: “We do not want their problems over here!”, as if it was not part of Ireland. Evidently, they preferred Americans or Australians, with their mythical Irish grandmothers, to the Northerners. I had also long been afraid to go to the North: frightened by what my Dublin Irish colleagues said. Though from my childhood I had known more about the North than about the South. Thinking of the North, I usually imagined some eternally overcast sky, police, explosions and something almost like anti-tank “hedgehogs”, as we had in the defence of Moscow in 1941.

...Dublin’s spring was so beautiful, so mild, with so many flowers, such warm sun and with a velvety fresh greenness that I awaited the beginning of summer with great impatience. But it never came. Summer just did not arrive. The weather remained more or less the same as it was in May. It was in May that I met by chance the biggest bastard that I have ever met during my life in Dublin. He seemed to be a quiet, inoffensive kind of guy, who wouldn’t hurt a fly: a widower called Caoimhin O’Connor from Swords, the father of three daughters. Caoimhin was not a letter-writer. He was of a more dangerous category: those who place personal advertisements in newspapers. We met at a newspaper office, where I went to place my ad (not a personal one, of course, but one about putting up a typewriter and a fax machine for sale).

His wife died from alcoholism, and having got to know him a bit better, I could well imagine why she started drinking.... such a man would drive you to drink.

Caoimhin seemed to be good-natured and cheerful, a generous and loving father (his girls were just wonderful, the youngest was a year older than Lisa, the middle one was eleven and the eldest fourteen. I felt terribly sorry for them). With great sentimentality he talked about how his wife left him, how badly her new partner treated her (I cannot stand that word, “partner”: it sounds like “partner in crime”), how she began to drink more and more, how her liver stopped working, how she was slowly dying, how they were reconciled before her death, how the middle girl refused to say goodbye to her at the hospital, because it was too much for her to watch her mother’s suffering, etc., etc. I should have begun to suspect something dodgy already there and then: sentimental people, as you know, are the most emotionally cruel ones....

But I only realised after a while that Caoimhin was not just a bore, but a meticulous one, and with a nasty explosive temper. Naturally, in his situation Caoimhin hurried to find a “other for his children”, no matter how blasphemous it sounds. A man is not a woman, and with some extremely rare exceptions, no man would devote his whole life to his children while nobly remaining a bachelor.
He immediately presented every new female acquaintance to his daughters as a potential mother (one can only imagine what the poor girls had suffered!). I was not going to be their mother and did not hide it from him. But he liked me a lot, and Caoimhin decided that he would eventually change my mind. First, he hastened to assure me that he had “great connections at the top” and that he would help me get a visa for my mum. And the fish nibbled on the hook... He even promised to help me by lending some money for the tickets (I could not afford three tickets at once with my wages): with an installment plan to pay it back in 6 months.

But when I had already prepared everything, took time off from work and looked forward to going home to my mum and Lisa, he told me that he had changed his mind. “Why should I help you, if we don’t have any relationship?” Yes, that’s literally what he said. I burst into tears of impotence. At that moment Caoimhin was like the Jamaican gangster from the movie “Dancehall Queen”: “When I make an investment, I want to see returns!” The only difference was that he was even more repulsive. I gave him a slap and tried to show him the door. But instead of leaving, as a decent man who has been given to understand what the other party feels about him, he suddenly thrusted himself upon me with a kiss. His kisses were wet and nasty, he felt like a toad. At the same time he continued to talk about how my daughter certainly missed me very much, how she was waiting for me, how she would be upset if her mother did not come for her, how he would be happy to help me, if I only agreed to be his girlfriend... I still don’t want to remember all of this now!

When he left, I went into hysterics. I felt physically dirty, in a way that no shower could help. My God, what should I do? I needed someone to speak to in order to calm down a bit, but there was nobody. One does not go with such a thing to the landlord or his wife. I frantically looked through my notebook and found the number that Tadhg had left me...

It was Sunday, but once he heard my voice (and I had not even told him yet what exactly had happened: I could not squeeze it out myself) Tadhg immediately said that he would come. “Let’s go for a boat ride, would you like to?” In half an hour his car stopped in front of my house. I went out to meet him, with my face all swollen with tears to the point that it looked like I had been bitten by a swarm of bees. I don’t remember with what words I told him what had happened.

- What a bastard! - Tadhg exclaimed, clenching his fists. - He’ll get what he deserves! But now let’s go, I’ll take you to the Blessington Lake, my brother and I have our own boat there. We’ll row a bit; you need some fresh air. If you just stay home, you will only get worse. Come on, you’ll see how great it is over there!

- All the way we didn’t stop talking, not about what had happened, but about something else. Anything else. About France, about Amandine (finally convinced of Will Sharkey’s incorrigibility, the smart girl at last left him), about future Tadhg’s exams, about my new job... I started to calm down.
Blessington is not far from Dublin, about forty miles, but because of Dublin road’s traffic, we took over an hour to get there. The lake near Blessington is also called Poulaphouca Reservoir. It is hard to imagine that there can be such a quiet unspoiled beautiful place hidden between the hills and woods so close to a big city. Tadhg pulled out the chain to which his boat was attached. The boat was painted red and looked like those on which I had gone along the river near my house in my early childhood when my grandfather took me to our motor-boat station. He stretched out his hand to me and helped me to get on the bench, then he took off his shoes, pulled his trousers up to his ankles and went into the water to push the boat with me in it away from the shore. He jumped into the boat as it was moving, almost showering me with water. He turned out to be a good rower. We went around numerous small islands from which flocks of ducks soared into the air. There were many different coves and turns, and, oddly enough, even on Sunday in such beautiful weather there was not a soul here. From time to time there were circles on the water around the boat, and through the dark-greenish thick water we could see a fish swimming near us.

We reached the bridge over which cars drove, went under it and turned back. Tadhg rowed and rowed again, pushing on the oars with his thin but muscular freckled arms. The sun was dancing in his curly red hair. The lake was quiet, sleepy, and awfully nice. And I felt my shock and pain gradually receding into the background. Once again I was convinced that I had made the right decision to come here: if there are such people as Tadhg in this country, who need nothing from you and just help you when they see that you are feeling bad. Without seeing whether it fits into their agenda. And without presenting you a cheque for the gasoline used.

“Thank you”, I said to him with all my heart when he drove me home.

“Come on. There is nothing to thank me for. Everything will be fine”, Tadhg answered.

...Soon I was home and had tickets with me. Lisa became better in my absence, but not much. My mum cut her hair to make it easier to comb; Lisa became terribly thin and still didn’t say anything, all day long she twirled around the room like a spinning top and destroyed everything in her way. Practically nothing was left of my mum’s wallpaper, all the books had to be hidden, doors to the wardrobe had to be nailed. Only one thing made me happy: that her mood seemed to be good. Lisa often laughed loudly and boisterously. But she had epileptic seizures even more frequently now: she often fell on her face at the slightest unexpected sound, and her forehead often bled. We couldn’t even sneeze or cough in her presence without telling her in advance. And it became a reflexive to warn her: "Mum/Grandma is going khe-khe/achoo", sometimes we pronounced it out loud in public transport or places like that, even when Lisa was not around. You can imagine what a reaction it caused...
And then another blow came: my mother couldn’t get a visa! Though earlier, when I lived in the Netherlands, she and I travelled together to Ireland at Easter, and she got the same visa in The Hague without problems. A young Irish girl named Nora who worked at the embassy in Moscow was very compassionate and took my story to heart. She wanted to help us, but the fact was that the Irish Embassy didn’t decide it by itself who would get a visa and who would not: it was under the competence of the Department of Justice. When I tried to phone there, I was put through to a rather brazen and arrogant bureaucrat named Mr. Casey. I tried to ask him at least for a reason for refusal.

“Our policy is not to explain the reasons!” he told me in a very “democratic” way. And then he went on the offensive, “Why did you come to us?”

I gasped, becoming indignant. Had he not heard of Article 39 of the European Convention which guarantees the right of EU citizens to live and work in any of its member countries? Or is the only thing they know about the European Union how to pump subsidies from it?

“Because your economy needs people like me!” I barked at him. And only then I realized that he had not even looked at my documents and had automatically decided that “The Eastern European invasion began”...

I don’t know what I would have done if this kind girl Nora hadn’t helped us. She advised me to go to Ireland alone with Lisa and to look for my friendly parliamentarian for help. “Our politicians all know each other, and he might have some connections there, in the Department”.

And how was I going to work then?

Nora immediately gave me the phone number of her friend Josephine who, according to her, looked after children well, and often made some money on the side doing it. She also spoke a bit of Russian: once they studied Russian together, but then Josephine visited the “reconstructed” Russia and she didn’t like what she had seen, to such a degree that she gave up her study. Now she was living with her boyfriend - an IT geek, and tried to start one business after another. She worked in a laundrette for some time, but she really loved children and arts: she was a great painter and made appliqués and bouquets of dried flowers. In a nutshell, she hadn’t found her place in life yet. And it would do her no harm to earn some money in her situation. I looked at Nora again: she was a nice, down-to earth blonde girl, and I thought if her friend was a little like her, perhaps I could trust her. The phone call to the Secretary of that Irish Parliament Member confirmed that the situation was not hopeless - he, unlike me, knew well the reason for the refusal by the Department of Justice to give my mum a visa: my mum’s passport would soon expire, in some six months. Why couldn’t that official have said this to us? Was this perhaps a state secret? Mr. Casey had it on his conscience. My mother immediately applied for a new passport, and I decided to follow Nora’s advice: it was as if I had made up my mind to jump into a pool of cold water. However, I had to go back: my annual leave would not last forever.
The thing that always amazes me, in a nice way, about the Irish is their compassion on a human level, that goes beyond their official positions. I cannot imagine an official in any other country who would display genuine care about your destiny and show you human compassion. In Russia you could find a compassionate civil servant, but only for an appropriate bribe. In the Netherlands you won’t find one for all the tea in China: they think in such a straight way and only within the instructions placed in their hands. But the Irish seemed to live by the motto of Phileas Fogg “There is always a way to save the day”. Sometimes even more emphatically: “it’s impossible, but if you really want it, you can do it”.

My appearance with a child in a pushchair (and a one who had clearly outgrown this pushchair) was an unpleasant surprise for my Dublin landlords. Even though we didn’t bother them, and I did my best to prevent Lisa from breaking anything in the house. My landlord had to abandon just one more illusion: that I was a young, free and single professional, who might want to sunbathe in the yard someday. And the landlord’s son, a hefty, overgrown teenager named Bill, who didn’t work, and didn’t study properly, preferring to run playfully through the house after the screaming female housekeeper in the absence of his parents, was unhappy that he had to take into account a sleeping child at night, when he had just got used to testing his new drum set over my head about that time. Hearing his exercise on the drums, Lisa woke up and began to sing along. Since she couldn’t really sing properly, she made only one sound like the Chatlans made in the film “Kindza-dza”:

"Oui-i-i...” Bill began to imitate her through the wall like a nursery school boy (I wonder what was wrong with him mentally; normal people do not behave like that). Only the landlady felt sorry for us as a woman. But ultimately she was not the real boss, even in her own house. I realized that next year her husband would just not renew my lease (the lease that I had originally, was for one year, but after that it had to be renewed every month).

The situation was getting more and more desperate. Every morning I woke up with Lisa at half-past five in the morning (she could not sleep longer even if she wanted to: her brain damage had made her hyperactive, and she jumped out of bed at the same time every day like the steadfast tin soldier), put her in her pushchair and took her out for a walk, in any weather, so that, God forbid, she won’t wake Bill with her “Oui-i-i...”.

By 8 am Josephine came: a healthy country maiden, with a delicate rosy-cheeked face, curly-haired and robust, but oddly enough, very feminine. She was simply made to work with children. Every day, I mentally thanked Nora and providence for the fact that they sent me Josephine. I don’t know what I would have done without her. She didn’t have the slightest aversion to a sick girl: she sang to her, changed her nappies and talked to her as if Lisa understood her. She even pulled out her old university books from somewhere and tried to

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121 From the Australian cartoon “Around the world in 80 days”.

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talk to Lisa in Russian. Josephine walked with Lisa, took her to the playground and entertained her as much as she could. I left her the keys to the house and went to work with a calm heart. The only thing that worried me was the financial side of the issue. It was obvious that I wouldn’t be able to afford this long term. Babysitting for a week cost a little more than my week’s rent. Of course, Josephine’s work was worth it: not everyone would be able to cope with Lisa in her state, not to mention the fact that Josephine had such infinite patience! But my budget was dealt a fatal blow. I almost stopped eating and counted the days until my mother would arrive.

To crown it all, Caoimhin came to my front door a couple of times and rang the bell like crazy: I couldn’t disconnect the doorbell... After all this I just had to go to the police. Blushing, I told an elderly Gardai (Irish policeman) that someone was harassing me, even though I had told him long ago that I didn’t want to have anything to do with him. I was too ashamed to tell him the whole truth about what actually happened. The sergeant listened to me with the same sort of human compassion as Nora and promised to phone this fellow at his home number and talk to him so that he would cease his pursuit. I do not know whether the Gardai did it or not, but since then Caoimhin no longer showed up.

My mother came a month later (which seemed like an eternity to me), and the first thing she said when she saw my home, which I was so proud of, was: "My God, you’re living in someone else’s basement!” Mum just didn’t have the slightest idea what it meant to begin life in a new, strange country where you have no one to rely on. Socialism "spoiled" her so that she really seemed to expect that I would set up my own house here in six months and begin to teach in a university somewhere. After all, our principle was “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his work”\(^\text{122}\). It was hard for her to understand that no one might need your abilities. Her comments dealt a painful blow to my still fragile self-confidence. I thought that I still had some things to be proud of: within six months, I was able to find a good job (by the standards of my salary) in a new country, and self-contained accommodation (this was such a rarity here!), to master an entirely new profession, to adapt to local life and, in the end, despite all obstacles, to bring both my mother and daughter over here... I just started to cope with the role of breadwinner, the provider, the role that in a Western family the husband or father usually takes, and I got

\(^{122}\text{From each according to his ability, to each according to his need (or needs) is a slogan introduced by Karl Marx in his 1875 Critique of the Gotha Program. The phrase summarises the principles that, in a communist society, every person should contribute to society to the best of his or her ability and consume from society in proportion to his or her needs. Here however the author refers to the different slogan: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his work. It characterises society during the transition to socialism, but preceding the final step to communism. This essentially means that people are rewarded based on the amount they contribute to the social product.}\)
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used to my new related duties. Mum's remarks put under question all my modest achievements in this area and made me feel small and worthless.

But I tried so hard! Without leaving the workplace, using the Internet and telephone, I tried to find where in Dublin to get medical treatment for Lisa, where she could undergo rehabilitation. My Irish acquaintances praised their health care system to me. I again asked women whom I knew from the Citizens Information Bureau for advice. That was how a social worker called Patrick Doyle came into our lives.

He appeared on our doorstep suddenly: an elderly man with grey hair and sharp features (later he told me that his ancestors were French Huguenots who fled to Ireland). He looked very serious, and it took me a while to figure out that he loved jokes: Patrick also joked with a serious stone face. With that kind of a face he would talk about when he was young, lived in England and courted his future wife: he tried very hard to impress her with his abilities during a football match. Buoyed by his victory, flushing, he approached her after the final whistle, and she just asked him why the spectators shouted “Come on, Shamrock”! to him and why he was wearing socks of different colours on his feet...

Before I met Patrick, I generally had very little idea about who social workers were, and what they were there for. He deeply and sincerely got involved in our case. He took us to the clinic in Dun Laoghaire (supposedly the best rehab in Ireland), where we were told that they didn’t take such cases as Lisa’s. “If only she couldn’t walk!” the doctor said almost dreamily. (Good God, what a “good” wish, thankfully at least she can do that!) But even after that Patrick didn’t give up and took us to the children’s hospital in Crumlin, the biggest and supposedly the best one in Dublin. The devastation there surprised me. Dilapidated walls, wet ceilings, plaster hanging from the walls... Even in Yeltsin’s Russia medical institutions didn’t look that miserable. Also the doctors there were completely indifferent to everything. The Irish doctors refused to even do a CT scan: in Holland they had done it quickly (although, according to the doctors, there were only two machines for this purpose in the whole country with a population of 15 million!). In Ireland they said it was too expensive, there were no benefits from it, and we would have to be on the waiting list a couple of years. A wonderful public health services, in other words!

Then Patrick decided at least to find a school for Lisa, and he took us to St. Michael’s House, a facility for children with disabilities... Mum came out in tears. As soon as we entered, children with various deformities rushed to hug and kiss us. This picture was really not for the faint-hearted, but my mother somehow disdained those children (“Over my dead body will Lisa learn anything together with these morons!”). It just broke my heart when I looked at them, and I stroked and kissed them without any squeamishness.

123 Shamrock is a symbol of Ireland.
In short, Patrick tried his best but there were no particular results. We found that there was simply no place here to treat Lisa. The condition of the Irish public health service was not at all as wonderful as my colleagues had tried to convince me. In fact, an elementary visit to a GP with the flu here would cost you around thirty pounds. A tooth filling cost about ninety (my rent was seventy two pounds a week, Josephine’s weekly services were eighty). And doctors often turned out to be backwoodsmen: for example, they did not know elementary things about herbal remedies, which in our country not only a doctor but every little old lady knows.

The situation was aggravated by the fact that my mother disliked Ireland a lot. Her complaint list, besides “your home is someone else’s basement” included:

A) Ireland has a “useless sea”: it is so cold you cannot swim in it; there is nothing here “but rocks and flocks of mohair sheep”;
B) The Irish are twaddlers and thoughtless, because their children walk down the street with bare knees in cold winter, for example;
C) The Irish drink a lot, and they have no other entertainment in life except for pubs;
D) The Irish are racists, because one half-crazy granny on the street told my mum something about Africa (my mother does not know English) and pointed with her finger at Lisa;
E) In Ireland you drive on the left;
J) In Ireland it is impossible to find unsalted butter in the shops.
She also said that the Irish reminded her of the heroes of Andrei Mironov’s song in “The Diamond Arm”124:
“Covered with the wild green, absolutely all,
There’s a Bad Luck island in the southern sea atoll.
There’s a Bad Luck island in the southern sea atoll,
Covered with the wild green, absolutely all.
There lives an unhappily poor savage tribe,
With tender character, ugly outside...” and so on.

...You know what? I agree with Carlsson: "If the only thing that annoys someone is that he gets nutshells stuck in his shoe, he can consider himself lucky!"

Every day I came home from work dead tired after hundred and fifty calls, and got served, together with a plate of potatoes, the next portion of my mother’s sneers at the Irish and her indignation at them.

124 “The Diamond Arm” - is a 1968 Soviet comedy film made by Mosfilm and first released in 1968. The film was directed by director Leonid Gaidai and starred several famous Soviet actors, including Yuri Nikulin, Andrei Mironov, Anatoli Papanov, Nonna Mordyukova and Svetlana Svetlichnaya. The Diamond Arm has become a Russian cult film. It was also one of the all-time leaders at the Soviet box office with over 76 700 000 theatre admissions in the Soviet era.
I knew from personal experience how badly a man in a foreign country could feel and therefore I tried to explain to my mother how to fight those feelings to make life easier: it is in your own interest! You must focus not on the bad, but on the good things (no matter how little of the good there might be). In fact, remind yourself why you are actually here. Don’t get hung up on silly little things, only truly unforgivable things shouldn’t be forgiven. And the main thing: if you are in the country temporarily, not forever, if the general situation oppresses you, you must constantly remind to yourself that this is not forever.

In the first year in a new country everything surprises you, everything is new to you, and everything seems interesting. In the second year all the things that amazed you a year ago begin to be terribly annoying. Everything seems to be wrong, you compare everything with what you are used to. If this is your first experience living abroad, most often you will start to see your “own ways” as the only proper way of doing things. In the Netherlands I quickly stopped doing that: I’m not saying that “ours” is the only acceptable way in the world, but with all respect to the locals, I want to have the right to remain myself. More than that: it is not us, but the West that is nowadays behaving globally as if its way of life, rules and regulations are the only right ones for all the people on the earth. It is the West that is imposing its will on us through all the Yeltsins, Duvaliers, Havels and Pinochets (and if it cannot do it this way, then it uses its own bombs and tanks!). It is the West that strips us of our own lifestyle and our uniqueness: that is exactly what forces people out of their own country, as toothpaste from a tube. These Western “missionaries” from all NGOs try to teach us how to live in our own country and how we should proceed with elections.

You feel driven into a corner: you cannot live at home in accordance with your own views and beliefs, but you have nowhere else in the world to flee to. (Trying to live at the expense of such countries as Cuba and Korea, which were betrayed by your own country, would simply be shameless; that’s why these countries do not count.) Solzhenitsyn, Scharansky and other representatives of a tiny minority among the many millions in our country at least had somewhere to flee to, if they did not like the USSR!

Well, and then... either you get used to a new life and stop looking at it with hostility ("Why not manage to live somehow?" Gogol’s Cossacks used to say), or life there will be quite unbearable for you, as it has become for me in “ons kleine kikkerlandje” (“our little frog-land”, as the Dutch call with affection their Holland). And then it is time to pack your suitcases again... But the fact is that my mother didn’t want to wait for a year. She did not even want to try to tune herself into local life in such a way that it would be easier for her: for some strange reason, she really loved to revel in her own discontent. I

125 Dictators.
126 Soviet dissidents.
tried to tell myself that my mother was tired. That she needed to rest, to have fun, to get some sleep. I bought her tickets for the famous Irish "Riverdance"; took Lisa out for a walk, but nothing helped. I had the impression that my mother was intentionally seeking a quarrel with me in order to release her own tension. After that she would phone my grandmother at home (the poor woman was already over 80!) and upset her for a week by telling how badly I treated my mother: how little money I gave her for shopping (no matter how much my mum gets, she spends the whole sum the same day), how boring it was in Ireland (I took them on a bus around the country every weekend, putting the debts on my Dutch credit card, just in order to entertain them). For a couple of months, my mother and Lisa toured the length and breadth of Ireland. Lisa probably didn’t care, but she just liked travelling: the train, bus, whatever. But Mum.... We visited the most beautiful corners of the island: Kerry, Clare, Donegal, Wicklow, and nowhere was it interesting enough for her. Like the wolf from the movie "Mama" - "No, this is definitely not Paris!"

It was getting harder and harder for me. I believe that people should help each other in difficult times within the family, as my grandmother and grandfather did, to provide a reliable refuge to each other, and not to try to push a drowning person further under the water. Every day going back home I felt like I was getting my head placed into a hole once again. My mother acted like she did not even remember that we really came here for Lisa’s treatment. You may argue if the Irish are racists or not, but none of them had yet said to us what our own post-perestroika woman doctor said back home: "Actually maybe it’s hereditary with her, because all these mulattoes and other mixed-blooded creatures have not been studied sufficiently yet". Just like the childminder Mrs Bock from the cartoons about Carlsson, “Beware: the dog isn’t sterile!”...

Stress at home began to affect my work. I held on: my statistics (number of calls, their duration, etc.) were impeccable, but my fuse was becoming shorter and shorter. My boss Claudette (she didn’t speak Dutch, even though we were in the Benelux department, she was a tanned blonde from Wallonia, who came into the office dressed in black leather, on a Harley Davidson) examined my results of the last week, hadn’t found any cause for dissatisfaction, but nonetheless said with a hurt voice, even with some jealousy, “And your score on that exam for maintenance was higher than mine!”

Why she told me that I don’t know. If she hadn’t said it, I wouldn’t have known it at all.

127 “Mama” (English: "Rock'n'Roll Wolf") is a musical film from 1976 and is a Soviet-French-Romanian co-production. The movie was filmed simultaneously in three different languages (Russian, Romanian and English). The cast was dancers from Moscow Circus, Moscow Circus on Ice and Bolshoi Ballet. In 1977 the movie won the «Silver Cup» at Children's Film Festival in Venice.
But since then I started to think that Claudette was picking on me at every trifle.

The joy of work left. We, the temps, did the same work as the permanent staff, but they were paid bonuses at the end of each quarter, while our bonuses were taken by the employment agency, which set us up at that company and was considered our employer. One day the agency didn’t pay us on payday (yes, this happens not only in Yeltsin’s Russia; it was only in the USSR that something like that was impossible!). That day I had to pay my weekly rent and I had a big row with the agency. The matter was resolved in a purely Irish way: I borrowed the required amount from one of my colleagues until Monday (he didn’t work for the agency, that’s why he got his money on time) in the presence of witnesses, but that was the Dutch form of arrangement (he could have gotten a receipt from me if he didn’t trust me!). After a while I realized that the hope for a permanent contract after a year, with which we were lured all that time, like rabbits with a carrot, were getting bleaker: the company began to talk of reducing even the permanent staff. Many colleagues were seriously talking about going back home to the Netherlands. I had nowhere to return to, so it was time to start looking for a new job...

Meanwhile mum had to extend her visa. We went to the office on Harcourt Street, and it turned out that it could not be extended: Mum would have to go back to Russia to do it! It was easy for them to say, but what about Lisa? I had no more annual leave; I could no longer afford Josephine. Life reached an impasse from which I could not find a way out.

Desperate, I called Josephine and told her what had happened.

- Oh, so how is my Lisa doing? - Josephine was glad to hear from me, as if she was a family member - Nora just arrived in Dublin! She retired from the embassy and is leaving for Greece in a few days. Look, let’s meet, the three of us, tomorrow night, how about that?

- The next evening after work I was waiting for them at the “Pravda” pub. It had just recently opened in Dublin. Strictly speaking, there was nothing Soviet, except for a couple of pictures and posters on the walls, some strange inscriptions in Russian, like quotes from Ostap Bender\(^\text{128}\): “The meeting is continuing!” and signs, misleading the Irish visitors: which of the toilets was men’s and which was women’s?... What was that strange letter - "Ж"?

“Preevet!”\(^\text{129}\) Nora exclaimed in Russian when she saw me. We ordered some lemonade. Nora shared the news from Moscow. Then Josephine shared her own news. She didn’t have much news: she found work at the laundry again. “Joe treats me very well, and that is

\(^{128}\) Ostap Bender - is a fictional conman and antihero who first appeared in the novel "The Twelve Chairs" written by Soviet authors Ilya Ilf and Yevgeni Petrov and released in January 1928. The novel was adapted to film twice in the USSR: first in 1971 by Leonid Gaidai and then in 1976 by Mark Zakharov, featuring Andrei Mironov as Bender.

\(^{129}\) Hello! (Russian)
important for me!” she said about her boyfriend, looking as if she wouldn’t be allowed to breathe without his permission. I could not understand why this girl, so nice, so kind, so talented (she showed me some of her art work) had such low self-esteem. I’m not a feminist, but since my divorce I have never regretted that Sonny was no longer “treating me well”. I’m just independent, my own person and not an attachment to someone.

I briefly told Nora and Josephine about my situation.

- I don’t know what to do now. To let them go back? I don’t want to live here without my child. You have no idea how hard I had to fight for Lisa! I don’t need any of this without her. I realize that it is useless to tell the officials all this. But am I asking too much from life? I just want my family to be together... I have no energy left to start all over again. I’m not Sisyphus. We haven’t even found a doctor for Lisa yet...

- And how did Lisa become ill? - Nora asked sympathetically.

I began to lose my patience. I started my story, not in as much details as I had told Anita about it. All memories that I tried so hard to drive into my subconscious backfired on me: the same way it was with Amandine and Tadhg in the park only for a moment, but this time the memories rushed out in an unstoppable flow, to the smallest details. And I was surprised that it was the first time that I said all of this as if it happened to someone else, not to us. There were no more feelings left - all the tears had been cried out. But Nora and Josephine were well impressed by my story even without them.

- What was the name of that fellow in the Department of Justice with whom you spoke?” Josephine asked suddenly.

- Mr. Casey, why?”

- It’s nothing ... Tomorrow I’ll try to talk to him”.

“ You? But you are not a solicitor, Josephine, not a lawyer...”

“It doesn’t matter. Anyway I’ll try”.

“Thank you!” I said, touched, but with no hope of success. Anyway, people here are not indifferent! It meant so much to me after living in a country where “friends” told you, “Sorry, we can’t help you, but don’t forget to call us later on and tell us how it all will end, will you?”...

...Josephine phoned me a week later. I didn’t know how she had done it, didn’t know what she had said, but all week, it turned out, she had been phoning that very minister Mr. Casey again and again and asked him to extend my mother’s visa. And she achieved it! Even though she wasn’t a lawyer. That was the other side of the fact that the legislation in Ireland wasn’t so detailed. I had no words to say! I didn’t know how to express my gratitude.

“Come on!” Josephine said on the phone, “I don’t need anything, don’t think about it. The main thing is to find a good doctor for Lisa”.

That week we went to Mr. Casey to renew my mum’s visa. He turned out to be even more bombastic than I had thought. He spoke of himself as your man Alain Delon: in third person:
“Who is here to see Mr. Casey?”

We went in, he gently chided us, paternally (though he was just slightly older than me) for not knowing the rules (which, it seemed, no one really knew in his own department), then told me confidentially how Josephine had been able to convince him. "Your friend is... well, very insistent!" - he said with a gentle smile on his lips. Maybe they were originally from the same village?

One way or another, but the unbelievable thing in Irish practice is that it happened: my mum’s visa was extended for 2 months. During these 2 months, though, nothing changed: we still didn’t find a doctor. Mum still made her nightly anti-Irish rants. Once in the park near our house she met some Russians: that defector, a former naval officer, whom I had mentioned earlier, his wife and their little son, whom they gave birth to in order to remain in Ireland (back then it still helped!): apparently the secrets that he betrayed were not enough to obtain refugee status. At the sound of Russian speech (the officer and his wife were speaking with their boy, my mother - with Lisa), all 3 of them were very surprised. They got into a conversation. At first they found a common point of view on the Irish. "They really are savages!" the officer complained. "The notion of "intelligentsia" does not exist here. People are very kind, sympathetic, but limited intellectually! Students in our high school know more about European literature than their university students do, the philologists. It’s hard to talk to them about anything!"

And it’s true... For example, I brought Connor to the Irish Theatre for the first time in his life. Theatres are surprisingly good in Ireland, in classic style, similar to our school (not like the Dutch: an experimental “mixture of a jackdaw with a bear and little Armenian with a motorcycle”, with an almost mandatory ritual striptease on the stage). Connor and I watched “A Streetcar Named Desire”. He clapped so hard and loud in the end that he almost hurt his hands and came home stunned. So what, one wonders, prevented him from going there before? That’s right - he just didn’t have such a habit.

However, as soon as they started talking about politics, Mum discovered that she and the naval officer didn’t have a common point of view. My mother came home so angry that even the Irish began to seem nice to her.

“I will never set foot in that park again!” - she said.

"Why not? He is the one who should never set foot there if he does not like it!” I replied.

“I see that you don’t care at all how your mother feels, you just don’t care!”

And did my mother ever care about how I felt?.. In January we celebrated a sad enough New Year - I couldn’t reconcile myself with the coming separation! - and then my mum took Lisa home. I wept at the airport, and she said seriously:

“You ought to be happy! Now you’ll be able to sleep enough, you can live as you wish…”

“No, I won’t live the way I wish, that’s the whole point…”
“I don’t understand you. When you’ll have some decent conditions for the child, then you can invite us! Not in some strange basement...”

Did she want me to marry some elderly conman or something?

Another small miracle happened at our parting: the plane was delayed by seven hours because of fog! And, as was possible only in Ireland (and even there only before September 11th), I, who had no ticket, was allowed by airport workers to see my ill child off, to say goodbye to Lisa and my mother inside. "Only quickly!" I sat with them in the waiting area at the gate and then even brought them to the plane.

“Just promise me that you’ll try to find her a good doctor at home once more!”

All the way back home I cried. The sympathetic Irish asked me what they could do to help me and offered me their handkerchiefs. Oh, Mum, Mum ... I don’t care how the Irish look if they have such warm hearts!..

Coming back from the airport, I saw a brand new car that my landlord and his wife had just bought for their grown-up parasite Bill. It was parked outside the house, and my patience was exhausted. It was also bought on my hard earned money! Why should I have to give it to someone else when my own child had no decent roof over her head there?

I had to do something. I had to change the situation. If I could not find a proper shelter in Dublin, where I could easily live with a sick child, then I had to go somewhere else. I couldn’t stand it there, not any more. But where could I go? I didn’t know. And the period of deep mourning began...
Chapter 4. “To listen to Bobby’s language every day!”

“She’s crazy like a fool
What about it, Daddy Cool?”
(From a popular song by “Boney M”)

“Prokhorov gloomily hid himself in a shaky cabin, having recalled the image from a school photo. He closed his eyes again, then opened them again, trying to understand: why over the car windscreen, on the glass and even on the clear surface of the instrument panel of “Stepanide” there were colour photos and drawings from magazines showing Black men, Black men and Black men… What could it mean? Why for twenty years did the guy collect photos of… Black men?.. Black men disturbed Prokhorov, as a whisper behind a thin wall”.

“Answer, please, Andrei! Why did Yevgueni collect pictures of Black men?”

- He was cutting out pictures of Black men for a long time… Probably in his third grade he borrowed “Uncle’s Tom Cabin” from the library and cut it all up… The principal, the old woman librarian, the blind director of studies Vikenty Alekseevich all came to the classroom… They also asked: “Why did you do that, Yevgueni Stoletov?” Zhenya was silent … »

(Vil Lipatov “And all that is about him”.)

My uncle Shurek had a huge influence on my personality (this would be written in my official biography, if I had one). His name must be pronounced with an accent on the “е”. Actually, his real name is just Sasha, and in my early childhood I even called him “uncle”. But after a while I stopped: after all, “uncle” is something so solid, so grown-up, so serious. But he was simply my best friend - and he is up to this day. “To me you are my mother, my father and my uncle!”, as an African proverb says. In some African cultures an uncle - the brother of one’s mother plays a special role in the upbringing of a child. That was the case with us too.

Shurek was nineteen years old when I was born. By then Shurek had already been wearing glasses. According to my Mum’s firm belief, he was “our grandmother’s pet” since childhood. (Why shouldn’t he be, since he never caused any trouble, never came home late from work, and didn’t drink alcohol or smoke?) He has started his own family only at the age of 38. So you can count for how many years we were - I won’t be afraid to use this expression - the most important people in each other’s life. Even today he knows me better than anybody else, including my Mum.

130 Vil Lipatov (1927-1979) - Soviet writer famous for his detective stories "And all that is about him" and "The Village Detective".
Our friendship started so long ago that I don’t even remember when. Shurek played with me, sang me lullabies and recorded my first childish babble with his old tape-recorder “Dnieper” (nicknamed the “coffin with music”): “This is books, this is books, books are everything, than-that-this!” Once I managed to take his favorite marshmallow out of his mouth and eat it while he was chewing it and talking at the same time, and was distracted a little at something. Shurek remained sitting with his mouth open. “When I eat, I shouldn’t talk and listen!” - Grandfather laughed loudly.

What I also adored was when in the evenings Shurek skipped with me sitting on his back from the old electricity pole at the corner near our house to the railway and back: to the railway - in a trot, back from there - in a gallop. I preferred the gallop a lot!

It was Shurek who taught me to ride a bike and skate. I imagined myself to be Irina Rodnina, and him to be first Alexei Ulanov, later Alexandr Zaitsev. It seems that was the moment when I stopped calling him “uncle”. In my early childhood Shurek’s former schoolmate often visited him. He was a cheerful, curly-haired guy called Tolik. Shurek and Tolik played chess all evening long on a bench in our backyard and swapped tapes with Vysotsky’s songs. Later Tolik got married, soon his son was born, and he gradually stopped visiting Shurek. This only confirmed my negative thoughts on marriage: it destroys such fine things as friendship!

Sometimes we performed the acrobatic etude “The Ram and the Shepherd” in front of my grandparents, to their demands of “encore”: I hung down from both sides of his neck, with my head and feet. Sometimes Mum and Shurek placed me in a big blanket, took it by both ends and, to my delight, began to swing it.

In the winter - even though he must have been tired after work - Shurek took me on a sledge around our block. Sometimes we went together downhill on my sledge - fast like the wind! In the dark I imagined myself to be the underground anti-fascist fighter Zina Portnova.

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131 Soviet ice skating World champions.
132 Vladimir Visotsky (1938 -1980) was a popular Soviet singer, songwriter, poet, and actor, whose career had an immense and enduring effect on Russian culture. Although best known as a singer-songwriter, he was also a talanted stage and screen actor. His songs about war, realities of life were different to the light-hearted mood of mainstream popmusic and were challenging common taste. In the film industry he is most famous for his version of Hamlet and a role of a courageous homicide detective Gleb Zheglov in the film "The Place Of Meeting Cannot Be Changed".
133 Zina Portnova (1926-1944) - was a Russian teenager, Soviet partisan and Hero of the Soviet Union. In August 1943 she became a scout of the partisan unit. In October 1943 Portnova joined Comsomol. Two months later she was captured by the Germans. During Gestapo interrogation in the village of Goriany, she managed to grab the investigator’s pistol from the table, and shot him and two other Nazis. Recaptured while attempting to escape, she was brutally tortured, and then executed in the Vitebsk city jail.
escaping enemies pursuit on a horse-drawn sleigh. Once in winter Shurek tried to ski downhill with me on his neck, but this ended up with such a somersault that I am still surprised that I didn’t even have time to get scared... We made snowmen together, or watered our home-made ice hill. In summer we had water-fights, getting each other wet in the backyard from home-made water pistols, or playing at home “throw-it-at-me”, as we called pillow fights.

And I still remember how Shurek and mum took me to the library on the same sledge, having placed me into a big bag! The library was one of both Shurek’s and my most favorite places. There one could always find something very interesting. The library was in the club “Hammer & Sickle”, which belonged to one of our factories. In summer there was a “pioneer camp” for kids there, and sonorous cheerful children’s voices rushed into the library window. Of course, the library was free of charge; later it made the hair stand up on my head to learn how expensive it was to be a reader in the Netherlands!

Shurek was fascinated with science fiction, and Granny “hunted” for each new issue of “The Explorer” magazine for him through all the newsstands in town. Shurek had a whole bookcase full of science fiction; in spite of the fact that our house had only one room, he had his own bookcase, while mine was in the kitchen. Shurek was very zealously concerned about his collection and trusted it to very few people. He entrusted it to me when I had grown up a little. Till now I remember fascinating stories of J. B. Priestley, Isaac Asimov, the Strugatsky brothers134 and a number of other authors, some of whose names I have unfortunately forgotten. I especially liked the story called “The Emerald”, in which aliens changed the skin colour of our terrestrial racists into bright green. Another story that I liked was “This fragile, fragile, fragile world”135. I had no idea that one day I would find myself living in that same sort of absurd world...

By the way, have you noticed that in American movies and books in 99.9 % of cases aliens are malicious and hostile to people? They are really eager to destroy our planet. In Soviet science fiction literature that kind of alien was an exception. Well, everyone creates artistic images based on his own ideas about the world and people, don’t they? Or maybe it is just because aliens have quickly understood whom they were dealing with in America?...

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134 Arkady (1925-1991) and Boris (born 1933) Strugatsky - are popular Soviet science fiction writers who worked together. Their novel ”Roadside Picnic” (1977) was translated into English and was filmed by Andrei Tarkovsky under the title ”Stalker”. The Strugatsky brothers were and still are popular in their native country and many other countries, including Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Germany, where most of their works were available in both East and West Germany. The brothers were Guests of Honour at the 1987 World Science Fiction Convention, held in Brighton, England.

135 The 1966 story by the Soviet writers B. Zubkov and E. Muslin where the whole world consists of fragile, one-day use things.
When I had grown up a little, we started to play badminton in the street in front of the house. We didn’t follow the rules or use a grid. Our own rules were the following: to keep the shuttlecock in air as long as possible. Therefore we usually played on a windless evening. Both of us counted each stroke of the racket, and in good weather we tried to go for the record. Now I don’t even remember the exact number of strokes in our “world record” (it was about 10,000). But when we were in good shape, we were playing for half an hour, or even an hour without the shuttlecock touching the ground: a few thousand strokes was considered the norm. We cheered each other, and Shurek exclaimed like a real sport commentator when one of us managed to get a pass from a very difficult position. We proudly considered ourselves to be the world champions in this new kind of sport that we had invented!

Should I also mention our photo practice? I got my first camera, “Smena”, for my 12th birthday. First, we took pictures of the whole neighbourhood. Then I posed in different ones of Mum’s dresses. After that we copied pictures of our favourite pop groups and enlarged them. We even managed to shoot images from TV (this was already not with the small “Smena”, but with the more professional “Zenith” which I got on my 15th birthday). The only thing I didn’t learn was how to develop film. One had to do it in complete darkness, and I was too nervous to insert the film into the tank without seeing. This pivotal operation was entrusted to Shurek. On Saturdays we visited a special photographic supply store to get a developer, a fixer and some photographic paper. My favourite one had a pale-yellow shade. Soon we also got a photo dryer. All paper, film, chemicals, an enlarger and other necessary things were produced in the USSR and were of a very high quality. Only the paper was sometimes produced in the GDR. Even today I remember the disgusting hydro-sulphuric smell of the developer and how my hands smelled after a printing session!

At our place there were no conditions for developing and printing: neither running water, nor a completely dark room. To do all that we went to Little Tamara, who had a condo apartment by that time. A printing session always took a long story depending on the number of films. Sometimes it took all night. First Shurek dived into the bathroom, whose door had a blanket for complete darkness, just in case. If even one ray of light penetrated into the bathroom, Shurek cried out in panic: “What are you doing? Where is the light coming from? Now we will ruin the film, and that will be it!” But it never happened. After developing and fastening the film, it had to be dried: we hung it on a cord, on a clothespin, like linen. While it was drying, Little Tamara made pancakes and treated us. While we were waiting, we prepared the kitchen for printing: we curtained the window, dissolved the reactants and got our red lantern from the storage room. The lantern reminded me of the opera “The Barber of Seville”: “…The red small lamp at the entrance, it is difficult to miss, signor”. (By then I was already big enough to enjoy listening to operas and besides “The Barber...” I loved “Aida”, “Yevgueni Onegin” and “Prince Igor”; I knew many arias by heart.)
After that the most mysterious and interesting procedure started, i.e. printing. Somebody who has never printed photos in his life can hardly imagine how fascinating this process is! You have to watch how the silhouettes of people and subjects gradually appears on paper in the tank with developer and to manually evaluate when it is time to take the picture out of the developer! Having snatched the photo from the tank, I galloped to the kitchen water tap and, having flushed it for some seconds under running water, I threw it into the other tank - with a fixer. In the kitchen sink there was a third tank in which the photos were washed off for half an hour in running water after the fixation. In the room Little Tamara had already spread the sports posters from her office on the floor: on them our photos were drying. Quite often the whole room and even the hall were covered by drying pictures till the next morning. Having woken up (for printing we usually stayed overnight in Little Tamara's place), we first of all crawled on the floor to collect them, even before breakfast. Later, when we got a dryer, things went a little faster; however we still had even less time to sleep.

To be an amateur photographer was quite affordable for anyone. Later, when "perestroika" started, everything was getting more and more expensive, and finally the factories that manufactured the photo reactants switched over to producing "foreign" washing powder: “Tide” and “Persil”. Those factories were sold off to Western corporations (the best and most well-known of these was the “Svema” factory from Shostka that is now even situated "abroad": in Ukraine!). As a result, the photography hobby, once so commonly enjoyed by so many people (with photo clubs at schools and in the Palaces of Young Pioneers, and with millions of followers like us) has virtually died out...

Can I ever forget the Olympic Games in Moscow! When those Olympic Games began, Shurek and I spent the whole days in front of the TV. I remember cheering for Miruts Yifter: small and sickly, but such a strong long-distance runner from Ethiopia!

And the bouts-rimes compositions! And our trips to Fyodor! Fyodor was a director of a "Soyuzpechat" shop (where they sold central newspapers and popular magazines) near Little Tamara's place. He was a very serious guy, looking at least like a top manager of a factory. It was the only store in town where one could buy a variety of magazines from the socialist countries. We collected Polish "Kobieta" and "Ekran",

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136 Svema - is a registered trade mark and former name of the Shostka Chemical Plant, located in Shostka, Ukraine. It was founded in 1931 in then Ukrainian SSR. "Svema" used to be the major photographic film manufacturer in the USSR, but their film lost market share in former Soviet countries to imported products during the late 1990s.

137 Miruts Yifter (born 1944) is a former Ethiopian athlete, winner of two gold medals at the 1980 Summer Olympics.

138 Bouts-rimes - a literary game; a poem, usually impromptu and comic, with unexpected rhymes given beforehand. Sometimes a theme for bouts-rimés is given as well. The game appeared in France during the first half of the 17th century and soon became popular in Russia.
Bulgarian “Paralleli” and “Zhenata dnes”, Cuban “Mujeres” and “Neues Leben” from the GDR...

In the summer Shurek and I along with the Granddad went fishing or picking mushrooms. Unlike Shurek and Granddad I was not really keen on fishing: it is boring to sit for a long time in one place. And I felt sorry for the fish. I did not eat them at all. Sometimes we would bring home a small live fish and let it out to live in a barrel with water in the vegetable plot. I would come there to feed it bread. But for some reason the small fish invariably emerged floating on their back in a couple of days, and I asked Granddad not to do it anymore.

Picking mushrooms was a different story! We had our favourite place: by the rail track of the railway going to Moscow. Just as to go fishing, we had to wake up very early for mushrooms. Many inveterate mushroom pickers would come to the forest almost at night, and if you overslept, you might get there to find only the stalks of the mushrooms, cut off at the very root. It took us about forty minutes to reach "our" station by a suburb train. The train was full of mushroom pickers and summer houses residents. In those days, people went to their own summer cottages for a break and even if they planted something on their allotments, they did it for fun, not to survive on "pastures" as during Yeltsin's rule. Even the oldest women were not afraid to go to the forest for berries or in the fields to pick cornflowers for sale: in the forests in those days there were no homeless people, no maniacs, no escaped prisoners, no addicts or other social products of “freedom and democracy”.

The smell in the forest was great! And the mushrooms themselves smelled fantastic! Flowers, which we never saw near our house, grew there: purple and yellow cow-wheat. And real cuckoos cuckooed there as well. According to an ancient Russian custom, the number of cuckoos foretold how many years one would live. Dew lay on grass in the morning. Pools in thickets didn't dry up for a long time after the rain; here and there traces of elks were seen in the mud. It was better not to go into the forest without rubber boots or at least some sport shoes.

The forest was a real one, unlike the one consisting of American maple trees near our house: under the American maples no mushrooms can grow, except for some poisonous ones! Birches, oaks, fir-trees, aspens and a hazel grew in a real forest... The forest was not thick, here and there between the woods there were collective farm fields sowed with oats and that very same sweet-smelling buckwheat, about which one only can dream nowadays. Neither buckwheat, nor mushrooms are there anymore, just the villas and summer houses of some "new Russians" and other gangsters...

139 Kobieta - Polish fashion magazine for women.
140 "Sovetsky Ekran" ("Soviet Screen") - illustrated magazine published every two weeks from 1925 to 1998. From 1991 to 1997 it was called "Ekran". It was published by the Union of Cinematographers of USSR and Goskino of USSR. The magazine does not exist today.
In a ravine near the collective farm field was our secret place where boletus mushrooms grew: once we picked twenty eight of them! We usually split our team into two parts: Shurek and I were one team, and Granddad was the other. We never went too far apart, though. Granddad ran along the forest quickly, like a young man. I must say, he was indeed very athletic: every morning, including weekends, he did gymnastics, and afterwards took a cold shower in the backyard. No matter what the weather was like! Granddad was a choosy mushroom picker; he never collected everything he saw. He especially did not like spurges though they were perfectly edible.

After a run through the wood, we had a quick lunch of boiled potatoes, tomatoes and salt with bread somewhere on a lawn. Once we were almost got lost and ended in a bog, but finally we found the way out by the sound of the trains. This railway was not like the one near our house; this one was really dangerous, trains here passed by almost every five minutes at terrible speed, going south to the Crimea and the Caucasus. It would never come to our mind to walk along this railway track, like we did at home.

Back then I ate only pickled mushrooms; but the rest of our family loved them fried with potatoes. Even today I can tell for sure in what kind of grass mushrooms are likely to grow; which ones are safe as food and which ones aren’t. To the horror of people around me in this sterile “civilized” society, who believe that the only proper mushrooms are the ones sold in a supermarket, and that those that grow in the forest are just for decoration, dangerous to life if served for dinner.

Shurek was the only one of us who would ride a bicycle on the big road out of town during the summer, and ski behind the railway line in the winter. He also worked in the country: after graduation from his Institute he had been assigned to work\footnote{After graduation every student in the Soviet Union was assigned his first job where he had to remain working for three compulsory years. During this time an employee had special status of a "young specialist": he or she could not be fired, and could get some special benefits like housing. After three years of working the young employee could continue to work there of leave for another job.} in a small urban-type settlement about thirty kilometres from our town, and he stayed there after the compulsory three years, in the same factory where he was quickly promoted to chief economist with his own office. Sometimes he got hints that if he joined the party he could be a director, but Shurek was unambitious, a socially inactive man, and this prospect did not really tempt him. He didn’t even want to bother to look for a job closer to home. He would travel to work by bus, getting up every morning as early as 6 am. Sometimes I went to his workplace too. I liked going there. At Little Tamara’s workplace I would type on a typewriter and at Shurek’s I would add on a calculator. The only thing I didn’t like there was that for some reason they only had chicken’s tails on the menu in the canteen.

That settlement was small, cosy and green, with the traditional square and the Lenin Memorial in the centre. All of its population worked in the same factory, and everybody knew each other. All the single local
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girls immediately saw Shurek as an eligible bachelor when he started working there, but they didn’t appeal to him. He liked one woman, but she was already married... Shurek could only sigh about her in our bouts-rimes. The settlement was international: Armenians and Ukrainians, Belarusians and Kazakhs, and even a Korean family lived there, with a father who worked as a council worker, or to put it more simply, sewage disposal man. He had a divine name: Apollo. The settlement was built before the war, purposely around the plant, and people from all over the country came there to work. There were not many such places in my region. Most of the population in our town were just Russians. We mainly met other nationalities in the market.

Some of my uncle’s colleagues became heroes of our fantasies and we even improvised songs about them, such as the vice-director, a Belarusian named Stepan Anisimovich, for example, whose wife used to call him in an exotic way “Steeva”, like the hero of ”Anna Karenina”. But in general people who worked with Shurek were ordinary, not exotic people. The director had a love affair with the chief accountant. By the way, I liked her; Galina was such a homely, nice woman. The director’s wife worked in the planning department and was, as usual, the only one in the factory who didn’t know about the affair.

In autumn I together with Shurek picked potatoes in the vegetable plot and apples and plums in the garden. All this was just for our own consumption, even in the biggest crop year it wasn’t for sale. I felt good sharing them with someone else, but not selling them. In our family we didn’t have people who loved to sell things, and my relatives generally didn’t want any part of this activity, because only those who were generally incapable of doing any real work went into sales. I learned this since childhood.

So life went around in a circle. In spring there were paper boats in puddles, tomato seedlings on the windowsill in boxes, taking out the winter frame from the windows and the 1st May demonstration; in summer there were biking, badminton, mushroom picking and fishing; in autumn there was harvesting, in October fitting of the winter frames into the windows again; and in winter there were sleighs, snowmen and New Year...

I believed in Ded Moroz\footnote{Ded Moroz (liter.Grandfather Frost) - in some Slavic cultures, the traditional character Ded Moroz plays a role similar to that of Santa Claus.} for a long time and I do not see anything to be ashamed of about it. Somehow my mother always managed to put the New Year’s gifts under the tree at the last moment, in such a way that I never saw her do it. The gifts weren’t so important by themselves, it was the mysterious atmosphere of New Year’s night. Indeed it seemed that anything was possible if you just wished it strong enough. We always celebrated New Year’s Eve at home; nobody went out into the street. Little Tamara came to us to stay overnight, and we had a celebration until the morning, under the tree, watching television. That night, there were usually excellent programs on TV: definitely an interesting new film on New Year’s Eve, ”Little Blue Light” show after midnight, and after that, at
about 4 or 5 am, for particularly steadfast people (as most fell asleep by that time!), there were "Melodies and Rhythms of Foreign Pop-music". They were usually shown as a single long program twice a year: on New Year’s night and the night before Easter: to keep the youth at home, preventing them from going to church out of curiosity.

We had a black and white TV at home, the colour TV we bought on credit, when I was studying in the 2nd grade. I remember how Shurek literally jumped in his chair with excitement when he switched it on the first time! Our favourite TV show was "Tavern "13 chairs". The presenter of telecast "In the World of Animals" had the surname Zguridi, and I showed my knowledge of ethnology to my household: they told us that he was Georgian. "If he was a Georgian, he'd be Zguridze!" - I objected steadily. Other programs were "Kino Panorama", which was first presented by Kapler (of course, I had no idea about his relationship with Svetlana Stalin!) And later on it was presented by Kapralov; and "The Documentary Screen" with the poet Robert Rozhdestvensky as a presenter, whom I disliked even though I don’t remember why anymore. A little bit later there came Aunt Valya's children's program "Visiting Fairy Tales". There were so many interesting programs on our television that it would require a separate book to write about them all. It was quite enough for us to have just two channels!

From Shurek I became infected with an interest in Western pop-music. Of course, he was fond of our music too, but to a little less degree. I sang songs in different languages by hearing, without knowing any of those languages. By the mid 1970's Rafael and Engelbert Humperdinck, Joe Dolan, Tom Jones and Miriam Makeba, Dean Reed, Joan Baez and Gianni Morandi gave way to my and Shurek's favourite music genre for the rest of our lives: disco. We often spent weekends in search of what we could record on tape with our "coffin with music" from the radio. Those who just go to a shop or to a market nowadays for new CDs (and sometimes they don’t even have to go anywhere, one can now just order or download music from the internet!), cannot even imagine how exciting it was. It was almost the same as fishing, to look for songs to record from the radio. And the songs that I recorded over the weekend could quite possibly be compared with the fish we caught.

143 The author refers to the Soviet system of individual loans. People were able to buy some goods on so called "credit" - which means that their book-keeping office at work every month subtracted part of the debt and transferred it to the shop. There was no interest charged.

144 "Kinopanorama" - was a popular Soviet television programme about cinema. It was broadcasted on Soviet and Russian television from 1962 to 1995. During 33 years it had 53 different talented commentators. Aleksei Kapler- screen writer and film director worked in "Kinopanorama" from 1966-1972. He is also known for his brief romance with Iosif Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva.

145 Robert Rozhdestvensky (1932-1994) - Soviet poet, Laureate of the Lenin's Komsomol Prize and the USSR State Prize. He came into Soviet poetry in the 1950's along with such famous Soviet poets as Evgeniy Evtushenko, Andrei Voznesenskiy.
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When Shurek was asked why he didn’t get married (we didn’t ask him, of course: his bachelor status didn’t bother anyone at home, but some distant relatives who came to visit us seemed really bothered by it!), he felt shy and said as an excuse that he would be glad to, but there was no one suitable: he liked only black girls, and there weren’t any of them here. He especially liked black singers: from Ella Fitzgerald and Donna Summer and especially the gorgeous Marcia Barrett of “Boney M”.

If I only knew what impact it would have on my own life later! Music combined with Shurek’s personal tastes and with the movie “How Tsar Peter (yes, the same one, my favourite Tsar Peter!) helped his Moor to marry” in which the noble and generous Ethiopian Abram Petrovich Hannibal\footnote{Major-General Abram Petrovich Gannibal (1696 - 1781) was brought to Russia from Africa as a gift for Peter the Great and became major-general, military engineer, governor of Reval and nobleman of the Russian Empire. He is perhaps best known today as the great-grandfather of Alexander Pushkin, who wrote an unfinished novel about him, Peter the Great’s Negro.} fell victim of the blunt mockery of our native snub-nosed racists, plus a pair of books on colonial history and the history of the slave trade affected me like a bombshell: at twelve years old I had become a passionate racist-the-other-way-round.

But first things first.

...One day my mother returned from work and brought me a book “Four centuries of the slave trade” that she had bought on her way home. This book changed my whole life. What I felt as a nine year old, after reading about the horrors of slavery and the millions of ruined lives? Anger - not just anger, but such a huge rage, that there was not enough space in my heart for it. It was bubbling and eager to pour over it in a desire to do something to redeem this irreparable guilt towards the black part of mankind! It would be better if I had sat down, thought about it and began to even feel proud of my ancestors, the Russians, who never took part in this centuries-long shameful holocaust. But no, I took it as a crime of the whole white race... I began to feel guilty. I started to read more, more, and more. The book “Black outcasts of America”, books on the history of individual African tribes, about the “Back to Africa!” movement of Marcus Garvey, about the theory of Negritude by Leopold Senghor - about the distinctive originality of the Africans, notes about Rastafarianism... I had studied the “Countries of the World” reference book and knew by heart the names of all the African presidents and the independence days of all the African countries. Just about that time in America, Assata Shakur escaped from prison. She became my number one heroine! Does anybody remember Ben Chavis nowadays, by the way?

I was incredibly angry about how the white planters behaved with slave women. I knew about it from "Uncle Tom's Cabin". It would be a good lesson for them if their own daughters and sisters, had relationships with the slaves in response! Who are these incredible hypocrites in general, to consider themselves entitled to "preserve the purity of the race", while deciding for others how they should live? Are we women their property? So this was the first time when the desire to "challenge" the
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others arose in me, only it was not in response to something Soviet. When I was ten or eleven years old, combating racism seemed to me much more urgent than fighting for peace, which we daily asserted on radio and television. Because, after all, we already had peace.

And on all this fertile ground, when I was ten years old, that very New Year's miracle in which I have always believed, finally happened. Even though on the surface these two things were totally unconnected. They were connected only in my head. That New Year’s Eve the wonderful wizards of disco music called "Boney M" burst like a whirlwind into my life...

...I was already asleep when at about 5 am that New Year’s night Shurek woke me, shouting: "Look! Just look at this!" I opened one eye and saw on the TV screen a handsome dark-skinned man in some unimaginably shiny clothes and boots, with trimmed palm tree-like hairstyle and hairy bare chest, who was spinning like a top-thin, throwing his microphone on the floor, then lifted it up again and in general, acted on stage like none of our own singers at the time. The expression of his face was concentrated and detached, as though he was engaged in something very important. This incredible man, blinding, looking and acting like absolutely nobody else around me was called Bobby Farrell. Roberto Alfonso Farrell from the island of Aruba.

A year later they came to our country, to Moscow. It was really an incredible dream come true! It was a very cold winter, and I, going to school, was worried about them: how would they feel there, in Moscow? I hoped that they wouldn’t catch cold! Just before the New Year temperature dropped to almost -35C. (We didn’t go to school if it was -25C or colder, and every morning I would listen to the local radio in hope... But if it was -24C, the classes were not cancelled!) Naturally, I didn’t have the slightest chance to get to their concert (all the more so because I was only eleven at the time), but I carefully collected all the newspaper clippings about their tour, read with pleasure interviews of that amazing man, who had forever been captured in my memory since the previous New Year’s Eve. I already knew from those interviews that he spoke five languages, and that his native language was called Papiamento. And I waited for them to be shown on television soon again. This usually happened so rarely that you tried to cherish each such occasion in your memory and “rewind” it there again and again until the next time. VCRs didn’t exist yet at that time.

Finally the day came: April 13th of 1979! It was not announced in advance that their concert would be shown on TV at 23:25, and I went to a sleepover that night at Little Tamara’s place (my school only started in the afternoon). By then, our “coffin with music”, which had to be warmed up for a few minutes before playing music, had moved over there, and I practiced my disco-dancing in Little Tamara ’s living room, imagining that I was a DJ in a discotheque called "Rhythms of the sixth floor". Late that evening somebody suddenly rang the doorbell. It was Shurek! He came running for me, after happening to see a modified TV schedule for today in "Trud" newspaper...
Even now, when you recall that evening, you feel like you have wings! The next day (it was Saturday) my head was in such a cloud in the classroom... None of my classmates had seen the show, which further increased my sense of a miracle that had been sent only to me. If there was a person whom I ever envied, it was Tatyana Korshilova, now deceased. Back then I thought that she was simply not worthy to speak to my idols. She was too unduly familiar, in a non-Soviet way. Although in comparison with modern presenters Tatyana seemed almost shy and certainly very intelligent. The real worth of everything can be found only in comparison...

Allow me to disagree with the well-known Soviet expression “Today he plays jazz, and tomorrow he will sell the Motherland”. It all depends on who is playing! Never for a moment did I think of selling the Motherland and I have never thought that the West was somehow worthy of imitation or admiration on the sole ground that disco music was produced there. Not familiar at all with the English language at that time, I invested an entirely different meaning in these songs (only now, when I actually do understand the lyrics, I almost get sick of hearing many of my favorite old hits...). I also put a different sense on the image of my idols that was formed in my mind. Anyone living in the West who knows “Boney M” and does not have my Soviet origin and upbringing, most likely will never be able to understand how I could see in them what they were not at all about. Anti-colonialism? Anti-racism? Don’t make me laugh.

Try to understand that Americans with their “Terminators” and “Jokers” are not the only ones who judge the surrounding world by their own life. We Soviet people too saw the world based on our own life experiences. And “Boney M” seemed to me to be noble, lofty, intellectual (a talented person must be intellectual, I thought) and also representative of the Third World countries: it was possible for me to think all of this because gossips about their private lives weren’t published in our country and none of us knew then what a spiteful and vindictive nature had this lady with such an angelic voice, Liz Mitchell, who is now so passionately trying to trample her former colleagues in the mud, not realising how Frank Farian used her. Just the way that Chuvash girl Zhenya played around with our girls on the street in my childhood.

By the age of thirteen I fell madly in love with Bobby. Not exactly in the same way as with Alain Delon or Gojko Mitic. Maybe it was because I was already a teenager. I had such beautiful dreams about him that cannot be expressed in words!

In my childhood there was a song: “In the villages of Ryazan, in the villages of Smolensk
The word “love” is unusual for a woman.
There when infinitely and faithfully loving,
A woman will say: “I pity you!”

This truly describes my feelings for Bobby. He was my passionate and ardent knight and at the same time he was a defenseless child who had to be rescued from the evil white exploiters-producers. I gave a hiding to Frank Farian in my dreams with great pleasure!
A cynically down-to earth contemporary (not to mention the Dutch!), of course, would explain it all by “hormones” and would tell me that my dreams about Bobby pressing me to his hairy chest and kissing me firmly were “erotic”. But in these dreams, along with affection (which, by the way, did not go any further than my innocent young girl’s imagination allowed me), we also talked about how to complete the process of decolonization of the Caribbean, and how to punish Maurice Bishop’s killers. As well as about supporting MPLA in the struggle against UNITA. And we even participated in the guerrilla activities in the territory of Namibia.

My love for Bobby was my greatest secret. I dreamed about him every night before bedtime. Everybody at home knew that I loved “Boney M” (we all liked them), but no one guessed that I liked Bobby as a man (well, of course, the way I imagined him to be!)

My uncle became “Shurek” around that time, when I became “a Corsican Ica Veron”. That’s from the name “Veronica” from my favorite Rumanian fairy tale movie, with Lulu Mihaescu in the main role. Ica Veron was a 13-year-old bride of Bobby Farrell...

Ica was an orphan (that way none of her parents would resist her early alliance with a man so much older than she was) whom Shurek, who was also a Corsican, had adopted and brought up. Why from Corsica? I just liked the way it looked on the map, and also because I read a story by Prosper Merimee about it and saw the movie “Vendetta the Corsican way” (“Les Grands Moyens” in the French original). Later Ica and Shurek created a band (at that time we called it an “ensemble”) with the participation of Valerica Renatto from Sardinia (that was my Mum!) and Tony Taney, an old lady from New York (which, of course, was our Little Tamara) named “Steeva Litkevich Disco” or “SL Disco” for short. It got to the point that I even actually wrote songs for “SL Disco” and I and Shurek recorded them on his old faithful “Dnyepr” tape recorder. Unlike other teenage girls, I never wanted to become an actress, but I greatly envied those who had a good singing voice... I didn’t have illusions about my own voice though; I only had my imagination.

"SL Disco" became so popular that once they met “Boney M” themselves during a performance at some festival. The rest was history...

The relationship between Ica and Bobby developed quickly after she had beaten up his producer Frank Farian, who did not allow Bobby to sing himself, and she came to Bobby to express her encouragement to him. After that they left for some country where underage marriage was permitted (I remember that I really looked for such information in the encyclopedia, as if I could really do this!), either Bolivia or Paraguay, I don’t remember exactly, and returned already as spouses to the fans worried about their disappearance...

Ica Veron and Bobby Farrell settled on an artificial island Monogambe, built by Ica off the coast of Benin (because she was escaping there from the whites!). Together they formed the famous duo “Negritude”, created after Bobby was betrayed by his producer and left “Boney M”. Interestingly, I did not know back then that Bobby would actually really leave them soon. I did not know anything about his
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personal life (I remember how I wanted to know very much when he was born, so that I could secretly celebrate his birthday). And then I found out how close I actually was to reality in my dreams: Bobby got married to “our” woman, an Eastern European, a Gypsy woman from Macedonia (oh lucky girl!), who was much younger than he was. And they met when she was only 14! And Ica and Bobby also “got married” on October 7, 1980, and Bobby’s real birthday, it turned out, is on October the 6th.

...Ica made a vow to herself: to perform only for the dark-skinned public on all continents. Whites tried to get to her concerts, but in vain. In addition to being a singer, she was also a producer, composer and sometimes she filmed anti-racist films. For educational and punitive purposes it was recommended to show them to the racist Boers of South Africa, after tying them up to chairs, to prevent them from running away. In one of them a slave owner’s daughter (of course, Ica played her) ran away with one of the slaves to the maroons, in another a girl-pirate freed African slaves from a slave trader’s ship and sailed with them back to Africa. And so on and so forth. The funniest thing is that while I fantasised at this level when I was twelve or thirteen, modern Russian female writers seriously publish such nonsense for an adult audience! And someone actually reads it!

I had some special notebooks in which I wrote down the names of all new “Negritude” songs and performers of all roles in all their new films as well as a handwritten guide to Monogambe, where all the streets and various buildings were named after black heroes from different continents, from Harriet Tubman to the Angolan Carlita. (The only exception was made for Koreans: they impressed me so much because of my cousin’s Korean friends, about whom I’ll tell you a bit later). Furthermore, Ica Veron periodically published her diaries. These sheer fantasies, in which real events were mixed up with pure imagination, and where the school test works were called “press conferences”, I have kept them to this day. And if anyone thinks that I ever really wanted to live in Western Europe, they can check for themselves what sort of words I used in those diaries, talking about colonial powers in general and about Britain and the Netherlands in particular...

...All was well, although Ica Veron, as a normal teenager, occasionally suffered from bouts of melancholy, but one beautiful summer day Shurek (not the Corsican from fantasies, but my very own uncle!) walked out of our toilet in the courtyard, squinting at the sunlight and cheerfully, as if by chance, asked me: “Well, and how is your husband Bobby Farrell doing?” I don’t know how I didn’t sink into the ground after this phrase. He stabbed me without a knife. The mystery was no longer a secret. It turned out that grandfather got some of my draft papers, and he, without looking at them, tore them up and put them where all old papers ended up in our house (we didn’t have toilet paper at that time). Shurek was bored and, while in the toilet, decided to read some of them before using them...

To his credit, he did not laugh at me too much. And I didn’t stop being fond of Bobby at all. I loved him for a long time, until I entered university, at the age of eighteen, when life confronted me with real
men. And a comparison between them and Bobby, by the way, was not in their favour! I still thrill at the sound of his name. Yes, of course, in reality he might not be like in my dreams, but how much happiness he brought into my life, without even knowing it!

Can you imagine how the others at school reacted to such a strange creature like me? Although our school was still Soviet, and we had no idea what “bullying” was. For this, apparently, one really needs to live in a “free society”. Teasing of Soviet children did not go further than “Miron is a snotty dumb head”. And a fictitious character, my namesake Komsomol member Zhenka Stoletov, who was considered a model for our contemporaries at that time, also, as I far as I can remember, collected pictures of Africans from an early age and decorated his tractor with them...

I entered the school relatively late, when I was seven and a half years old. But the alternative would have been to start six months earlier than necessary, and my grandmother always told me “You’ll grow up soon enough, my dear, you’ll have all the time in the world to be grown up! But childhood will never come back”. And I remembered that well.

I was lucky because I got into a small, quiet, even somewhat patriarchal school that by its atmosphere resembled a quiet pond overgrown with algae. Most children in our neighbourhood went to another one: a showpiece school, a huge one, with a great number of children from newly constructed apartment blocks nearby, most of whom spent their preschool childhood with grandparents in the villages and didn’t know much about either ballet or opera. With all the ensuing consequences for their intellectual development, and sometimes even for their behaviour (it was hard for them to get used to the urban way of life).

But when my mother came to sign me into that school, it was too late, and I think it was for the better.

Our school occupied two pre-revolutionary buildings along the tram line, about a 15-20-minute walk from our house. One had to cross some dangerous roads on the way there, and I was taken to school and met after lessons until the age of fourteen. Usually my mother accompanied me on her way to work, and my grandmother usually met me after school. We studied six days a week, from 8.30 am to 12.00 (from the 4th year it was up to 2 pm). There were two shifts at school, and in the 2nd, 5th and 6th classes we studied in the second shift: from 2 pm till 6 pm. In winter I had to go home in the dark, but I even liked that. At least, I could have more sleep in the morning (I am "an owl", not "a lark"). When on this schedule, I usually did my written homework in the evening, and my oral one the following morning.

The two school buildings were surrounded by a fence, and between them was a spacious courtyard, suitable for physical education lessons and ceremonials. We usually took our class photos there as well. The right building was smaller and was used for primary school, the left one, with a large assembly hall on the second floor, was for secondary school. The floors in both buildings were wooden, brownish-red, polished with filings and some oily stuff that made red marks on your clothes if you fell on the
floor. The cleaner, Aunt Zoe, was a very strict lady, and the kids were a little afraid of her. She chased pranksters with a rag. British children would have sued her for violation of their human rights.

The director Anastasia Ivanovna "ruled" the school. She was as eternal as the school buildings, a stately lady of unknown age with a thick layer of make-up on her face who always wore pink shade business suits. She didn’t just walk, she sailed through the air like a peafowl, slightly raising her little finger. She taught us history and was an average teacher: instead of explaining things, she made us read aloud relevant pages in the book in turns.

When I started school, I did not realise for some time to what extent drastic was this turn in my life. For ten whole years. My first day in first grade I remember by the sea of white ribbons and aprons (it was our special-day school uniform), and stomach pain caused by separation from my family, even for a few hours. I didn’t know any of my classmates. But my first teacher was familiar to my mum; her younger sister was once in the same class as mum.

I was very lucky with my first teacher: Nelly Timofeyevna was an energetic, kind, warm woman, like a second mum to us. She was one of those teachers who not in a bookish way but really love the Motherland and children. My friend Alla Kolesnikova thought that she had teacher’s pets (and I, as an excellent pupil, was one of them), but which teachers didn’t have them? I stopped being afraid of school within a couple of weeks. My only remaining fear was school hot dinners. We were taken to the adjacent building, to the school cafeteria, and Nelly Timofeyevna didn’t leave you alone until you had eaten your portion. I choked on meatballs made half of bread, which I hated for their smell alone, but Nelly Timofeyevna was relentless. Then I started hiding them in my apron pocket, along with the pasta. Lena ate my meatballs at my request; she was one of our class’s plump kids (we had two plump ones, Lena and Alla, and there were six Lenas in our class in total!). I threw the pasta in the grass on my way home, until one day Nelly Timofeyevna caught us. After that I said at home that I didn’t want to eat at school, and I was relieved from eating school lunches. Lunch, by the way, cost just peanuts and kids had hot milk for free. From then on I sat alone in the classroom and waited until my classmates came back after lunch from the adjacent building. It was the start of my damned individualism...

My second fear was of the days when Nellie Timofeyevna was ill. Often it was not she who was sick, but her only son, Alyosha, a boy a couple of years younger than we were. These days, instead of Nelly Timofeyevna, a teacher from the third grade, Valentina Nikolaevna, was her substitute. I feared her as fire, although personally she treated me well. She even called me "a ray of light in the kingdom". But I was still afraid of her. Just because Valentina Nikolaevna was a big fan of mockery,

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147 "The ray of light in the kingdom of darkness" - is the phrase by which the Russian critic and revolutionary democrat Nikolay Dobrolubov (1836-1861) described the main character Katerina in a play by A.N. Ostrovsky "The Storm". The author like all Russian children studied Works by A.N. Ostrovsky at school.
and I suffered almost physically, seeing how she ridiculed my classmates. I was lucky to avoid this, because I studied well. But she stubbornly called me “Kalashnikova”. (I don’t know why, and I was terribly annoyed, but didn’t dare to say anything; I was too young for that). Her husband worked in the same factory as my grandfather.

Valentina Nikolaevna generally gave an impression of some kind of a hooligan. I remember her virtuosity with words (she was very sharp-tongued). When we complained that the name of a story we had to read at home, “Your friends in other countries”, didn’t fit in our school notebook, where we recorded our homework, she responded immediately:

- Just write – “yr. fr. in oth. co.”!

There were twenty three kids in our class. I sat at the fourth desk in a row near the window, together with a boy called Vadik. Vadik was always rosy-cheeked, with a light-brown fringe falling over his eyes and a funny high-pitched voice like Pinocchio. He sang well in the school choir. He treated me with respect. Vadik was a perfectly normal desk-mate and we got along well for four years. Only in the fifth class, when we were allowed to choose with whom to sit, after being put together with our neighboring class, and there were thirty seven of us, I chose to sit at the same desk with Alla. Before that we had not been particularly friendly, but to sit at the same desk with a girl for both of us seemed much more natural at that age. The culture in which we were brought up was such that girls and boys played together only until a certain age and then somehow naturally, not because someone forced us, the “segregation” began. In my early childhood I was really good friends with Vitya, the son of my mother’s colleague from Sacco and Vanzetti Street, who was four years younger than I was. He could never remember my surname and always called me Zhenya Kalacheva. My mother and I went to his parents’ summer cottage, where we picked cherries, while his father roasted very tasty shashlyks on the barbeque - an unheard-of thing for a man! We also dressed up in different costumes at his house and arranged a fancy-dress show, as one would say now. He had a very nice grandmother and grandfather. His grandmother always cut up fresh fragrant phloxes in the garden for us when we went home...

But by the age of ten or eleven, none of us girls had any contact with the boys anymore, unless it was strictly business. We just had no common interests, because they had their own world and games, and we had our own. I don’t know what role the teasing (“Tilly-tilly-dough, here come the bride and the groom!”) or joke questions, “When’s the wedding?”, played in it if there was a friendship between a girl and a boy. It was considered something almost shameful. But I think that if I met a boy with the same interests as I had, I wouldn’t have been afraid of any teasing jokes. It’s just that in our class... the boys acted so immature: they ran like mad along the corridor and slapped each other on the heads with their schoolbags. I had nothing to talk about with them. They were really small children, even at the age of fourteen or fifteen years. I and my friends looked at them with hidden distaste. There were some girls who in the upper classes of the secondary school began to stand on street corners with these same boys in the evenings, but there were few of...
them, and we disliked them the same way as the boys. For some reason it was considered that in the 6th or 7th grades this should have been important for us (as it was put in a question then: “Can a girl be friends with a boy?”). To be friends, of course, in a normal human sense, not in the sense they so often mean today. However, this issue was not of any importance for us. Once my class teacher asked me about it during class and I was sincerely outraged: who does she think I am?

- Tamara Petrovna, what’s all that to me? Who wants to be friends; they can be, no one stops them, surely?
- Well, Zhenya, tell us, how would you like boys to behave with girls?
- I don’t care, Tamara Petrovna! I don’t want anything from them. I don’t care how they view us!

I spoke quite sincerely. When we were in the 8th grade, two idiots, as I described them because of this incident, Kolya and Lenya, once tried to wait for me and Alla near the school after class, in order to walk home with us, but we realised what was happening and turned in a completely different direction before reaching them, leaving them standing with their mouths open. My mother laughed so much when I complained to her about them. And I was very angry.

I never wanted to become grown-up more quickly than I was going to. Fantasies did not count; I have never behaved in accordance with them in reality. Perhaps I already realised that the process of growing up was irreversible. And when I was fifteen or sixteen years old I knew exactly that I was still a child, and I didn’t need to act like an adult. My whole life as an adult was still ahead for me.

...Unlike most of my classmates, I had already learned to read before I started school. The lessons were easy and I even found it strange to have to force myself to read by syllables, when I had long been able to read fluently. I had no problems with mathematics either. But there were some problems with my handwriting. I learned to write in block letters at home, but writing them carefully was very difficult. I even had a few "C's" in the copy-books. The first and last of those during my whole school life. In addition to reading, mathematics and spelling, we had craftwork, drawing, physical education and singing classes. In the second year natural history and Russian language were added. All of the lessons except for singing were taught by Nelly Timofeyevna. For singing lessons once a week Vera Sergeevna came with her huge accordion. She was Belarusian, a former partisan, a feisty blonde with a huge hair bun on top of her head. I remember how I felt when she was dictating the words from one children’s song to us, insisting that the word "squirrel" should be written with a single “r”, but I knew for sure that there should be two letters.

...Vera Sergeevna tried to teach us musical notation, but only the basics: how musical signs are written. We also sang songs about Lenin and the Revolution and one folk song in a not quite understandable language, “And whose little hut is that?”, in Ukrainian.

Soon, in November of our first year, we became little Octobrists, and had our own leaders, older girls from the 6th class. We walked
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around so proudly with our newly acquired badges! Nelly Timofeyevna was full of energy. One day she prepared with us a combination of poems about October, and another day she taught us a snowflakes dance for the New Year children’s matinee. In the third class she created with us a puppet theatre. We rehearsed "The Mansion" by Marshak right during class. I played the Fox, Vadik was the Rooster. I have actually never liked public performances, and I still don’t like them. But somehow it was easier when you played the role behind the screen. We spent all our free time rehearsing and, to our own surprise, won the contest of the whole town for children’s puppet theatres, where the older kids were our competitors. And besides, some of them were almost professionals, from the puppet group in the Palace of Pioneers\footnote{Young Pioneer Palaces were youth centers designated for the creative work, sport training and extracurricular activities of Young Pioneers and other schoolchildren. Every big city in the Soviet Union had a Pioneers Palace, it was usually the biggest and the most beautiful building in the city. Coaches and tutors were paid for their work, however activities were free for all children. There were various sports, cultural and educational, technical, artistic, tourist, archeological and young naturalist hobby groups in Young Pioneer Palaces. With disappearance of the Soviet Union Pioneer Palaces ceased to exist. Some of them were preserved, but activities have now to be paid for by the families.}! They led dolls on the stage better than we did, but we were more spontaneous actors. And so the judges liked us more.

I cannot say that we were all exemplarily well-behaved as children, but it was fairly normal for us to get up, when the elders came into the classroom, not to argue with them, to raise our hands when we wanted to say something and to respect other basic norms of behaviour. Real hooligans were an exception and, as a rule, they proved to be mentally retarded and then sent to a special school to study. Nowadays we would say that they had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (by the way, in the “civilized” world in general, this seems to be an excuse for any kind of bad behaviour!), but then we were all confident that they simply didn’t want to behave properly. For all my ten years in school I fought only twice, and both times because of my principles. In the 5th grade I defended the honour of a teacher whom I felt was treated poorly,

\footnote{Little Octobrists - is a Soviet term that first appeared in 1923-1924, and at that time referred to children born in 1917, the year of the October revolution. Later, the term was used as the name of a youth organization for children between seven and nine years of age. After the age of nine, in the 3rd grade, Little Octobrists would typically join the Young Pioneer organization. Little Octobrists were organized in groups each representing one school grade level. The group was divided into subgroups called Little stars, of 5 children each. Every Octobrist in a Little star had a duty - commander, flower-grower, junior medical, librarian, sports coach. Each group of Little Octobrists was under the leadership of one Young Pioneer from the Young Pioneer detachment. The Pioneer was supposed to help his young friends to organise activities outside classroom. Every Little Octobrist wore a tiny ruby-coloured five-pointed star badge with the portrait of V.I.Lenin in his childhood.}
because she couldn’t call our hooligan Zhora to order, who drove her to despair with his behaviour. (How does it happen, that kids loved and obeyed our mathematician who was a clunk-head and a hooligan teacher, but were ready to eat alive a really cultured and more delicate teacher?) I called him out for a fight. Stupid Zhora kept trying to hit me with a boot in those places where it would hurt a boy, but I didn’t give a hoot!

...A few years later the same Zhora unexpectedly came up to me during lunch break and asked:

“Zhenya, can I fill in your “relay book”?

I was confused. Why would he ask for that? A “relay book” was a purely girl’s device, the boys have never done such things. It was a notebook with random beautiful pictures cut out of magazines or postcards pasted in it, in which the girls responded to various questions: it was like a questionnaire: what is your favourite book? Film? Your goal in life? And so on. It was called a “relay book”, because the owner passed it on from one girl to another. At that stage we had a real “relay book” fever, and I hadn’t escaped this plague either.

“Well, come on then!” I said.

Then I read his answers and was really surprised. This boy, who looked like such an incorrigible underachiever and a ruffian (he was not even considered to be worthy to become a member of the Komsomol, the only one in the whole class!), apparently read books about Ivanhoe and Robin Hood and his biggest dream was “If today it were the Middle Ages, and my dad would have been a knight!” But the point was that Zhora didn’t have a father at all... Perhaps that explained his behaviour at school? Anyway, I was surprised to realise that he seemed sillier in class than he really was.

After school Zhora chose the romantic profession of a forester.

We went to school to study. No more toys, no baby talk, no classes in which you were taught how to blow bubbles, as in Western schools, no “oh, three hours of class per day is too much for him!” And I believe it was the right way. The ignorance of the vast majority of Western (and our post-Soviet) young people makes you clutch at your head. It is so painful when you see how human intellectual potential is wasted, and how some children who are very intelligent by nature remain underdeveloped for the rest of their lives. 25% of the Irish who have completed secondary school are functionally illiterate\(^\text{150}\). It is impossible to imagine something like this after graduating from a Soviet school. But everything begins with this “Oh, it is so hard for him, let’s get him a personal assistant!” Instead of this, we had a system of excellent and good pupils helping those who fell behind. But the main thing, of course, was the fact that the Soviet education system had a different ultimate goal from the Western one: people’s development. Under capitalism the main point is: why should people be developed, because if they are too clever, they would start

\(^\text{150}\)http://scout.wisc.edu/Projects/PastProjects/NH/00-06/00-06-15/0027.html

Another 20% can perform only simple reading and writing tasks. Results of a research done by OECD in 1999. In Britain, every 5th adult is functionally illiterate (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/811832.stm).
asking questions about how this society functions and why? It is better to let them blow bubbles for as long as possible and if possible for one’s whole life. And education costs a lot of money: it is much cheaper to import grown-up educated people from India, Poland or China!

School was very interesting. There were merry competitions, for example, in collecting wastepaper and scrap metal. There was a brilliant Pioneer leader, Svetlana, who was one of those rare people involved in this work by vocation. There were shows of songs and parades on February 23rd, under the leadership of the school military teacher, and the military-sportive game “Heat Lighting”. To the envy of some of my Irish friends, there were military classes with shooting and time-constrained assembling of a machine gun of my famous namesake. There were great cultural excursions to museums, theatres and cinemas. There was one month practice as a mechanic at a real plant.

But there were two most memorable days in my school life. The day when we were took the Pioneer’s vow in primary school. Not everyone was lucky enough to have gone to Moscow, to Red Square, for this ceremony! Our Nelly Timofeyevna, who wanted to make this day really unforgettable for us, insisted on it. Our patron, a local factory, hired a bus for us with the factory’s money, and one serene morning in May we went to the capital. A lot of us took our parents along, because there were enough seats on the bus.

When I had a red tie put around my neck - standing directly opposite Spassky Tower on Red Square - something like tears appeared in my eyes. Perhaps it was then that I so keenly felt the continuity of our generations, which before that was only a formality for me.

For the first time in my life I visited Lenin’s Mausoleum. I remember how I was surprised to see that Lenin was ginger-haired! On the way back in the bus we ate ice cream and sang, competing to see who knew more songs, boys or girls. Our parents laughed so much when our boys began to sing a song that was still very new back then:

Don’t cry, girl,
The rains will pass away,
The soldier will come back,
Just wait for him!

In secondary school my most memorable day was... the final party. After the 4th grade I began to hate school so much that I couldn’t wait for the day when I finished it. On the outside it looked as if this change was caused by a mutual dislike between me and two new teachers, the mathematics teacher Tatyana Pavlovna and the P.E. teacher Gennady Vladimirovich. But there were other, deeper reasons for that. If I compare my school with my mum’s stories about her’s, my school was already very different.

- I can’t understand how can anybody not love their school - she used to say, - I didn’t even want to go back home after school! If I was sick, I was in mourning. We had thousands of things to do at school. We were always busy doing something, preparing plays, organizing camping trips, taking part in various interest groups. We felt that school belonged to us!
But in my time we were already waiting impatiently for the school bell to ring after the lessons. When there were elections - to the class council, to the school council - we almost hid under our desks: please let them elect anybody else, not me! Today we reap the fruits of this attitude: when we are governed by those very same "anybodies", yesterday's school and class Komsomol leaders...

Similar was the indifference towards things that should have been really of concern for all. During subbotnik151, when we were cleaning the school's yard, girls quickly threw down their brooms.

- Come for a chat! - they called me. But I continued to sweep: I really could not understand such an attitude towards the task: first, the quicker we finished, the quicker we could go home, and second, aren't we doing it for ourselves? Isn't this our school, after all?

"Don't be afraid of your enemies: the worst they can do is kill you. Don't be afraid of your friends: the worst they can do is betray you. Be afraid of the indifferent ones: they do not kill and do not betray, but all treachery and murders in the world happen with their silent blessing", - wrote Bruno Jasienyski152. And all perestroikas as well, we could add...

The left wing people around me often speak with inspiration about the need to empower the people. But what nobody explains, is what to do if the people do not wish to be empowered...

...All the kids' favourite teacher, Tatyana Pavlovna was from the same sort of cheeky teachers as Valentina Nikolaevna: rough, fond of making fun of people, she could easily throw a piece of chalk at some disobedient pupils. She never threw anything at me: not only because I didn't give her any reason, but also because she subconsciously felt that I had a strong feeling of dignity. I would just get up and walk out of the class, if she tried it on me. She began to dislike me after I cried a couple of times at tests when I was about ten: in order to receive an A on her tests, apparently, one had to solve an additional problem, from the extra-curricular material that she didn't explain to us in her lessons. Even though I was studying well, I wasn't fond of technical subjects, unlike all the technicians and engineers in my family. And in my opinion, it was an awfully unfair way of evaluation: how can you ask your pupils to know something that you didn't explain to them yourself? But Tatyana Pavlovna hated tears and had a conversation with my mum after that, where she told her, in her typically sharp way, that what I had was, in her opinion, not a pride, but plain self-loving. Mum, of course, didn't stay silent and

151 Subbotnik (from the Russian word суббота (soubota) for Saturday) was the day of volunteer work. Subbotniks are mostly organized for cleaning the streets of garbage, fixing public amenities, collecting recyclable material, and other community services. The first Subbotnik was held on April 12, 1919, at the Moscow-Sortirovochnaya railway depot of the Moscow-Kazan Railway upon the initiative of local bolsheviks. There was one Subbotnik a year. Apart from doing some work in the morning workers usually had a good time in the afternoon - having lunch together and socialising.
152 Bruno Jasieński (1901-1938) was a Polish poet and the leader of the Polish futurist movement.
paid her back... And so a cold war began between me and Tatyana Pavlovna, and I began to hate mathematics, algebra and geometry for the rest of my life.

But I found a practical solution for my problem quickly: after two or three such tests I noticed that the next test’s problems were written on the back of the current test. I wrote down a sample of the latter, an extra problem for the following test, the one that I would have the next time, and I solved it in advance at home, under the guidance of Shurek. But even now I still see Tatyana Pavlovna and her tests in my nightmares. Even though she died long ago, when we were in the 8th grade. She had cancer. I remember how we went to visit her once in the hospital. She had lost an awful lot of weight and become yellowish. She looked at us from her window (they wouldn't let such a big group into her room at once), and I, who didn't know yet that she was terminally ill, took my chance to poke her:

- Do you remember, Tatyana Pavlovna, how you were angry with me that I was sick so often? And look at yourself...
- I learnt it from you! - she laughed, but her face betrayed that she was in pain. In summer when we passed our first proper school exams, she died. And up till now, when I meet somebody who is full of inner hatred towards people, I first of all ask myself if this person is probably sick...

The story with Gennady Vladimirovich was simpler: he often mistook me for another girl from our class, Natasha, who had a habit of refusing to do some exercises (that is a separate story), and no matter how hard I tried, he would always give me a “B". In the first and fourth quarter of the school year we had athletics at P.E.; that was OK with me, but in the second we had gymnastics and in the third, the longest one, from January until mid-March, even worse: cross-country skiing! I didn't like either. I didn't mind uneven parallel bars, but I was terribly afraid to jump over the vault, after I almost broke my neck once... As for skiing... You had to bring your own skis to school, then bring them back home, to walk to school wearing ski shoes and a thick jumper and to run on skies in a field behind the school until you almost dropped (it was timed). To do a bit of cross country skiing for pleasure was OK with me, but to be timed?.. Even in those sports where I was good and showed good results, Gennady Vladimirovich still only gave me "Bs" for some reason. In the 5th class I became class champion in high jumping. But even that didn't help. A "B" and that was it. You could pull your hair out, but even that wouldn't help. Then why even try to do your best?

And then I began to get sick, so that I would have to go to school as seldom as possible. After each time being sick with respiratory disease, you would get two weeks off P.E. lessons (because it was supposedly dangerous for your heart), and I managed to correct “two weeks” into “two months” on doctor’s letters. At the end of the day, I thought, the school books are quite easy, and I can learn it all myself at home. After that I'll do all the tests, and that's it. Why should I waste my time and, more importantly, my nerves? I wasn't faking, I was honestly sick: I would go outside in the evening in winter and stand for half an hour with my bare feet in the snow. Or eat icicles from the roof. After that I became such a
frequent visitor to our local polyclinic that every dog knew me there. When somebody is looking after you, as Carlsson Who Lived on the Roof rightly said, it is even pleasant to be sick: "You just lie there in bed..."

And that's what I was doing: staying in bed, on soft feather mattresses and pillows on top of the covered bed, under the radio which I was listening to if there was something interesting, reading books and sleeping a lot. Once a week I went to one of my classmates to catch up on homework. In such a situation Shurek and mum were more and more my home tutors, for separate subjects. Shurek was excellent at mathematics and mum at technical drawing and painting...

- Zhenya, what's your problem with P.E.? - our class teacher Tamara Petrovna asked me once, not knowing what mark to give me for the year, - Don't you like to run around a bit?
- Hypodynamia (lack of movement), Tamara Petrovna, is the plague of this century! There is nothing I can do...

Tamara Petrovna just stood with her mouth open. My classmates didn't even know such words at that age. So, she just wrote "free" under P.E. in my marks' list. And that's exactly how I felt - free. Liberated.

My sicknesses became more a less a joke in the class. "Good morning! Sit down. Leader, who is absent today? Kalashnikova, how come you're here?"

Amazingly, my absence didn't affect my school performance. But of course, it did affect my relations with my classmates (or to be more precise, the absence of such relations). I was never really sociable and lived a bit in a world of my own, but after that there were really not many common points left between me and the rest of the class. I had a couple of mates in the class, but only one true friend. A quiet, "16 stones" plump Alla Kolesnikova with the nickname "Skinny", who was impossible to shock and at the same time very sharp-tongued. We shared the front desk: because we figured out that teachers usually look at the back of the classroom when deciding whom they should call up, rather than right under their noses. And also because from the front desk we could easily see at whose name the teacher's finger stopped in the class list.

As I already said, my classmates felt that I was different. Yulya Gubareva, who reminded me of the jackal Tabaki from "The Jungle Book", secretly reported to our new class teacher who was who in our class (for some reasons many teachers like informers, they are useful to them): "And this is Zhenya Kalashnikova. She is only interested in Africa", - thus, look what kind of strange people exist in the world! But nobody intimidated me because of that, not even by bullying. People just kept their distance from me. For two reasons: first, because no bullying would ever have any effect on me, I am not the slightest affected by "peer pressure" and don't understand how anybody can be. If somebody came to me and told me that I should do one thing or another "because everybody else does it" I'd send them packing with a flea in their ear! Second, even if somebody would have tried to bully me, Alla was always around. She'd show her giant fist from behind her back and say: "Whoever annoys her, will have to deal with me". That was enough.

"They came together... Wave and stone,
Irina Malenko

Prose and verses, ice and fire
Are not so different from each other..." as these two. That was as if it were written about Alla and me.

But despite this, we were great mates. Alla was from a working class family, an only child, just like me. She was born near the Volga. I suspected that we wouldn't be together our whole lives because I had no doubt that I was going to study in Moscow, and then... Who knows what would happen "then", but I felt that an unusual life was awaiting me. Alla wasn't seeking an unusual life. She wanted to finish secondary school and become a nursery school teacher. She loved kids a lot.

Alla let me be myself and could listen very well. I was grateful to her for that. Did she really find interesting stories about the uprising led by the slave Tula in Curacao and how the campaign against illiteracy was taking place in Ethiopia? It's hard to believe, but she listened to me! And I did the same for her: she told me how much she liked Mikhail Boyarsky and how our class hooligan Zhora (the very same one, looking like an angel fan of knights' novels) once invited her for pancakes at his house. Naturally, nobody in our class was supposed to know this!

One more thing - we both adored our local theatre...

I already mentioned this theatre. It was 200 years old in 1977. We didn't miss a single premier. "Third Pathetique", "Money for Maria", "The Shore" and "Dog on Hay"... The theatre never ceased to amaze us. I remember how once we went there on New Year's Eve, for the first performance of "Boombarash": it was such a horrible frost that we had to run all the way to the bus that brought us to the theatre and back. We were so wrapped up that only our noses stuck out of the woollen shawls covering our winter hats. But even the cold wouldn't stop us. By the way, at that time people didn't freeze to death in the streets regularly every winter: not just because nobody was homeless, but also because the passers by cared. If somebody was drunk and fell into the snow by accident and fell asleep there, there was always a kind soul who would pull them out of the heap of snow and pull them by their coat collar all the way home...

"They came together. Waves and stones,
Or flame and ice, or verse and prose
Are not so different as were they".

From the poem "Eugene Onegin" by Alexander Pushkin (1799 - 1837). The poem is studied in depth in all Russian schools. Russian children are expected to learn many citations from it by heart.

Mikhail Boyarsky - is a Soviet actor and singer. He is best known and loved for the role of d'Artagnan in the film "d'Artagnan and Three Musketeers" (1978) and its sequels (1992 and 1993). He was also a popular singer of the 1980s.

"Bumbarash" - is the novel written by the Soviet writer Arkady Gaidar. In the novel upon which the play is based, a former Austrian prisoner of Civil War in Russia is returning to his home village, where everyone, including his beloved girlfriend, thought he is dead. The rule in the village is periodically changing between Whites, Reds and the bandits. Bumbarash is trying to survive in this chaos and return to his love.
My favourite actor in our local theatre was a comedian, ginger-haired and long-nosed Valery Arkadyevich Stepanov. He was brilliant in Shukshin’s “Characters”\textsuperscript{156}, Alla and my favourite play, where he played Andrey Yerin who secretly from his wife bought a microscope with his bonus. “You, hook-nosed miser” - his stage wife cried. That was quite an accurate description of my favourite actor’s looks... When I was about 11 and was in the theatre with mum and Deema, the poet, Deema saw Valery Arkadyevich in the parterre during the pause and said to me very loudly:

- Oh, look, Zhenya, there’s your idol!

Valery Arkadyevich heard this and looked around with curiosity: who’s there liked him so much. He saw me, smiled and winked with one eye. That’s how I still remember him. If you met him on the street, you would never think that he was an actor, he was so modest and quiet. But he changed completely once on stage. And some years later I discovered for myself that our “miser” was not only a comedian, but also a brilliant drama actor! How he played in Schiller’s “Intrigue and Love”!

Our theatre was and still is a sort of big family. There are some actors who joined it straight after acting school and remained there ever since. They even still celebrate birthdays of their deceased colleagues together... Even perestroika could not destroy it, possibly because we are provincials. In our town people still call each other “comrade” in the street. And if somebody by accident blurts out “Madam” or “Sir”, there is a loud, healthy laughter...

Alla was an image of steadiness. She is one of those who grow up exactly into such a Russian woman as in the poem: who can ”stop a galloping horse” - and would look at you with scorn, if you didn’t. And she also loved the peasant humour of Shukshin very much and when she heard his jokes, she laughed so beautifully, so contentiously, waving her hands and wiping tears off her eyes: “Oh, I can’t take it anymore! He just killed me!” - that it was a pleasure to look at her. She was an average pupil, but she could sew clothes very well and she helped me a lot in our sewing lessons (I was useless at it, no matter how I tried, I was like an elephant in the porcelain shop, despite the fact that both my granny and my mum are wonderful tailors). Alla and her mum made an extra income from sewing work gloves at home. Besides, her mother worked at a chemical plant. They lived next to a sausage factory and Alla told me how on the eve of some holidays the factory’s workers would throw sausages over the wall: for a price, of course. Alla had a rare ability for such a young age: to see through people. She would mock me about my sicknesses and sometime complained that she missed me at school. When I came back after the next cold, first of all she would ask me:

- Are you back for long this time, or what?

\textsuperscript{156} Vasily Shukshin (1929 - 1974) - Soviet actor, writer, screenwriter and film director. His heroes are village people, ordinary workers with peculiar characters, inquisitive and sharp-tongued. Some of his characters could be called eccentric, living in the world of their own. In his books Shukshin gave laconic and capacious description of Soviet village, his work is characterised by the deep knowledge of Russian language and the way of life.
When we were in the 8th grade, Leonid Brezhnev died. It was the first change of power in our lives. I was born and grew up under Brezhnev and even saw him once on the street of my home town and couldn’t really imagine what life would be like without him. His death brought up exactly this feeling: not so much sorrow, as curiosity. I was much under impression of what happened and even wrote a short poem that started like this:

“A hero of folk jokes is gone...” There were various criticisms of the deceased and others - very categorically, as only fifteen years old can do...

Yuri Andropov came to power. We knew very little about him and wanted to know at least a bit more than the official biography. So, my relatives used a source of information typical in such situations for the Soviet intelligentsia’s kitchen: "Voice of America". According to that voice, the picture was quite scary: an ex-KGB head who loved Persian rugs, pretending from time to time for the sake of his cause to be a "liberal" who would crack down on us all from the very first day. But what did we have to be afraid of if none of us was a dissident against his own country, none of us stole things from work or drank or missed days at work for no reason.

My first thought about Andropov at that time was that he was the same age as my granny. And that is why subconsciously I associated him with her. Granny, as I already said, was kind, quiet, endlessly patient and at the same time very strict and reserved, a person of high moral principles who never betrayed them, and up until this day she remains for me an example of positive human qualities.

From ordinary, daily memories of Andropov I remember that in the beginning we were a bit afraid of him, probably because we didn’t know what to expect. But that was a sort of fear like "if they are afraid of me, that means they respect me". A bit like Western books about Andropov that were published during his life. Being fifteen, I continued to write my childish poems, critical, typical for that age, including about him. Once, completely unexpectedly for me, I dreamt about Yuri Vladimirovich. In my dream he gave me an intelligent and sad look, smiled a bit and said, pointing his finger, "I know what you are writing about me!" It was the only time in my life that I dreamt about a politician. He was the only politician whose portrait I completely voluntarily hung up on my wall, during his lifetime...

One of the most memorable things of that time was how they caught people who weren't at work for any respectable reason - at the exits of the cinemas during working hours. Many of them were workers of various research institutes. The Soviet intelligentsia reacted to the early 80’s almost as if it was the beginning of a new 1937 as a "terrible infringement on human rights". But nobody shot or even imprisoned them, and we stopped trusting those foreign radio voices.

But even the intelligentsia, spoiled by the Soviet system who wouldn't have lasted a week in their jobs under capitalism with their attitude, could not refuse to admit the effectiveness of Andropov’s methods of struggle for working discipline: drunkards practically
disappeared from our streets. Our family knew this as no others did: the forest and river next to our house were the favourite place to "celebrate" payday for all local workers, who usually asked my granddad for a drinking glass at the end of each month. Now they stopped asking for a glass, to the great joy of my grandmother!

Another remarkable feature of daily life at that time was the fact that the grocery shops were open in the evenings till almost 11 pm, which was very handy for working women.

But my spoiled generation was upset about the continuous lack of TV and radio programs with foreign pop music, which had been off the air since the invasion of our troops into Afghanistan, under Brezhnev. Nobody explained to us the relation between the situation in Afghanistan and pop music. Those radio programs, of Victor Tatarsky and Vladimir Siverov, simply stopped. We didn't know and we couldn't have known or understood with our childish brains that there are far more horrible things in life than to go without disco music for dessert. Those things my generation would face later, under Gorbachev and Yeltsin.

I also remember Samantha Smith - a cute little American girl who basically paid with her life for her interest towards the Soviet Union and her honest desire to tell the truth about it to her own compatriots...

I remember the growing animosity of the West towards us: because Yuri Vladimirovich's government took a principled position in negotiations on nuclear disarmament and was even prepared to bring home our negotiating team if these negotiations led to nothing. The West’s animosity was in such sharp contrast with what followed during Gorbachev's "peacemaking" that even in the very beginning of it, I, still a carefree twenty year-old student, already felt that there was something deeply wrong. It's not rocket science to understand that the only way to make friends with your enemies so quickly was to give them everything they asked for. Even though that was offered to us under the name of "new thinking", one doesn't need any special political wisdom in order to follow all the requirements of his opponent. Gorby's "peacemaking" is of the same type as that of those black market dealers hanging around hotels who would beg foreign tourists: "Peace, friendship... chewing gum?"

Speaking about black market dealers selling their goods in the side streets (goods that were far from being first necessities!), under Andropov they practically disappeared from sight. While in the last years of Brezhnev they had already almost stopped hiding, under Chernenko and Gorby they openly and annoyingly offered their stuff on the street.

157 Samantha Reed Smith (1972-1985) was an American schoolgirl and child actress from the US, who became famous in the Cold War-era United States and Soviet Union. In 1982, Smith wrote a letter to the newly appointed Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Yuri Andropov, and received a personal reply which included a personal invitation to visit the Soviet Union, which she accepted. Smith attracted extensive media attention in both countries as a "Goodwill Ambassador", and became known as "America's Youngest Ambassador". Samantha wrote a book and co-starred in a television series, before her death at the age of 13 in the Bar Harbor Airlines Flight 1808 plane crash.
corners..."Pity Andropov isn't there for you!" - I said to one of them angrily.

Yuri Vladimirovich won our hearts when he began fighting against corruption. Even the through and through representatives of the liberal intelligentsia forgave him for the "closedness" of the country. "First of all we have to sort out our own country, and then we can possibly open our doors for guests", - men used to say. After the beginning of this fighting "for discipline from above, not from below", as poetess Yekaterina Shevelyova expressed it, no foreign radio voices could change our opinion about him. And precisely because he started this fight not from below, but from above, nobody will ever make our people believe that his death was natural and that nobody "helped" him to pass over to another world (among those whose interests and wallets he began to touch so decisively). People will always believe that he fell victim of a conspiracy - because of how fast, literally in front of our eyes he burnt out like a meteor in the sky.

When Yuri Vladimirovich became ill and disappeared from TV screens, for the first time in my life I began to think seriously about what was going on: not just with him, but with our country in general. My attitude towards him changed. Maximalist youth cynicism of the Brezhnev era was finally changed to trust. But it was already too late...

We weren't officially informed about his illness, and that increased rumors and the belief in the existence of a conspiracy. One sentence is engraved in my memory from his speech at one or another plenum which was read out for him, because he was already unable to attend: "Due to temporary reasons..."

I saw the death of Yuri Vladimirovich as a tragedy, an injustice, something that could have been avoided; and a result of a conspiracy by some evil forces. I began writing poetry again, composing a whole series of verses dedicated to his death. And a month after his burial the first congress of the UPLA took place...

You won't find anything about this party in Wikipedia or in history books. It consisted of just two people. Alla and I. I was the Secretary General, Alla - my vice-secretary.

UPLA meant United Party of Loyal Andropovists.

The first congress of UPLA took place (yes, I do realize how funny it sounds!) in our school's bathroom. After the lessons, when there was nobody left there. At the time we were in the 9th class, and even though the times have already changed, I doubt that our teachers would have approved the creation of another party at that time, even though our party wasn't against the Soviet state in any way. It's just that the CPSU at that time stood for everything that Yuri Vladimirovich fought so tirelessly against...

This was my very first political step in life. At the age when other girls think about how to fight acne, try to use lipstick for the first time and try to find out whether "he" loves them or not with the help of daisies, I and Alla were thinking about the future of socialism. We tried to determine for ourselves how we could continue to fight for the same cause to which our hero had dedicated his life...
...After school I came home, where a plate of hot buckwheat porridge was waiting for me every day. I changed clothes (I hated sitting at home in my school uniform) and began to eat and to read something. The greatest part of the end of the day was spent reading (that could also be done outside, depending on the weather). In the evening, after eating rice soup and baked potatoes, I began to do my homework. Shurek and Mum would come from work and tell their stories. After dinner the TV was turned on. We watched some film and "Vremya" ("Time"), the daily news program: how the workers of this or that a factory fulfilled their plan before the date due (not about how many heads Chechen bandits have cut off today and how many children were raped by maniacs!). At about eleven o'clock we went to bed.

Almost every day was like that. Day in, day out, every week, every month, every year... Many years in a row. Sometimes it seemed as if nothing was happening at all. It was even a bit boring. And that's why I was longing to go to Africa so much: because there weren't any revolutionaries around me, because there was no need for revolutions!

From time to time they would say on the radio that, in accordance with numerous demands of the working people, for the next school year all schoolbooks for children would be free. Or that paid maternity leave would be extended. Or that prices for some consumer goods would go down. Things like that. In a word, we became far too spoiled!

But now, when there is no Soviet Union anymore, life has become so "interesting" that you finally realise the wisdom of the old saying that "happiness is the absence of troubles".

"Happiness - it's when I and my husband simply went to the market together on Saturdays," says my friend Alla today. Her husband lost his job in the "golden" Yeltsin's years and he hung himself when their baby son was just three months old...

...How difficult it is to squeeze the whole ten years of your life into just few pages, years that were full of so many different events...

For some reason I remember very clearly the New Year's Eve of 1979: at the brink of a new decade. I remember it far better than the infamous "millennium". For the first time in my life I was conscious of the change of the decade (in 1969 I was too young to remember anything). About ten minutes before New Year I went out to the veranda, looked at the red lights of the circus building shining far behind the river and thought: "What will the 1980's be like?" For some reason I felt uneasy in my heart, even though there were no obvious reasons for that. No one could have predicted what would happen with our country by the end of that new decade. You wouldn't think it was a bad omen that there were temporarily no chocolate bonbons in the shops. Usually we hung them on the New Year's tree, but that year we had to do without. Probably they were stocking up for the Olympic Games in Moscow. Well, chocolate bonbons aren't bread or milk they aren't a prime necessity. Today when the so-called loud-mouthed "democrats" describe the "horrors of Soviet life", "empty shelves" and "shortages", I feel as if I had lived in a different country than they had! Yes, there were "shortages": not enough Persian rugs, crystal, foreign things. Yes, it was difficult to get an apartment - but
families would get them absolutely free, ready to move in, even with free wallpaper and gas ovens and baths. And the rent was so miniscule that if you told about it to Westerners, they would simply refuse to believe you. They don’t believe in human goodness either, poor souls. "The real value of a population’s income is guaranteed by the stability of state retail prices for the main consumer products and lowering of prices for some types of goods, along with creation of the necessary conditions and stockpiling of the trade’s resources. The index of the state retail prices in the USSR in 1974 was 99.3% in relation to 1965. For a long period of time payments for housing have not gone up (since 1928), as well as the prices for transport and water, gas and electricity. In the budget of the families of workers and civil servants, the payment for housing is on average about 1%, together with other expenses (gas, water, electricity, telephone) - approximately 4%, at a time when in the developed industrial capitalist countries working people spend on average at least 1/3 of their income on housing, and prices have the tendency to rise".\textsuperscript{158}

Do I have to add anything to that? And that isn’t just words; unfortunately, nowadays we ourselves have the opportunity to compare…

Yes, I do remember the queues. They weren’t deadly. And I only saw empty shelves for the first time in my life \textit{in Gorbachev’s time}: just then and only vodka and soap were rationed for the first time in my life. In my childhood nobody was hungry, there was plenty of food, and it was so cheap that people often bought more than they needed and then either threw away some of it or hoarded it (a habit of our grandmothers who have lived through the war; who could blame them for that?). Yes, there were just two or three different kinds of cheeses or sausages in the shops at the same time, not thirty. But what is better: two-three kinds of something that is within everybody’s means or today's “full shelves” where smoked salmon and caviar are rotting, and which are full only because people can't afford to eat properly? Dear “democrats”, did you try to sell all these things for Soviet prices? Try and we'll see how long your “abundance” will last!

It was no secret for anybody that shortages appeared because the shop workers hid goods and re-sold them to their friends or to people whom they needed or were selling them “from the back door” at double or triple the price. They don't like to remember this nowadays because they try to prove that shortages were caused by insufficient production under socialism. Well, one can never produce enough for all the thieves and crooks in the country! At the beginning of perestroika, people tried to convince us that such behavior is supposedly caused by the “low wages of the sales personnel”. Are they trying to say that if you give a pay raise to a thief, he'll stop stealing? The “apostles of perestroika” were using the same sort of argument about the doctors: "If they were paid as much as in the West, then they would perform medical miracles".

\textsuperscript{158} Great Soviet Encyclopedia. There were three editions of GSE. The third edition was translated into English and published in the USA in 1973-1982 by "Macmillan Publishers Ltd".
Irina Malenko

So, are they treating patients any better now, when we have practically no free of charge medical care left, and "humanitarian" ego-boosting little journalists regularly beg "benefactors" for money for ordinary children’s medical operations: otherwise these children would be doomed? And the person who suggested it, has he been to the dilapidated Irish children's hospital, known as the best in the country, where from time to time they amputate healthy organs of sick children, “by mistake”? And has he seen how the Cuban doctors treat patients: with all their modest socialist salary and despite lack of medicines because of the years long criminal US blockade?

By the way, I personally never worried about sausages. The only thing for which I was prepared to queue, were bananas. They were really a rarity, and we adored them so much that when we got the chance, we were ready to buy at least five kilograms at once. But if I were given a chance to choose between the opportunity to eat bananas every day and free medical treatment, free education for everybody and lack of serious crime in the country, I think it is pretty clear what my choice would be. They can stick their bananas up their***. And make sure they don't forget to take their "Pepsi Cola" with them.

...In the spring of 1981 when I was fourteen, I joined the Komsomol. 159

When we became pioneers, we were accepted as a group, but to become a Komsomol member was an individual matter. And contrary to what they say about it now, not everybody was accepted. For example, Zhora wasn't. First of all, you were accepted as a candidate for Komsomol membership at school level, then you had to go to your district Komsomol committee for an individual chat. I was accepted as a member in March 1981 - right at that time when somewhere in far off Northern Ireland Bobby Sands began his deadly hunger strike...

I was five when Bloody Sunday happened in Derry. Northern Ireland, or "Ulster" as they called it in our news (they didn't know all the sensitivities of the local terminology: only Protestant settlers call this area "Ulster") was imprinted in my sub-consciousness from early childhood as one of the gloomiest places on our planet. From the news on TV and political programs, such as "International Panorama" I remember sounds of shooting, people running, screaming and throwing bottles with an inflammable mixture (we never called them "Molotov cocktails") at the military vans... I remember how I tried to understand what was happening there and in Ireland in general. In my childhood I read such Irish books as

159 Komsomol (the Communist Union of Youth), was the political youth organisation in the USSR. The youngest people eligible for Komsomol were fourteen years old, the older limit of age for ordinary personnel being 28. History of Komsomol is closely connected with history of the revolutionary struggle of the working class and all Soviet people for building their Communist state. Komsomol members fought on the front line during Civil and Great Patriotic Wars, raised the country from the ruins after the war, enthusiastically participated in building new cities and railways, set the best example to the younger generation of Pioneers. The movement had great influence on all Soviet youth during early years of the USSR with overall count of 36 million members by the late 80's.
Eilis Dillon's "Island of Horses" and Walter Mackin's "Flight of the Doves" in Russian translation. Soviet translations were especially good also because they had forewords where the context of a book was explained with references to the country’s historic background, as well as the things of symbolic meaning which one could only know if one knew that history. It was from such forewords that for the first time I found out about Celtic chieftains, Irish monks, the crimes of Cromwell’s troops, the Great Famine and emigration, about such Irish folk songs as "Four Green Fields". And about the IRA...

They always named Bobby Sands in our newspapers, on the radio and on TV with his full name: Robert. That’s because in our culture it was seen as unacceptable infantilism for a grown up man to be called by his short name. That’s why President Carter, for instance, for us was also always James and not Jimmy. For some reason Robert Sands’ name in my memory was linked with church and priests; probably because they said so often that he was a Catholic. For us any sort of church was something pre-historical, something for dinosaurs.

At school we collected signatures on petitions with the demand to the British authorities to accept the demands of the Irish political prisoners. Funny how today the very same people who so easily allowed a member of their own Parliament to die a horrific death from hunger, pretend to be such defenders of human rights somewhere in Zimbabwe or Chechnya...

There was much (and regular) reporting about "Ulster" in the Soviet newspapers, on TV and on the radio. At that time we still had our own correspondents almost everywhere, not just simply translators and re-typists from BBC. Of course, for us the IRA were freedom fighters, modern revolutionaries. If it wasn’t for their religious limitations, they’d be priceless. That is when I heard the name “Sinn Fein” for the first time.

Could I ever imagine that I would ever end up in Ireland, that life in "Ulster" would become more or less bearable, but in my own country unemployment and misery would come, along with the closing down of factories, dilapidation of buildings, evictions for those who could no longer afford to pay for a roof over their heads, humiliation of women, ethnic conflicts, drugs - and all in all, a total disrespect for the human being, along with fear of tomorrow...? And that I would meet face to face with people who knew Bobby personally and were even friends with him? As a Soviet joke says, "don’t you dare to raise your hand at him, he saw Lenin himself alive!"\(^{160}\)

And in my memory Bobby Sands will always be in some way interlinked with the Komsomol, no matter if the Irish like it or not...

\(^{160}\) Soviet anecdote: Husband comes home and finds his wife with the lover. He is going to deal with him. "Don't you dare touch him" - wife shouts - "he saw Lenin himself alive!".
Irina Malenko

(apart from singer Kobzon and Stalin, but they didn't write much about Stalin in our books in those days). Faina Iosifovna corrected us: "Not Osipovna, but losifovna!" She was a small, round black eyed woman with eyes like black currants, reminding me of a bird with a funny sharp look. There were rumors in our school that her brother used to be married to our principal but left her, and that's why the principal didn't like Faina losifovna. But we loved her, and how! Even those who didn't like French. She was a master at entertaining: if there was any free time left during the lesson, she played various games with us. For example, "the silencer": everyone had to keep quiet, and whoever spoke or laughed first would lose. We did our very best to keep quiet, and she sat by the window and looked outside with dreamy eyes, lightly touching her shawl wrapped around her neck and then suddenly began to sing in a high, squeaky voice:

- You are just the same as you used to be,
  My steppe eagle, brave Cossack...
  You can't imagine how loud the whole class burst out laughing!
  And how long we argued after that about which of us laughed as first...

  When we started the 7th class, the principal finally "forced" Faina losifovna into retirement. (I met her later a couple of times; she started working in a local library.) Our feelings about her were best expressed by Alla's words: "Such a great peasant woman she is!" Nobody thought for any reason that this "peasant woman" was Jewish, even though she didn't hide it. But about my other favorite teacher, Emilia Veniaminovna, that was the first thing that they thought in our class... Interesting, when somebody is close to your spirit, people don't even think about their ethnic origin, but if somebody is different from the rest, people somehow seek a reason for this difference exactly in their origin...

  Emilia Veniaminovna taught us Russian language and literature. She was a real representative of the Soviet intelligentsia, in the best meaning of the word, intellectually refined and high-spirited. She should really have taught somewhere at a university, not at a secondary school: students would value her a lot more there. Many of us were simply "not grown up enough for her music". I personally was, and I felt good during her lessons and found them interesting. But the worst pupils in our class, the ones who sat at the back, found her to too "out of this world". Emilia Veniaminovna was a born and bred Odessa woman. With eyes shining with excitement she told us about Pushkin, and those at the back of the classroom yawned openly. And then something really out of order happened: one of the boys openly called her a Jew. "Why are Jews teaching us Russian language nowadays?"

  The silliest thing was that this boy himself was of Jewish origin. I don't know if he knew it himself, but it was enough for him to take a look at himself in the mirror. And his girlfriend, also in our class, who was much taller than he was and unlike him, was an excellent pupil, was of Jewish origin too.

  Emilia Veniaminovna didn't say anything back to him; she was too well mannered for that. She didn't even complain to anybody. But I couldn't stand it:
- Well, what can we do, Oleg, if some Russians don't know how to write their own language properly!

Later on I got to know Emilia Veniaminovna a lot better. I was corresponding with her daughter, my namesake, who was a year older than me and lived with her granny in Odessa. And Emilia Veniaminovna's husband, Yakov Mikhailovich, became my private French tutor. By that time instead of Faina Iosifovna we had another French teacher, one for whom German was her main language, and I was afraid that my knowledge of French with such teacher would be insufficient to pass entrance exams into university. Yakov Mikhailovich taught French at the Pedagogical Institute in our town, and Mum arranged through Emilia Veniaminovna for him to give me some private lessons at their home. I had never before seen the ordinary life of my teachers, and it was interesting and a bit strange to see Emilia Veniaminovna wearing an apron in the kitchen. And it was also interesting to see how Jews live: just like us or do they have any specific traditions (at that time I already decided to become an ethnologist)? I didn't notice anything different, except that Emilia Veniaminovna often made stuffed fish for dinner and that she was so polite with Yakov Mikhailovich, as if he was a total stranger. Yakov Mikhailovich was a chain smoker; Emilia Veniaminovna would cough delicately into her little fist and then would say to him something like:

- Yasha, you smoke so much...Could you perhaps be so kind as to smoke outside, if it would not disturb you too much, of course? Thank you so much!

I was terribly afraid of Yakov Mikhailovich and often made mistakes just because of that fear. He seemed so strict to me! I really had to force myself to attend those lessons. But at least he really did prepare me well, and I passed the entrance exam in Moscow brilliantly!

In the 9th class we got a new mathematics teacher in place of the one who died: Galina Afanasyevna. She was a very young woman, just 6 years older than we were, but already divorced. She tried to establish herself on an equal footing with us from the very beginning: a big mistake. A teacher should always keep some distance from her pupils, if they aren't adults yet. But Galina Afanasyevna told us about her ex-husband (at that time all girls who were future teachers were keen to marry boys who were future army officers) whom she mockingly called a "shaved cactus". She called me and Alla "K-girls" (because our surnames started with a "K"). After that it was somehow hard to take her seriously. During her lessons pupils could simply refuse to go to the blackboard when they were asked, and she, instead of disciplining them, gave up and always called the same pupils up to the board. That also didn't add to her authority in our class.

When we were already doing our final exams, in the exam for algebra and the basics of analysis panic began when one of the problems appeared so difficult that even the teachers weren't sure how to solve it. Galina Afanasyevna, all red-faced, ran out of the class. Some of our parents already gathered outside, including my Shurek. One of the mothers was a mathematics teacher herself. They all went into a circle and tried to solve that problem together. Galina Afanasyevna attempted to join them to help.
- Girl, and what are you doing here? - said Shurek to her, because he had never seen her before and mistook her for one of the schoolgirls...

We had exams twice during our school life: in the 8th class and the final ones in the 10th. After the 8th we had algebra and Russian language, orally and in writing (four exams in total). The final exams were seven: an essay, Russian literature, algebra, physics, chemistry, history and social science and foreign language.

When I later saw how in Ireland (in the North) they torture children by forcing them to “define their future” at the age of eleven, when they had to pass exams that would define the sort of school (grammar, technical or secondary) in which they would continue their education, I was just shocked. Considering that the first three years of primary schools they basically don’t teach them anything: they play with toys, blow bubbles and almost still walk with dummies in their mouths. Of course, it is clear why: why would a capitalist state spend money on a proper education for the children of some workers or even worse, of the unemployed? If you could only hear how passionately the parents of privileged background defend this shameful system! Just like Uef in the film "Kindza-dza!": "When there is no color differentiation of pants in the society, life has no goal, and when there is no goal..."

By the way, any of us could just continue education at the same school after the 8th year exams: to go to a professional school or technical college was fully voluntary, no matter what your results were. But even there the pupils continued to study the same curriculum as the rest of us - in addition to their professional skills.

I passed all my seven final exams with excellent marks (even though my chemistry exam was really tough). Probably because there was no pressure on me; I wasn’t going to get the golden medal anyway. Because I had a “B” for BMT (Basic Military Training)161. “For what?” - they asked me in Moscow during my entrance exams...

At the BMT lessons they taught us how to shoot; I was a convinced pacifist at that time and thought that the danger of war was a bit overblown. I didn’t think back then that if the danger of war wasn’t as big then as it is now, that’s precisely because of what they taught us at such lessons. And thanks to the people who wrote our schoolbooks for this subject...

...And then the final party came: my happiest day at school after becoming a Pioneer! Our parents performed magic making refreshments for us from early morning on. The party started after the sun went down.

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161 Soviet secondary school curriculum included the subject called Basic Military Training. Soviet Union suffered greatly in two bloody wars that were inflicted on the country by the West, therefore it is understandable that the Soviet government used to put the emphasis on some basic military training and tried to teach ordinary people how to defend themselves in case of an attack. The subject teacher had a lower military rank. At most lessons students had lectures on different kinds of modern warfare (chemical, biological, nuclear). Some lessons included practical studies, like assembling and dismantling Kalashnikov machine guns, or how to wear a gas masque.
We didn't realize that with this sun going down our childhood was gone forever as well. It was the end of June. At first we listened to the official speeches, then we received our diplomas and then began eating and dancing. We were even allowed one glass of champagne each, as a token of being accepted as almost adults. Of course, I didn't dance, even though I loved dancing at home. Our girls were so beautiful in specially made (often home-made) dresses for the occasion. Many had a perm or put lipstick on for the first time in their lives, even though we were already seventeen. But that didn't surprise anybody: we would be more surprised if somebody dared to come to school like this when we were still having lessons! (In my mum's childhood the principal would send them straight to the bathroom to wash it off!)

Emilia Veniaminovna said good-bye not only to us, but to the whole school and to our town as well: she was moving back to Odessa for good, because her elderly mother was very ill... That is why she was doubly sad. I promised to write to her. There were also some other teachers who came to our party, some of them hadn't taught us for several years already.

- And you, Zhenya, what did you decide to become? - our geography teacher asked me.
- I'll go to study at the history faculty, - I said honestly.
- Well, thank god for that, because I remember you fantasised about ethnology or something! - she responded.

She was wrong if she thought that I "became wiser": I just read that you can become an ethnologist after graduating in History. Most of all, to be honest, I would have loved to study at the Asia and Institute of Africa of Moscow State University, but even in the brochure for candidate students it was written that they accept "mainly males, mainly Moscow residents, from the Communist party and Komsomol activists", and you needed a reference letter from the regional Komsomol committee where, of course, nobody knew me. For me this was almost a personal drama. I didn't stand a chance. I wasn't a Muscovite or a male. And who would have given me such a reference if I was simply a good pupil, not pushing myself into Komsomol activity? By my time attitude towards the party and Komsomol activists had significantly changed and can best be expressed by an old joke about general meeting in a collective farm:

- For her great results in working on the farm we present comrade Ivanova with a calf!
  Applause.
- For her great results in working in the fields we present comrade Petrova with a bag of grain!
  Applause.
- For her great political work we present comrade Sidorova with the full fifty five volumes of Lenin's works!
  Laughter, applause, shouting:
  - Yeah, that's just what the b*** deserves!

What is expressed here is not an attitude towards the works of Lenin, which few would manage to read in full, but the common attitude towards the "party activists": We saw with our own eyes that usually it was
those who were incapable of anything but smooth talking, they were always aiming to become such activists. Almost the same type of people who become sales assistants, only more ambitious. We saw and felt their insincerity when they made their speeches at school and that pushed us away from the idea of activism: god forbid, my friends would think that I was like one of those ones, a cork fitted for every bottle! And the more insincere a person was, the more passionate speeches he or she made, as a rule. Just like the new Sinn Fein members in Ireland who joined when membership became safe and could even bring some personal dividends...

That doesn't mean, of course, that we were against the Soviet system: we just wanted to do real things, not to waste time on loud words. For some reason we were certain that those who looked after things would not allow such people to rise to the very top. I don't know where this surety came from. Probably because we trusted our authorities. Because even though our government at that time made a whole lot of speeches, they were also doing a lot of real things for the people. We didn't listen to the speeches. We turned off the radio, made jokes about the Politburo, but had no animosity towards the authorities. (I think it is far worse when people don't even have any jokes left to tell, as about Yeltsin. On the one hand, because people became so tortured by life, on the other - because what joke can you make about a man who was far worse than any joke in real life?)

Sometime, though, I felt hurt: when I felt that I wasn't fully trusted. As, for example, in this case with the Asia and Institute of Africa entrance terms. If you are not a man and not a Muscovite, that doesn't mean that you are less devoted to the ideas of Marxism-Leninism. And among Moscow men with great reference letters there was also enough human garbage. I met some such people later on in the Institute of Africa: Vasya, a Muscovite, graduated from the IAAS (Institute of Asian and African Studies), fluent in Portuguese, who had worked in Angola and Mozambique and invited me to a barbeque at his summer cottage. Vasya despised Africans, didn't like his work and dreamt of leaving it "for a more decent place". While I could only dream about his work!

But the matter was, most probably, not the fact that you "weren't trusted", but the fact that people who were sincerely devoted to ideals were in fact no longer required. What for me would have been a job of my life, where I would do my very best to honourably represent my country and to carry its flag high, not caring about the material reward, for them was simply a cosy place for their own children and grandchildren...

But all of this wasn't in the open: almost as the Dutch racism that you feel but can't prove in court. And that was even more hurtful...

At the same time, you can't solve problems like that with Gorbachev's so-called "glasnost". First, there is a saying that you can't feed a nightingale with fables; second, his "Glasnost" was the glasnost of an impotent. I'll explain: in Soviet time newspapers didn't write about every silly thing (and that was even better: why should we normal people know about some criminal don being killed by some other mobster? Or to read: "church floor collapsed in Canada hurting thirty nine people". So what?), but if some real problem was described in the media, no doubt,
serious measures would be taken, and the culprits would be punished.

Gorbachev's "glasnost" simply turned our media into tabloids of the Western style: for example, there you can read almost every day about the horrors of sex slavery in their own countries, but nobody moves a finger to really fight it: they just say their ritual "oh!" and "ah!" over these sleazy facts and go home, until the next article. To come to a clear conclusion is the biggest taboo of any Western-style journalist. And god forbid they would call for something: that "would disturb the balance and objectivity"...

Our Soviet journalists - I mean, the proper ones, of course! - had a conscience, had a citizen's position, not like that of some amoeba (that's a microscopic protozoan which perpetually changes its form) whose "objectivity" reminding me of Trotsky's position on the Treaty of Brest: "No peace and no war, and disband the army..."162 Leaving any sort of evil untouched and unpunished. This "objectivity" also reminds me of a scene from my favourite book by Kir Bulychev:

"Shame on you! -Alisa said, - In front of you two are big men carrying a boy away, and you are trying to hide this crime out of fear.
- I didn't want to hide, but they asked me to. Maybe they have the right to carry boys away?"163

... The graduation party continued... When it was over - at 3 am - the whole class walked to a local park, through the whole town. This park was open that whole night especially for people who finished secondary school, and all the attractions were open for us for free! We wandered around till dawn, and I didn't see a single seventeen year old who was drunk or fighting with anybody, not to mention even worse things. Everybody was cheerful and happy. Because we, the school kids of the early 1980's, weren't yet accustomed to "general human values" to such an extent that we couldn't imagine enjoying ourselves without drinking, having sex and beating each other up.

I and Alla went to the Big Wheel, and when our cabin at the very top began to creak and leaned to one side because of her weight, I admit I got a bit frightened and regretted that I had chosen to go there with her. But it was safe. In Soviet times they checked on the safety of attractions regularly. We were as flying over the whole town. On one side the sky was still black, but on the other the sun was already rising relentlessly.

That is how I remember the last day of my childhood. My whole life was ahead of me, full of miracles, as I was certain. All ways were open for me.

...Why ethnography? Interest in different nations - not just African ones! - a desire to learn more about them and general internationalist

162 In 1918 Leo Trotsky pushed forward a new slogan: "No peace and no war, and disband the army". In other words - refusal to sign the Brest - Litovsk Treaty (and thus the end of hostilities) and the disbanding of the collapsing army. By delaying the signing of the treaty, Trotsky hoped that Germany would move its forces to the West and would not attack Russia.

163 Kir Kulychev, One hundred years ahead.
feelings grew in me in my final school years. Maybe because there were so few people of different ethnic groups in our town.

- Guys, why don’t you join one of our after-school clubs? - Tamara Petrovna asked us once. I thought for a while, looked at the list of the clubs and decided to join CIF (Club of International Friendship). I was very surprised to discover that the only people who came to the meeting were myself and the teacher who lead this club.

- Zhenya, don’t get upset! The guys will join us later, - Yekaterina Aleksandrovna said to me in an apologetic tone. - For now, here is a letter for you that came to our school. Would you write to this girl, please?

The girl who wrote that letter was called Alina and she was from Minsk. The letter was addressed “to a girl, pupil of the 7th class of the secondary school No 5 of the town...” and she wrote about herself, about her family, her hobbies and her city...

I became so interested in writing letters that I had already decided to use her way of getting pen pals and began to write to schools in other cities myself. And soon I set myself a goal: to find pen pals in all union republics and all autonomous republics of our great and multi-ethnic country. Just TV concerts of the Day of Formation of the USSR, which I never missed, and the broadcasts of the “Creative work of the peoples of USSR” were not enough for me: I really wanted to find out how the youth of my country lives, how my age mates breathe in its different parts. I wanted to learn a few, even the simplest words in the languages of all peoples of my country, up to the Nogai164 and Selkup165.

I hung a large map of the USSR on the wall over my bed, crossing out already “covered” regions. At home I still keep an album with pictures of all my pen pals - a collective portrait of my country! - and a large collection of letters that barely fits into a suitcase. At that time an envelope cost just a few kopecks, about the same as price of a pie with jam, and we schoolgirls didn’t even think about its price. This price, by the way, was the same for posting anywhere within the country, regardless of the distance, and a letter even reached Chukotka in five days. Corresponding was almost a freebee. Nowadays our people cannot send letters as often as they like even to relatives, they even stopped sending birthday cards to each other, never mind parcels: because it is far beyond their price range!...

If we don’t take into account short letters of the sort “I have nothing to write about, but please write me soon!” (indeed there were some such letters too), a lot can be picked up from my collection about life in the 1980s in the USSR. That is what I explained to excessively zealous Little Tamara, who was always trying to throw them away, to clear a shelf in her storage room: “It is a historical source!” Of course,

164 The Nogai people are a Turkic ethnic group in Southern Russia: northern Dagestan and Stavropol region, as well as in Karachay-Cherkessia and the Astrakhan Oblast. They speak the Nogai language.

165 The Selkup are a people in Siberia, Russia. They speak the Selkup language, which belongs to the Samoyedic languages of the Uralic language family. There are only 3 villages where the Selkup people live.
everybody looks at any source for something that confirms his or her vision of the world. For example, today’s "democrats" would have grasped a letter from Eliza Chen from Tajikistan, who would say how “Tajiks tease us” (Koreans) by calling us “The sinking of Japan”, to support their thesis that the USSR was a “prison of peoples”. Although in reality, it was just an ordinary way to tease children, based on their appearance. After all, they tease ginger-haired people, for example: "Freckled boy, red-haired, red-haired, with a spade killed his grandparents".

I had girlfriends in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR - Chechens, Ingushs and Russians. They studied in the same class, went to the movies together, spent vacation in the same Pioneer Camps. A Chechen girl, Fatima, my age, who dreamt about becoming a journalist, wrote a short article about me in their local newspaper - under the heading "We are internationalists" (!). To my embarrassment, she described there how wonderful I am. And on the reverse side of this newspaper that she sent me was very remarkable article - In the light of what Chechnya now has become, about a 10 years old boy who brought a penknife to school. It was such an extraordinary case back then that the whole school was turned upside down. The boy was almost expelled from school. A penknife! Nobody could even think back then about submachine guns and bombs! This was in 1983... How could we imagine in that time that there would be a war in Chechnya?

I was surprised to find out that in the Dagestan villages girls would take the physical education classes... in long skirts and headscarves (but I did not burn with desire to ban this, like some of those modern "tolerant" Europeans!). My friend Sevil from Azerbaijan sent me boxes of fresh fruit. And even with Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians I would find a common language. Their hearts would usually melt as soon you took an interest in their culture and language, and I could never understand why Russians who live in those republics cannot show such an interest, to make them happy. Is it difficult, or what? One of the Estonians, Anne from the island of Saaremaa, once visited Moscow with her class and could not stop wondering: “I say, Russians in Moscow are such good people!” Some of my friends were not only schoolgirls; for example, a Latvian woman Olita was a single mother, fifteen years older than me!

And what nice girls we had in Central Asia! For example, Maral from Turkmenistan, who sent me their favorite treat: dried melon. We became such good friends that she wrote to me even when we were both already married - until our correspondence was broken by the policies of Turkmenbashı. Maral had ten brothers and sisters. After finishing school she trained as a dental nurse. But she never had an opportunity to work in her specialty: in independent Turkmenistan they did not like it when a woman worked... Jamila from Uzbekistan was secretly in love with a local

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166 The line from the song from the late Soviet animation "Red haired, Red haired, Freckly face" (1971) in which children tease a boy until the sun gets fed up and makes everyone red haired and freckled. The catchy song quickly became popular.
German and asked my advice on this matter (as if I had some experience to give her any advice!)

And what about Marina from Tuapse, who wrote amazing stories about vampires and ghosts, and assured me that she was a witch herself! Marina was Czech - It turns out, in the North Caucasus we even have whole Czech villages, since the epoch of Catherine the Great. And Tanya from Kiev was personally acquainted with Dean Reed himself! And girls from the Indigenous Peoples of the North: Nenets, Yakut, Evenk, Nanai, Chukcha, Koryak, and even Nivkh!

But in spite of all this diversity, life was always similar everywhere around the country: quiet, slow as the Volga River, without fear for the future.

The only person who probably quietly hated me because of my correspondence was our postal worker, Aunt Lida. She wore a huge mailbag over her shoulder, she didn’t have a bike, she just walked in all weather, in winter and summer. To give you an example of how I overloaded the poor woman, I sometimes got ten or fifteen letters a day!

A Soviet postman was overloaded in any case: most of the families had subscriptions to three to four newspapers and some magazines as well, for the whole year, and one and the same postman delivered all of them. Our people were called the most well read nation in the world, and not for nothing. I myself in our family received by mail the magazines “Young Naturalist”, “Pioneer”, “Camp Fire”, newspaper “Pioneer Truth”, magazines “Korea Today” and “Asia and Africa today”! An annual subscription for the most expensive newspaper, “Pravda”, that came out seven days a week, cost about eight roubles. All the rest: our favorite “Trud”, “Soviet Culture”, “Izvestia”, “Soviet sport”, were even cheaper. This price included the cost of delivery.

The subscription for the following year usually began in September at work places, but one could also subscribe at a local post office. Each year there was an awful excitement about it, because subscriptions for some of the magazines that were in special demand were limited. This is what Serguei Kara-Murza\textsuperscript{167} writes about it: “The result of the autistic way of thinking was also that the intellectual’s imagination created an image of the freedom that would come as soon as the “totalitarian” Soviet system was broken. They didn’t want to hear the warnings of possible troubles in case of such a break-up. Meanwhile, any ordinary intellectual knows that any freedom is possible only if there is a number of “un-freedoms”. Absolute freedom does not exist; in any society a person is limited to structures and rules: they are just different in different cultures. But these questions did not arise: the intelligentsia literally dreamed about the freedom of the worm, which is not limited by any skeleton... We remember that in 1988 most of the intellectuals considered “the removal

\textsuperscript{167} Sergey Kara-Murza (born 1939) is a Soviet chemist, historian, political philosopher and sociologist. He became known for his anti-Globalization, anti-liberal and anti-Western views and he has sharply criticised the Russian economic reforms of 1990's. However, S. Kara-Murza also rejects traditional Marxist ideology.
of limits on subscriptions" as an act of freedom, as the most important event of the year. An epoch-making significance was attached to this small act. What did the average intellectual get as a result? I will remind the young ones: besides cheap prices in the USSR there were also limits on subscriptions to newspapers and magazines, quotas were given to enterprises, sometimes people drew lots for them. For the intelligentsia, this was a symbol of totalitarian oppression. They just did not want to see: the urge to sign for newspapers and magazines was itself a product of Soviet "totalitarianism". And the average cultured family subscribed to 3-4 newspapers and 2-3 heavy magazines - there is nothing like this in the free West... "Literary Gazette" had a circulation of 5 million copies! After killing this "totalitarianism", the intelligentsia entrusted the new regime with imposing such limits on subscriptions by market methods, so that in 1997 the "Literary Gazette" had only 30 thousand subscribers! Democratic magazines came out only financed by the Soros Foundation; the circulation of "New World" magazine has fallen from 2.7 million in the Soviet period to 15 thousand in 1997".

Still Aunt Lida never complained about her heavy bags. She would only laugh: "Today I have twenty letters for you! Will they fit in the box? Hold on!" The same Aunt Lida carried the pensions to all the retirees in our district; everyone knew what day of the month, and for all the twenty years that I knew her, she was never, ever robbed! Grandpa usually gave her a pension "tip": he rounded out the amount and gave the excess to Aunt Lida: "For her work".

It was especially nice to write responses to all the letters when I was sick. I got more comfortable in bed, gained inspiration and picked up a pen... To those who wrote me long and interesting letters, I tried to answer the same way.

Our Soviet Koreans stood apart among my pen pals. The Koreans literally captured my imagination when I became interested in martial arts: because of my second cousin, a coach who had a lot of Soviet Korean friends (to that I shall return later!). It was not so easy to find them: I had to write a lot of letters to the Uzbek, Tajik and Kazakh schools till I did. (Because you couldn’t really write on an envelope "to an 8th grade Korean pupil!"). That’s how Elisa Chen and Vika Lee appeared in my life. Usually I only corresponded with girls. And in the entire USSR, there was only person of the opposite sex for whom I made an exception - Sashka Kim...

"Kim - the most common surname in the Moscow 1980 Olympics: 11 from the DPRK and 1 from the USSR" - was written in one book that I had at home. Of course, that meant our famous gymnast Nelly Kim...

If Sashka still has my letters, one could see how I grew up and matured. He promised to "preserve them for history". I don’t know whether he has kept his promise...

Sashka Kim came into my life by chance. My address was published in the correspondence section of some sports magazine, and I was absolutely overloaded with letters! By the way, a large number of them came from correctional institutions: apparently the magazine was in libraries there. All the letters from these "gentlemen of fortune" were distinguished by a special kind of sentimentality and pity for themselves,
lame ducks, and none of them felt guilty about anything they have done. Having read these letters, none of which I answered, later on I could accurately figure out who was an ex-convict in real life, by their style!

Sashka didn’t fall into any of these categories. He was neither a prisoner nor a girl of my age. He was a student - six years older than me - and I, who was extremely shy in those years, would not have answered him, if it wasn’t for my interest in Koreans. What sort of people are they, how did they get into the USSR?

Soon we turned out to be great pals. So great that I hardly kept any secrets from him. Sashka was my elder brother, whom I needed so much in real life.

Sashka, who was born and raised in southern Kazakhstan, told me that in his family only his grandmother, who had moved to Kazakhstan from the Far East, spoke Korean. Among his friends were Kazakhs, Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, Jews, and his best friend was Greek. Sashka was a sportsman: to my regret, not in martial arts, but in weight lifting. And he was studying land reclamation engineering: in those days we didn’t have “professional sportsmen” who needed a personal priest at the Olympic Games, and who financed themselves with photo shoots in “Maxim” or “Playboy”. Also sportsmen didn’t need to become the racketeers; this was the post-Soviet career of my second cousin...

Sashka was a very sincere, direct and good guy. He said what he believed, and he believed in what he said. He believed that our country is the most amazing in the world, and he didn’t hide it. He was a true patriot and an absolutely Soviet man: not because someone had forced him, not insincerely, but from deep in his heart. He was proud of the Soviet Union, and not just during the triumph of our athletes at the Olympics.

If it was necessary to characterize the national character of Koreans using only one word, I would choose the word “sincere”. Sincere does not mean just telling the truth blankly at every turn regardless of whether someone is interested in hearing it or not, and regardless of the consequences, as the Dutch do. “Sincere” means believing in the principles by which one lives!

Sashka generally was a great optimist and lived a full life, wholeheartedly, cheerfully. I envied him a little because I was always waylaid by pessimism and doubts somewhere inside me. Maybe it was adolescence, or perhaps as Pushkin says: “He was gradually seized with Russian blues”, but I frankly envied to how happily he lived and how unconditionally he believed in his dreams. During the defence of his graduation project, he wrote: “I will go to the collective farm after graduation: I will set everything right there. Finally there I will have the opportunity to apply my knowledge in practice! I have been waiting for this day for a long time!” However, when after graduation he was sent to a farm in northern Kazakhstan, and he, a city boy, was faced with rural bad organisation, soon there was no trace left of his good intentions to work and to increase the national rural economy. He described state farm houses with horror. Well, that was our generation: things that did not frighten our fathers and grandfathers terrified us because we were too
spoilt. Surely, we weren't born and didn’t grow up to walk in rubber boots in mud up to one's knees, we asked ourselves. At that time we were completely unaware of the fact that there are troubles in the world much worse than this, and that billions of people around the world think about how to earn their daily bread to feed their children, not how to return to the asphalt pavement as soon as possible and to be able to put on nice shiny polished shoes again. And it would be foolish to blame only Sashka for this: we would all have to, using the words of Professor Preobragensky in Bulgakov’s book, "hit ourselves on the back of the head". The fact was that all of us - not just those who lived in the time of Nikita Sergeyevich168 - believed somewhere deep in our subconscious the words that "this generation of young people will live in the time of communism", and we had expectations of life accordingly... It was someone else who sacrificed in the past: in order for us to live better, but we would already not have to sacrifice any more for anyone...

Sashka struck lucky: since he was an athlete, he quickly got out of the collective "hell" of the farm. He arranged for his coach to call him back home, pleading that he was needed for the team. And soon he himself became a coach, leaving the melioration for others...

Our intellectual development and growing up didn’t go on simultaneously: although I was six years younger, somehow I usually went through all infectious diseases inherent to our intelligentsia a couple of years earlier than he did, and I got over them exactly just when he was catching them. It hurt my heart when I saw how he was going through the same delusions as I was, without listening to someone who "had already been there".

At the time when Sashka was a Soviet patriot, I temporarily suffered from the deference to Western "civilization" that was typical of our intelligentsia Though as for me it wasn’t absolute and blind: I went on, for example, to realise how much harm colonialism and the slave trade did to the peoples of the world, I realised what the foreign policy of the Western countries represents. As I said before, unlike some of our citizens, from childhood on I didn’t admire the West, I wasn’t interested in the Western "rags" either.

But in general, in the late 80’s, after my first trip to the Netherlands, there was a short period in my life which I am now incredibly ashamed of. Because neither before nor after did I suffer from such blindness as then. I am looking for explanations for this, and I can’t find it. Maybe because, having become a student, I discovered that the racism which officially did not exist in our country, was in fact alive and kicking, especially in Moscow. When I met my fellow student from Ethiopia, outside the walls of the institution on the streets of Moscow, we were exposed to the kind of ostracism that South African supporters of "racial purity" would probably envy! And it contrasted so much with the attitude - at least in public - that existed towards mixed couples in calm, well-

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168 Nikita Khrushchev - led the Soviet Union during part of the Cold War. He served as First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964, and as Chairman of the Council of Ministers, or Premier, from 1958 to 1964.
groomed Holland that for a long time I associated with the smell of grilled chicken, that I often asked myself in Moscow: how on Earth is it possible here? But at that time I still was unaware of the fact that "all that glitters is not gold". The fact was that in reality completely wild racist prejudices were raging in the hearts of many of these “civilized” Dutch people, and they were finally able to blurt it all out after a right-wing Dutch politician named Pim Fortuin said aloud what they had been thinking all the time.

In one word, I tried to convince Sashka that "there" was "civilization", but he, quite rightly, pointed out the advantages of socialism for me, advantages which at that time we simply took for granted, as something natural, like air. Maybe that’s why Sasha’s letter seemed to me so dull and vapid, like speeches at the party conventions of our leading ideologists...

To be honest, back then I was quite a disgusting person. First, I was a type of person whom one of the anti-racist writers of South Africa defined as "progressive ad nauseam". I believed that every progressive person, for example, must simply marry a person of another nationality: because only interethnic marriages are steps into the future. Without thinking that real life is not a subject for theoretical expositions, and that you can fall in love with your neighbour, who is of the same revolutionary blood as you, and in a distant ideal may turn out, in your opinion, to be not as revolutionary as he should have been, because he belongs to a nation of oppressed people, but most possibly a vicious little bourgeois...

When Sashka married a Korean girl, whom he had met playing chess, it was difficult for me to hide my disappointment. Like all our "Westernisers", in that short period of my life I mocked all ordinary things, all things human. Even how Sashka climbed a lamppost to look closer at the face of his newborn first child in a hospital window. "I didn’t think that a father’s instincts are so strong!" I wrote him. "Instincts are something that animals have, but I’m a kind of human being, I think!", Sashka was offended.

But after a little while the tables turned. Now I could already appreciate and understand everything that we have been losing so rapidly, but Sashka, "enlightened" by the perestroika men, began to be “terrified” by "what a totalitarian country we live in". In his discovery he looked like a child who was collared, dragged out from his warm little bed in the middle of the night and pushed into the street in the pouring rain and snow in his pyjamas, by people saying to him, half-awake and hardly understanding what was happening, and where he was: "Look, what a horrible house you live in!"

In due time we had a lot of arguments about nationalism. I couldn’t understand why Kazakh youngsters started rioting when a Russian was installed as the first secretary of the Communist Party there. "I wouldn’t care if a Kazakh or a Russian would rule over our country: the most important is for this person to be suitable for this job!" I wrote to Sashka. Then I didn’t understand the emotions of a small nation that was a minority even in its own land (only about one third of the population were Kazakhs). In general, small and big nations take many things in a bit differently.
His friends began to move out of Kazakhstan before that. Russians and Ukrainians, one after another, moved to Russia... But he was most shaken by the departure to his “historic motherland” of his best friend - the Greek Kostya, who had never been in Greece before, and who didn’t even speak Greek. “How could he?! How could he leave his motherland, which brought him up and gave him everything?” he wrote to me with indignation about Kostya. Less than two years passed before Sashka’s indignation absolutely disappeared. Now suddenly he “quite understood” Kostya. And he would have gone away too: there was just nowhere to go to.

Professionally, for Sashka the disappearance of the Soviet Union was something that could be called “a blessing in disguise”: if getting into the USSR national team was something that many of his pupils had not even dreamt of, now, in independent Kazakhstan, they became champions, and Sashka first started “travelling abroad.” Things began to take off... “I’ve been to Taiwan... Here is beauty upon my soul! Why can’t we live this way?”

Sashka’s anti-sovietism was completely unexpected for me - it came out of a blue sky and struck me right in the heart. It wasn’t even like my earlier quite gentle criticism, because I was never, not even in the period of my errors, against the principles of socialism. No matter how I tried to tell him about the reality of Western life now, when I’ve learned what the West is like for myself, not like on my two-months “tour” without problems and responsibilities, he did not listen to me. He kept repeating the same mistakes through which I had already passed, and even went further. He went right through without looking back. Even if I explained why we could not live - and never will live! - “as they live in Holland or Taiwan”, he would not listen. It is not a matter of arguments, but of something defined by the name of a stupid pop song about crayfish with beer: “I want!” I want - and that’s it. I don’t care about anything else...

He began to think seriously about emigrating to South Korea. No, it was not the Call of Nature: otherwise why wouldn’t he go to the DPRK? He did not even think about whether he could get along in a country with an entirely different system than the one in which he was born and spent his whole life. He only thought about colourful Taiwanese shop windows... Today, though, Kazakhstan would probably not be surprised by such windows, either, or by the presence of NATO soldiers on its streets today, training there how to conquer other Asian peoples living in a similar environment...

“Almost 200 British soldiers together with Kazakhs are holding manoeuvres in the country,” - the BBC reports with joy. “The tough, sandy terrain of Kazakhstan, with its hot weather, is considered to be an ideal place to prepare for military operations in the countries of the Persian Gulf. Officer Tony Scott in an interview claimed: “Here is a lot of sand, it is difficult here, and our recent operations continued right through hot weather, so it is good to get used to this sort of thing”.

“The soldiers are spending their time in Kazakhstan as part of the program “Partnership for Peace”, practicing with the Kazakh army in using
Irina Malenko
former Soviet weaponry and former Soviet helicopters”. Well, we’ll talk about that later...

From a human point of view one can understand why people run away from countries that suddenly become alien to them, (every time I see Russia today, I have an acute, painful feeling of a large cemetery, with the graves of my ancestors, of all those who mean so much to me, and without whom my life is meaningless, being soiled by some monsters; and I have an acute sense of guilt because I didn’t stop these monsters in time), but to escape still doesn’t solve anything, and you can’t escape from yourself.

What on Earth happened to you, my friend Sashka? Why have you suddenly stopped believing in what you always believed so sincerely; just because some of those monsters have assured you, as Tolstoy’s Natasha Rostova who bared her shoulders at the ball for the first time, that it “must be necessary”? ‘You didn’t have any other arguments except for this one. If people like Nazarbayev and Yeltsin were your arguments, are they really true Communists?

...Sashka doesn’t write to me anymore. For several years, he hasn’t written, despite the fact that I regularly send him postcards on every holiday and sometimes I write letters about my life and news even though I expect no answer. I really do miss him. Has my Soviet man Sashka really gone forever and will he ever come back?

...An Antillean, Sonny Zomerberg, was also my pen pal. Mum had not yet warned me that “normal men do not write letters”. After the beginning of “Gorby time” my letters finally started reaching abroad as well, and I almost drowned in a heap of messages from les jeunes Algeriens, Filipinos and Pakistanis. There were also some Africans among my new pen-pals, but not many. I remember for some obscure reason a name from the Gambia - Karamba Mambabay.

By that time I had already visited Holland, and my desire to see the rest of the world had become almost overwhelming. Sonny sent me a letter from the Dutch city of Enschede, where he was studying. "I am absolutely nothing like the Dutch!" - he warned me honestly. With these words he felt pride. We met for the first time a year later: in the house of my Dutch Amsterdam householders, who invited me to come to Holland again. Sonny, who was born on the island of Curaçao, was absolutely not like I imagined. First of all, I had already gotten used to the style of communication of African men and was impressed by his modesty. He was a tall (but not a beanpole, like the Dutch!), quiet and unpretentious young man with a charming and shy white-toothed smile and a skin colour of chocolate milk. He had extraordinary eyes: wide, in an amazing, almond-like shape. Later I realized that this was a hereditary trait of all members of his family on his father's side: they are Latin American Indians (Sonny's

169 Nursultan Nazarbayev (born1940) has served as First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party from 1989 to 1991. He became the President of Kazakhstan since the fall of the Soviet Union and the nation's independence in 1991.

170 Young Algerians (French).
grandmother was born in Colombia). Sonny’s family on his mother’s side were Afro-Caribbeans. In our school geography textbooks people like Sonny were called Sambo (obviously without any racist meaning). I remember how we walked around Amsterdam and ate together *patatje oorlog*. I liked Sonny, and I did not hide it. But after our first meeting, I decided not to meet him again: just because I liked him so much. I still had to return home, and I was very afraid of getting used to him...

I had a visa for three months, and I left my hosts from Amsterdam so that I wouldn’t bother them a lot, and started travelling around the country, trying to see some more of it. I stayed with different acquaintances. I spent a couple of days on a farm with very religious Dutch farmers who grew flowers (I had never in my life seen people praying around the table before eating!). They lived not far from Amsterdam but would not let their children to go there out of principle, even for a day. Then I spent almost a week in a working class family in a small town near Utrecht. That’s where I first realized that the Netherlands is not yet quite known territory for me! Before that, all the Dutch seemed to me to be exquisitely refined people of culture, like my Amsterdam friends (the wife, an employee of the museum, from a Jewish communist family; the husband, a mathematician and wit, with two lovely girls, one taking ballet classes, the other playing the harp!). But this was a working class family of three: a mother, father and an adult son: they smoked day and night, fed themselves almost exclusively with fatty Chinese take-away meals and spent their free time walking around cheap shops. They never travelled: “Why? We have everything in our town!” They did not read books or go to theatres. Their humour was rather crude and flat. The mother was delighted, thinking that they could “mate” me with their son, a cheerful husky named Marinus, who came home from work all covered in shavings - my opinion, of course, was not even asked, they considered it a self-evident fact that any foreigner would kill to move to Holland. But when their more educated relative explained to her how difficult it would be for me to stay in Holland (I could only guess what they were talking about, because I did not speak Dutch!), she at once somehow turned sour, and when I left them, to my surprise I found out that she had pulled out of my suitcase everything that she had given me: her shabby dresses, even those that she had not given me herself, but a cousin of Marinus. My God! What a country!

When I returned to Amsterdam, the people with whom I was staying informed me that during my absence Sonny had called them every day looking for me. I tried to call him back (he lived in a hostel), but his neighbours told me that he had not been at home for several days. Then I picked up my mail and found a letter from Sonny, in which he sought my hand in marriage! “You’re amazing, not like anybody else, dushi!” I have

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171 Fried potato covered with a mayonnaise, ketchup, curry dressing, peanut oil, and stewed with an onion.

Irina Malenko
dreamt about a girl like you all my life! I don’t want to be alone any
longer. Please, will you marry me?"

Just like Donna Rosa D’Alvadorez¹⁷³, I never had such a proposal
before. I was completely lost. I was 23 years old. He was the same age. I
had already graduated from the university, he was still studying. I liked
Sonny very much. What if I refused? Would I then regret it for the rest of
my life? Should I say “yes”? But I have known him for such a short time…
On the other hand, aren’t all proposals made this way in books and
romantic movies? Cinderella and the Prince also had not known each other
for a long time… Should I tell him that I didn’t know him well yet? But
what if he would be offended? And how would I get to know him better, if
I have to leave soon, and I could hardly come here again (we have already
spent a considerable sum of my grandmother’s savings on this trip!)? "On
the one hand, on the other hand… "I am speaking like some milkman
Tevye!¹⁷⁴

At this point in my reflections the doorbell rang. He stood on the
threshold; his look was full of such an inexpressible hope! Sonny looked
like he had not slept for a week. When he saw his letter in my hands, he
just sighed:
-Well? What have you decided, dushi?
I looked at him once again and said unexpectedly even for myself:
it almost looked absolutely like a real fairy tale:
-Yes. Yes!
And when I said “yes”, even though it may seem silly, my first
thought was: "And now I will hear Bobby’s native language every day! I’ll
learn to speak it!"
I si, awor mi por papia Papiamento i mi ta komprende tur kos, mas
o menos.¹⁷⁵

Whether this brought me any happiness, is another thing…

¹⁷³ "Hello, I'm Your Aunty!" is a Soviet 1975 musical comedy film loosely
based on the play Charley's Aunt by Brandon Thomas. The film was an immense
hit; many lines of dialogue subsequently became catch phrases themselves. Donna
Rosa D’Alvadorez (in the play she is called Lucia) is a millionaires, the widow of
Don Pedro from Brazil.
¹⁷⁴ Tevye the dairyman is the protagonist of several of Sholem Aleichem's
stories, originally written in Yiddish and first published in 1894. The character
became best known from the fictional memoir Tevye and his Daughters, about a
pious Jewish milkman in Tsarist Russia, and the troubles he has with his six
daughters. The play was popular in the Soviet Union. He is also the hero of the
musical “Fiddler on the roof”.
¹⁷⁵ And yes, now I can speak Papiamento and I understand more or less
everything.
Chapter 5. Island of My Dreams

«Lanta nos bos ban kanta
Grandesa di Kòrsou;
Kòrsou isla chikitu,
baranka den laman!
Kòrsou nos ta stima bo
ariba tur nashon.
Bo gloria nos ta kanta
di henter nos kurason».¹⁷⁶
(The National Anthem of Curaçao)

...After that, everything was really reminiscent of a film, at least during the first two years.

I took my belongings with me. On the street a car was waiting for us. Sonny came by this car - a used jalopy driven by a curly-haired cute driver of Hispanic appearance. His eyes were, as my friend Lida Basina would say, like those of her beloved from Azerbaijan called Nariman, "as two wet plums".

“This is my childhood friend, Aidan,” said Sonny, “he lives in Rotterdam. I spent the last two weeks with him because I just could not stay at home. I was so worried because of you, I almost gave up my studies - I didn't care”.

Aidan nodded graciously and took us to his place in Rotterdam. I don’t remember the way because Sonny and I couldn’t tear ourselves from each other during the whole trip. We sat in the back seat and at that moment there was no one and nothing else in the world for us - Aidan looked at us from time to time in the mirror and smiled knowingly.

Aidan was also an Antillean student and lived near Zevenkamp metro station in Rotterdam in an apartment he shared with another Antillean student, a black guy who had for some obscure reason the German name, Siegfried. Siegfried’s girlfriend lived there also, an Antillean girl with whom he’d had a child. When we came to them this child had chickenpox and Siegfried had just caught it from him too.

“Look, guys, don’t get infected from Marlon!” he warned us, rocking the baby to sleep at a respectful distance. I assured him that he need not worry, I’d already had chickenpox in the first grade.

¹⁷⁶ Let’s all together glorify the greatness of Curaçao, /Curaçao is a small island, /A rock in a sea, /Curaçao, we like you, /Above all the nations, /We sing the praises of you, /From the whole of our heart (Papiamento).
Irina Malenko

I plunged into an entirely new culture: all day long salsa music filled the house, along with the tasty smell of minced meat, stewed with prunes and some sweet-and-sour sauce as the inhabitants walked from room to room, dancing. Papiamento turned to be a melodious language, a bit like Spanish.

Sonny and I were both confused by the situation and the feelings that overwhelmed us, but it was a pleasant confusion. During the next few days we were, perhaps, the happiest couple on earth!

Looking back at our relationship now in the light of the years passed, I understand that the problem was not so much the fact that we knew so little about each other; the reality was that we were both looking for someone who’d satisfy our pre-existing images of an ideal. You’ve already heard about my ideals. For some reason I automatically thought that an educated intellectual, not a moneybag but a young man having a soul from a colonial country, could not be anything but a patriot and supporter of independence. Especially because Sonny had made clear to me his dislike for the Dutch - at that time his aversion was much stronger than my own. My mother, judging by her words, almost made the same mistake in her time when she married my father. She’d said, “I could not imagine that a such high achiever at school could be such a fool in life!”

Sonny wasn’t a fool, far from that. But he was also far from Robin Hood. Sonny had been looking for a nice, dark-haired white girl, brought up according to traditional values, while I was looking for a black revolutionary. Both of us imagined that we’d finally found what we were looking for and we would fit, as they say, like pork and beans. In fact, he proved to be a far cry from revolutionary and my “traditional values”, even though closer to his values than those of the Dutch, still considerably differed from them. But above all - now I realise it - we were both just too young for a successful marriage. For a young person it is typical to evince maximalism in their estimations and expectations and to also have acute attacks of despair, when life - or another person, whom they decide to rely on in this life - does not live up to their expectations and hopes. Yet the young lack the ability to listen to others and make concessions sometimes, although if such concessions are constant and just one-sided - even if intended to maintain peace in the family - such a marriage is doomed, too...

But we were young; we believed in miracles and in undying love, and even the devil himself couldn’t scare us! During the days we spent together in Rotterdam I completely fell in love with him.

A few days later we decided that we mustn’t outstay our welcome, said goodbye to our hospitable hosts (unlike the Dutch, they were not rummaging in our bags in our absence!), and I went with Sonny to Enschede. My visa was about to expire and I had to decide what to do next. Sonny’s exams were close at hand too.
There is hardly a more dull, dormant, repulsive little town in the Netherlands than Enschede. Only Almelo can vie with Enschede for these qualities. Enschede is located on the eastern border, you can come cross into Germany walking on the rails (only the disciplined Dutch, of course, do not walk on the rails) and many people here have German relatives. How could one explain the negative feelings aroused by this place? It is difficult to clearly express it in words, but I'm not alone in my opinion about Enschede. I know Dutch folks who’ve lived there for more than twenty years, and don’t feel any attraction to Enschede. It looks very much like anywhere else: shopping malls, stores, “Hema” and “Zeeman” and a market on Saturday, even a fountain in the centre and its own university - Universiteit Twente; yet the feeling of deep backwoods does not pass. The only thing that brightens the town up in good weather is nature. There are thick woods stretching around, so atypical for the flat and bald Netherlands. There are even real mushrooms growing there: the ones which Sonny tasted with such a panic fear when I fried them with potatoes...

Sonny lived in the country in the woods in a house like many other hostel pyramids, scattered in the forest like mushrooms. This was a student campus of the local university. You had to get to the town by bus, but buses ran rarely, and on Sundays they almost did not go at all, which astounded me. In the USSR we did not have such a big difference in the time-tables between weekdays and the weekend, and the return ticket cost us exactly half of the price of a single one. Two single tickets were never more expensive than one return ticket as it was here. Not only were the time-tabled buses shamefully rare, but the ticket prices were so high I couldn’t stand it and asked Sonny, “How do the students get to town?”

"By bicycle," - he replied. Come rain or shine, about thirteen kilometers one way...

And somewhere in the surrounding woods the NATO airbase was hiding and there was no chance of getting enough sleep on weekdays in the campus: early in the morning the contour-hugging F-16s began to fly over the hostels at low altitude with a wild roar, hissing like dragons. Five days a week; thank God, not on the weekends. I remember how it struck me: back in Gorbachev’s and Yeltsin’s time we’d been brainwashed for years that we had “peace, friendship and chewing gum” with the West and thus our jet fighters had long ceased to maneuver every day. But NATO - they were maneuvering as if preparing for war and now we know that it was exactly what they were doing...

Sonny lived in a small room with a balcony almost at the very top of one of the pyramids, near the end of the campus. From there you had to walk twenty minutes to the bus station through the forest. Sonny had only one bicycle and I had to ride sitting on the luggage rack with my legs dangling on one side, clutching Sonny with one arm around his waist. Before I got used to it, it was pretty scary, especially because I had to...
watch carefully whenever Sonny slowed down at a red light so I could jump off the rack in time. I grew accustomed to it eventually and teetered on the bike like a professional acrobat.

On the day we arrived Sonny called his parents in Curaçao from the hostel and informed them of our intentions. Naturally, like all parents, they turned to be, as they say in Russia, not entirely delighted with this fact. Sonny was the eldest child in the family, the only son and still in college. It was clear that his parents were proud of him and pinned on him great hopes.

“They say I am too young to get married!” – he told me, embarrassed, “but I explained everything to them - that we have no choice. If we don’t get married, you will have to go back...

Sonny was unpretentious in everyday life and, like me, he was not particularly interested in clothes; he wore a sweater and jeans. His room was full of items typical of a young engineer: some soldering gear, wires, a computer, and a couple of childhood souvenirs. Later his mother told me that he had always been very modest in his requests. As a teenager he’d be presented with some pocket money by his parents on the weekends: "Sonny, go to the town, to a disco or something!" He’d accept it, go away, and after a while give it all back having spent nothing. In his childhood photos he was a plump black boy with the eyes of an Indian who always carried around a small portable radio...

The first night in Enschede we almost did not sleep, and then slept all day... The next day we went to the immigration police to figure out what to do with my Visa. We were received coldly. It was more than ten years before Pim Fortuyn appeared on the Dutch political scene and it was still forbidden to express loud negative attitudes towards foreigners, plus at that time the Russians were almost a museum rarity in Holland, yet you could read morbid squeamishness in the face of Mevrouw Varken the police officer who talked to us. I don’t remember her real name, but it was my impression that I nicknamed her this way when I started to learn Dutch. Her face seemed to be saying: “Too many disagreeable foreigners are coming to this place, and then our erasers disappear”.

Not even knowing the Dutch language, I realised that it was going hard with us...

“Why do you want to marry him?” Mevrouw Varken asked me in English. I was taken aback by the question. Doesn’t she get it?

“Because I love him!”

178 Varken – pig (Dutch).
She rolled her eyes up to the ceiling as if to say: not only do they come themselves (Sonny was a Dutch citizen by birth, but of course anyone could tell a mile off that he was not ethnic Dutch), but they bring women for themselves from other countries! Of course, she couldn’t say this aloud. (I bet she’s now found an outlet for her feelings now by voting for some Geert Wilders or Rita Verdonk!)

I was very offended: I’d done nothing bad to this country and was not going to scrounge off anybody; my intentions were the best, including integrating into the community and I had respect for the indigenous population and still they were dealing with me in this way... But my offense was not the worst - I was really deathly afraid of losing Sonny and being separated from him! Mevrouw Varken said that to prolong my visa I’d need a sponsor - someone who’d assume responsibility for me - for example, pay for me in case I broke someone’s window. Break someone’s window? I stared at her, understanding absolutely nothing. Why on earth would I break someone’s window?

Sonny could not be my sponsor because he, as a student, had an insufficient income. Then I called up my Amsterdam householders (I had nobody else there to appeal to), explaining to them what was going on. Our relations had been very friendly and close, I’d been living with them for several months during my first visit, we’d had a wonderful time, did many things together. I washed their dishes and played with their girls and they took me to museums and the theatre... They agreed to send me an invitation to come there one more time, so they’d already assumed some responsibility for me, and I hadn’t cracked or broken anything during my stay in Holland. I was really attached to them and thought of them almost as my second parents.

I was so much taken aback by their response, virtually thunderstruck. Being as friendly as usual they said something like: “We’re sorry, but we can’t undertake to do this. But don’t forget, call us and tell us the end of the story!”

I was speechless. Are these people standing in front of me or some heartless machines?

We left the police station with no reward for our pains. It was spitting rain. At home, Sonny found a rash on his stomach: it turned out he’d picked up chickenpox from the baby Marlon! He was running a fever and I anointed him with a home-taken brilliant green which horrified him: in Europe no one had seen anything like this! and we both wept stormy bitter tears in each other’s arms sitting on his folding bed. Yes, that’s real love!

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179 Geert Wilders, Rita Verdonk – Dutch nationalists-populists.
180 In Eastern Europe and Russia the dilute alcoholic solution of Brilliant Green is used as a topical Antiseptic. Brilliant Green is effective against gram-positive bacteria.
“I don’t want to lose you, dushi!” - sobbed Sonny.

“What should we do? Why do they treat us like this?” - I echoed.

And the next morning, he said firmly:

“We will not give up so easily. Let’s make an appointment with a lawyer!”

I remember the trip to the lawyer - on the rack of Sonny's bicycle, the wheels creaking and my heart beating with a premonition - What if the lawyer tells us that we have no chance?

The lawyer - a nice young woman - didn’t ask stupid questions about why we wanted to get married.

“You have a way out”, she said convincingly. “The police also need to know our laws; it’s a shame that they are so incompetent! You”, she nodded to me, “will have to write a letter to your authorities asking to give you a certificate that you are not married”.

“They do not provide such certificates”, I replied. I was scared. “Instead we have an internal passport which has a special page for the registration of marriage. If it’s empty it means that a person is single. Here, look, I have a copy”.

“Hm-m... I believe you, but here it does not explain anything. They believe that all countries have the same laws we do, and thus, the same documents. You will not succeed in convincing them”.

It turned out that you really could not explain anything to the authorities... It was my first serious culture shock in the Netherlands. In Russia it is always possible to explain the situation somehow, depending on the sort of person you're dealing with. For example, after my first trip to Holland I had to retrieve my internal passport that the Education Ministry had taken when they were issuing my international passport. In order to get it, I needed to pass a blood test for AIDS (of course, from where else but in the West can you catch this contagion?) I passed the test without a problem, however in our university clinic in Russia they only tested anonymously but I needed a certificate that I didn’t have AIDS with my first and last name on it and was forced to ask the doctors to draw up a proper medical certificate.

“We cannot fix it for you; your test was taken elsewhere so we can’t take responsibility for it!” they announced to me.

And then, in sheer desperation, I sat down on the floor and roared:
“I need a passport! I have two months left before the defense of my research thesis, and I can’t even get a library card without it!”

The women doctors showed mercy - I was brought some water and they figured out how to resolve the problem. They gave me a certificate with my first and family names, but wrote that the blood-test was not made by them, but by laboratory number so-and-so - and that settled the matter!

When I tried the same method in the Netherlands, the reaction was completely unpredictable for me. As I understand it now, the Dutch clerks are not used to live human emotions and have no idea how to behave when someone puts on a show like that. Their faces contorted with real horror, yet they buried themselves in the manual and kept muttering:

“But Mevrouw - according to the rules - under such-and-such paragraph, such-and-such article…”

Their reaction looked like the Scouts Choir diligently turning away from Urbanus hanging off the tree - the louder he cried for help, the louder they sang so as not to hear him.181

Why are they so stupid?

“What should we do next?” I asked.

“If within three months there is no answer to your Registry Application, you can appeal in court with four witnesses who will confirm that they know you and that everything you say about yourself is true, including your marital status. Then you can apply to the Registry Office again. In the meantime, I’ll write a letter to the Police Office asking to extend your visa during the time needed for this procedure…”

And so we did. I sent a letter to our city Registry Office, inwardly freezing with horror: at that time marriage to a foreigner was at the very least unwelcome in Russia. There were exit visas, of course, but I’d left on a private tourist trip and now I was not coming back. As I’d expected, the answer came, and as I’d expected, it was futile: “If you need something, come home, and we will make everything work here”. As I was ready for such a development, I decided to conceal what kind of reply I’d received. Three months passed and I continued to say that nothing had been received.

In the end, everything came off well. After painstaking persuasion, a wealthy uncle of Sonny, who also lived in Holland, agreed to be my sponsor. Sonny found four witnesses among his friends. We’d already set

the date of our engagement (Ondertrouw) and the wedding itself, and then I sent a letter to home:

"Mum, I have an album of photographs of my pen-friends on the shelf. On the fourth page there is a big colourful picture with the inscription - Sonny Zomerberg, Curaçao - under it. I'm going to marry him in a month".

The picture was probably not too good because my mother wept all night over it.

We got married in May. In Russia, they say that it’s a bad omen to marry in May, that those who do suffer all their lives. My parents were married in May and parted very soon but I did not believe in superstitions.

The day was bright and warm, almost summery. Purple rhododendrons bloomed around Sonny’s hostel. We didn’t have guests, only our witnesses: my friend Katarina from Amsterdam - a spectacular librarian who came from Limburg and loved a Surinamese (the first thing she said when she met Sonny was: "Aangenaam! Wat heb jij een lekker klein kontje!"182) "Katarina! I’m marrying this man today!" I was so ashamed I wished the earth could swallow me up. Another witness was a friend of Sonny’s, Sharlon - tall, he looked like an American basketball player. The next day Sonny’s father was supposed to fly in from Curaçao.

I put on a white, knee-length dress, the only one I’d brought with me to Holland, and Sonny wore the only suit he had with a light blue jacket and we went to the Municipal Registry Office. By bus! People cast slanted glances at us. Katarina asked me whether I needed flowers. “No, no, please, no!” I screamed desperately. It seemed a sign of weakness if you were presented with flowers. I would’ve felt ashamed if I’d had them.

Unlike the police station, we were given a warm welcome at the Municipal Registry Office, they even invited in a translator for me: a plump little dark-haired Dutch woman, Henrietta, wearing a creased dress. She was manifestly nervous. It turned out that she spoke Russian fluently, but as she hadn’t needed to use it for years, she was afraid she’d had forgotten a lot. From time to time, Henrietta blushed and muttered to me in Russian instead of translating:

“Well, you do understand everything, don’t you?”

I woke up several times that night while Sonny was sleeping. I was still thinking of my new status as a married woman, satisfied that the worst was over and no one could separate us.

182 Nice to meet you! You have such a cute little backside (Dutch).
I had no idea that a man, who’d become so dear to me one day, was serving a sentence in an English prison at that time, in his eighteenth month of imprisonment...

The holidays ended quickly. A month before the wedding we moved from our room into a two-room apartment on the first floor of one of the dormitories, with windows overlooking the forest. It was done not through our indulgence, but as required by the police, who wanted to make sure that we had enough square metres per person. The windows were so big you could walk out and come back in through them (I suppose they’re called “French doors”) and we did so. They were even locked with a key like a door. The room was so spacious you could ride a bike in it. We had no furniture to put there. The kitchen was in a remote corner with no windows and the walls were painted in bright colours in the fashion of the 1970s in scarlet red!

I didn’t notice when summer set in. It was the first summer in my life when I couldn’t do as I wanted. For the course in Dutch, I had to wait till September. Finding work was impossible without a work permit, which I had to wait eight months for. They were the most frustrating months of my life! I had no money to do anything with, not even to go to Amsterdam just once. There was barely enough money for food. To buy foodstuffs, we cycled once a week to nearby Hengelo (Sonny bought me a cheap used bike). Near the hostel there was a small shop, but it was too expensive for us. We bought food only at C1000 and Aldi. Albert Hein was already beyond our means. We could only sniff the smoked sausage, which my grandmother the Cossack used to treat me to when I was a child. Even to send a letter home meant to deny ourselves a meal. I was not used to stinting on food - not because I was a millionaires’ daughter, but because all our people lived like this. The range of what Sonny and I could afford to buy in Holland weekly was strictly limited. Een pakje cocosbrood, een rookworst, per week - and then, following the list. Sonny went by it not because he was a stingy Dutchman, but because the rent took up half of his scholarship. I was terribly ashamed and disgusted to have to beg him for an extra chocolate bar or a beleg. I was so ashamed that I stopped doing it. My only comfort was the thought our privation would not last forever. It was unbelievable that two people with higher education subsisted on only bread and water! There were delicious lunches at Mensa at the University, where you could add a supplement of salads, but even this was too expensive. One lunch cost five guilders. If you buy a weekly card, for two people, it was seventy guilders a week, and it was only lunch, no breakfast and no dinner.

We began a “diet” of bread and peanut butter, and I remembered the Dutch students, who visited us in Moscow and wanted to leave us an

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183 The Dutch supermarkets.
184 One package of coconut bread and one smoked sausage per week.
185 Mincemeat for a sandwich.
unfinished jar of peanut butter. We frowned scornfully, but took it, as it was impolite to refuse a gift. However, that frown was superfluous because half an hour later they changed their minds and took their half jar back with them to Holland! If I hadn’t seen this with my own eyes I never would’ve believed it.

As Soviet students we laughed at them: so shamefully paltry and niggardly it looked to us who did not know hunger. If one of us was left without food - for example because he or she didn’t have time to shop before closing time, or through bad accounting spent their scholarship on the theatre, - there was always someone among our friends who’d treat them to meals with good grace without ulterior motive. There was even among us a girl from Moscow who came from a respectable family whose mum took her scholarship and gave her just a rouble a day. We bought her cappuccinos and treated her to grilled chicken and pancakes with chocolate sauce at Moscow’s Chocolates in Pushkin Square when we celebrated a successfully passed exam. I just could not eat with a hungry girl sitting next to me. We despised individualists, eating alone and sharing with no one.

Of course our higher education was entirely free and every second young person was getting it! A girl from Naryan-Mar, who was the daughter of a big boss, a well-to-do man, used to eat cloudberries sent to her under the blanket at night, for no one to see. A loud smacking gave her away. We resented such non-Soviet behaviour to the extent that the next day each of us got an apple and started biting at our apples in unison, with gusto, as soon as she turned off the evening lights! This seemed to drive it home to her what it was like.

But the lack of nutrition in the Netherlands was not the worst thing I suffered from! For the first time in my life I read nothing for several months. It was the most refined torture that I’d ever been subjected to! I almost physically felt that I was becoming a fool: when the brain doesn’t receive new knowledge it lacks new intellectual momentum, yet I was unable to do anything about it! Sonny had enrolled me at the local library, but it also had to be paid for, a ticket for a year was twenty-five guilders. And we subsisted on fifty guilders per week for two. For each book you had to pay extra. No chance to become an avid reader! What a contrast to the USSR, where all the libraries were public and free, where nearly every person was a member!

Passing by bookstores became something of a torture, a torture which might have enriched the scope of tortures invented by the Inquisition, so exorbitantly expensive were the books. Another prohibited luxury, another cultural shock. The annual subscription for a filthy magazine from which you could hardly learn a thing save the Dutch youth slang and swear-words, was worth as much as food for two people for half a month. The only thing to do was just watch idiotic games on television from dawn till dusk - “cheap but good”. I began to learn the Dutch
I was struck by the behaviours of those people playing, their animal screams of joy at winning some things. In my view, to behave like that was unworthy of a human being. It is merely a thing - an object - you won!

That summer was hot, long, and terribly pointless. You could even sleep all day, except you didn’t want to. Our only fun was to go to the forest for mushrooms, but I’ve already mentioned Sonny didn’t like them. Yes, even the walk in the woods was not the same here - once in a dense pine forest we came across a sign: “Private road! Passage forbidden!” Oh my God, it was like the Middle Ages! Why not post a sentry and charge a toll for passage?

Then Sonny's father came to live with us. He was an elderly gentleman, Arturo by name. He arrived in Holland not by free choice, like most Antilleans (as usual, who would voluntarily want to go abroad if life is good at home?). Several years before he’d suffered a stroke. After that, Señor Arturo could no longer work and the disability pension in Curacao, like the rest of their welfare payments, was so miserable that it was impossible to live on it. As the retirement age was the same in the Netherlands, he decided to move to the Netherlands temporarily and bring his family until he reached sixty-five (in Holland, sixty-five for both men and women) but then he couldn’t take his already Dutch pension back to the island. Besides Sonny, the family consisted of his mother, Louise; fifteen years younger than Arturo; and their daughter, Shantell, seven years younger than Sonny. Before her, Sonny had another sister, but she died at the age of five.

In his youth, Señor Arturo served in the army and was a brave man, then he became a book-keeper at a bakery, where he had the time to learn how to bake good homemade bread. On Sundays, he indulged us with freshly baked cakes. It was the most delicious thing on our menu.

Señor Arturo was a plump little South American Indian with a sad face. Ironically, he was the only person who had dark skin in their family. His father was from Suriname (“Paramaribo! Paramaribo! Paramaribo - the City of Dawn!”) and his mother from Colombia. The family believed that their family name was Norwegian. Arturo was a philosopher by nature, he liked to talk about history, politics, different countries, and he was very clever. Señor Arturo read books as avidly as I did. At the time, after my Soviet background, he seemed to me to be just an ordinary, normal person; but now, after more than ten years in the West, I am amazed at his intellectual depth by the usual Western standards! And, he had not even had a higher education. When I compare him with the average Western men, the comparison is clearly not in their favour.

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186 A Dutch version of the TV show, “Wheel of Fortune”.
187 Soviet song by Lyudmila Lyadova.
And yet, he was a believer and every Sunday he went to the local Catholic Church. But unlike many of my believing friends in Ireland and Russia (in the Netherlands faith is regarded an anachronism), he didn’t try to impose his vision of the world on anyone.

Señor Arturo was the only person who listened to my stories about the Soviet Union without prejudice and even with sympathy. He honestly tried to understand what was going on there and even understood what the Dutch could not understand: why we disliked Gorbachev. The Dutch used to say: “Oh, guys, just let him finish what he’s planned to do…”

In my childhood there was a song, you may have heard it: Comsomolers - restless hearts, Comsomolers always achieve their ends… At that time my mother said that as soon as young Comsomol leaders finally reached the age when they’d govern the country, they’d achieve their ends for real by destroying it. It proved to be prophetic, but tainted with dark irony. Gorbachev was too old for the Comsomol, but like the song said, he had a “restless heart”. Russians aptly say about such people: “What rein hit him under the tail?”

Sonny was not interested in politics, but I was ready to forgive him even that! After all, paraphrasing an old Soviet children verse, “different people are needed, different people are important”. He was interested in the exact sciences. I loved him so much at that moment that his lack of social awareness didn’t bother me. How could I not love him if he was willing to go through fire, water, and brass trumpets, as we say in Russia, in order to be with me? Sonny was a pure soul - like a child. He was a correct, good boy. He neither drank, smoked, or went to discos. He sat at his computer or soldered something.

Our future was going to be bright: we were both going to work. I would still get some local education (Marxist historians are hardly in great demand at the job centre!). We would go to his Fatherland (I saw that he loved his island!), and there we would be together, to build a new life, not only for ourselves, but for all islanders. The rest was pictured vaguely: some white-toothed smiles and the happy faces from commercials (which were already crammed into my head; I subconsciously believed that the life shown in them existed somewhere and could become reality, we need only try). To me it did not mean acquisition of things, but simply finding ourselves in the atmosphere of the commercials: full of fun, beautiful, and happy. My God, how silly we were! Our financial situation remained grave, but I had known what I was doing when I married a student and was ready to tighten my belt. I would rather have got the damned work permit and laboured hard day and night! I am not a softie!

Sonny made several attempts to work while studying. He worked at factories as an uitzendkracht\textsuperscript{188} to make our lives easier. But this inevitably meant that he would have difficulties with his studies,

\textsuperscript{188} Temporary worker (Dutch).
moreover, a student was not permitted to earn money without having a certain sum being deducted from his scholarship, so in the end he made very little money. He had to do strict accounting all the time, so as not to exceed the permitted wages. Otherwise it might turn out that he would work for free. Besides, even *uitzendwerk*\(^{189}\) in Enschede was very difficult to find. I was surprised when I remembered how our boys - students at home in the Soviet era - were moonlighting as much as they wished, and no one thought of deducting from their scholarships. And in summer those who wished went with a student’s building team to work at some construction site, or as stewards on railway trains, or what have you, and earned very good money there. Such students’ building or agricultural teams were numerous - every university or college had a few of them. And not once did the Soviet State deduct from working students scholarships. Sonny almost dropped out of college because of me, but I did not permit him to. I’d rather give up reading books temporarily...

I also really wanted to work, to do something, I just languished without this opportunity. If I had friends in Enschede, it might be possible to try to do the double\(^{190}\), but I had none. I had a pen-friend in this city, whose name was Esther, she was a student at an art school. One summer she came to visit us and inadvertently hurt me with her comments. I happened to have almost no summer clothes, because I had left my home city in late autumn, and in Enschede I wore Sonny’s old pants and sweaters. Esther said that I would be better for updating my wardrobe, by which I was deeply offended. On what planet do these Dutch live? I have no means even to buy books, and she reproaches me for old clothes...

There is nothing more destructive for the spirit, undermining your faith in your own powers and making you totally indifferent to what is going on than to be unemployed and feel the dead weight of society. It seems that you simply haven’t got anything human in you left anymore.

I could hardly wait till September, although usually I hated autumn. When the classes in the Dutch language started, three hours three times a week, my life finally began to get at least some meaning...

In any weather, even in the pouring rain, even in near hurricane winds (and it did happen too!) I went to town for this course on my rusted bike, it was about eight kilometres to go there and eight kilometres back. The teacher did not speak with us from the beginning in any other language but Dutch. Connie was an elderly and very professional woman. The only thing that I was uncomfortable about in her class were the texts for learning. For example, she almost proudly played us the song “Het werd zomer”\(^{191}\), which to my taste was just a commonplace vulgarity (and not only for me, but for many in our group!). Of course, the Dutch concern about the physical side of sex is proverbial, and it is the part of the Dutch way of life, but that does not mean that such painful quirks have become

\(^{189}\) Temporary work (Dutch).
\(^{190}\) Illegally, without paying taxes.
\(^{191}\) “It became summer” – a song about the first sex experience of a Dutch teenager.
the norm for the rest of humanity. But the Dutch seem to believe that it is so.

It is a striking paradox, that the Russian language does not even have words to describe the concept of privacy, which is so important for the Dutch, and yet in the Soviet culture privacy was deeply respected. And in Holland... about what privacy can you talk, when the same Dutch continuously shove intimate details of their private lives down your throat without being asked?

Everyone is different, the old woman said when she kissed her cow. Well, I don`t want to kiss a cow! And no Dutch can tell me what to do.

The group had twenty people - mostly political refugees and a couple of Dutchmen's wives. There were two very nice Ethiopians, with whom I once exchanged a phrase in Amharic:

- Yndemyn neh?
- Dehna nou, amesagenalles.

The wives were of American and of Soviet-Israeli origin. They somehow felt first-rate people among others. The girl from Israel, Shura by name once spoke it out to me directly and clearly:

- I looked for a job, and I was sent to pluck chickens, where only Turks were working. And I'm a Dutchman's wife!
- My eyes nearly popped out. So what?

"He is so very proud of his white skin, so he sleeps in a chair in the antechamber" - as the lines from Samuil Marshak's poem “Mister Twister” read.

When I saw her for the first time, I immediately knew that she was from our part of the world. Shurochka was small, pockmarked from ear to ear and quite dull in appearance. Her parents brought her from the Soviet Union to Israel when she was only three years old (it was the émigrés of the "1970's wave", about which Vladimir Vysotsky sang in his song with Mishka Stiffman as a lyric character). In Israel, the father was disappointed and adopted Orthodoxy. I wondered why they had left the Soviet Union? "Just wanted to chatter?" Shura's family spoke only Russian at home, and her Russian was good, she spoke without an accent. But when she wrote in Russian, it was a horror of horrors. Shurochka never visited a Russian school, so she wrote everything as she heard it, that is without any rules of spelling... She met her Dutch husband when he served in the Dutch contingent of UN troops in Lebanon. Shura also served in the army. They got married and lived a decent life in Israel. She had a

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192 - How are you? - Thank you, fine (Amharic).
193 The plot of this poem is as follows: the American billionaire Twister comes to “Leningrad” and cannot find a hotel for "white people only". After some nights spent on chairs in hotel antechambers, he has to make it up with living in neighbourhood with people of different races.
194 A line from the anecdote:

A Soviet sparrow comes to the West and is asked by a Western sparrow: “Do they feed you badly in the “USSR”?“ “No, - replies the Soviet sparrow. – I’ve never seen so many crumbs of bread and corn strewn for birds, as in the “USSR” - “Why have you come here then?” – “I just wanted to chatter".
good job, her husband was a businessman. But suddenly they decided to change over and start a new life in his homeland. From that moment their new life’s full swings began to hit them regularly on the head. 195 There was no work for either of them in Holland. It was too hard to live in the house of his Dutch parents (“They clock me on and off lest I outstay my time in the shower, can you imagine” - Shura complained).

We also had a Russian-speaking Syrian, who had studied in Kiev and spoke even better Russian than Shura. Kim, the American, was a typical loud representative of that nationality. She used to reply to any phrase with “and in America...”, even when we didn’t ask her opinion. For Americans I felt an emotion akin to pity. “All the same everybody cannot be Karlsson”196 and “you shouldn’t be too demanding to some...”

Once a real war nearly broke out in our group! Each of us was given an assignment to talk about their country. It turned out that one of our Turkish women was not actually Turkish, but a resident of Kurdistan, and when the other, a real Turk, began to tell us that everything was fine in Turkey, and the Kurds just made up stories about their ‘discrimination’ - the Kurdish woman rose from her seat and gave her a “right ear-bashing”. After which the Turk was urgently transferred to another group.

For the time being my life was reduced to being with Sonny and attending the classes. Then I made friends with that translator, Henrietta. She was the lady who came to our wedding. When I got to know her better, she turned out to be not so shy and awkward, as on the wedding day. She spoke Russian well, and gladly gave me different books to read (hooray!). She had visited the USSR in the 1970’s, but as far as I understood, she communicated there mainly with hippies and dissidents. Margaret Thatcher was Henrietta’s ideal of a woman. In youth she lived in an Israeli kibbutz. Henrietta was married to a professor or, rather, they lived together, and she called him “husband”. It made a big difference for us in Russia at that time - whether he was a husband or just a live-in companion...

Henrietta gave me my first opportunity to make a living: when she had to go somewhere, she asked me to substitute for her as a Russian teacher. In addition to the financial side of things, it was really interesting! I remember to this day how I taught the Dutch to sing: “I’m going to Komarovo for a week or two...” (a popular Russian song).

...By the end of this first year in Holland, I finally realised the thing that shocked me deeply. To be friends in Holland meant merely to drink coffee together...

I’ll try to explain to you the difference. Dutch friendship is like a definition of love given by my first Ethiopian boyfriend: “Why do people love each other? In order to have fun together”. I was deeply bothered by this notion, not because people who love each other should not have fun together, but because mere joy for the time being is not enough when we speak about true love - and the same about friendship! You not only have

195 Be in full swing.
196 Karlsson – the character of a Soviet animated serial, based on A. Lindgren’s book.
to have fun together, but experience difficulties and hardships together. If people only have fun together, it automatically means that when trouble comes, they automatically leave each other to fend for themselves and go to seek somebody else with whom they can go on having fun. Is it possible to call this a real feeling? And is it surprising for people with such concepts and attitudes to interpret the fact, for instance, that North Korean girls who marry disabled soldiers, do so “under duress”? They just do not understand that some people can voluntarily give up what others consider should be fun. They do not understand that such a person may even be happier than themselves.

We, Russians do not say the word “friend” with such facility. That’s the difference. If I go shopping with someone familiar, or even drink tea with him or her, it does not mean that we are friends. For an average Dutchman it is quite enough to begin to use the word “friend”.

At first I thought that the way I had been treated by my Amsterdam landlords, who consider themselves to be my friends, was just an accident. But soon I understood that this was a tendency in the Netherlands. The height of callousness was not the fact that they had refused to help me (although, in my opinion, they ran no risk at all). In the end, people may have different circumstances, about which we know nothing. But this bazaar of idle curiosity: “But do not forget to call and tell us how it all ended!” As if my life is some sort of a circus show for their entertainment.

...Many years later, when I was really desperate, I suddenly found true friends in Holland, who gave me real support, when I did not even expect them to. I shared my thoughts on this subject with one of these friends.

- I’ll tell you why they did it, - she told me - We do not help a person if we think that he or she can fend for himself or herself. This we regard as interference in the lives of others. Another thing is when a person is really in such dire straits that he or she has no choice.

- It was remarkable that I had found such good friends in the Netherlands. But I kept thinking, how could they tell that a person was really in a desperate situation or not? To me, to watch your friend suffering and not to help him or her because you suspected that their situation was not hopeless was equivalent to idly looking at him or her drowning in a river and crying for help. Perhaps they can swim, and I’d insult them if I try to drag them out onto the shore?...

But all this wasn’t to happen soon. Then - the longer I lived there the more I encountered Dutch heartlessness where we should see ordinary human sympathy.

More than once did I observe scenes like the following. An old lady ascending a bus gasps for breath, and on a nearby seat two six-foot chaps collapse. They are true Aryans, who stretch out their mile-long legs and lay them on the opposite seats. Neither of them has a notion of giving the seat to this old lady. Everyone around them keeps silence too, shut up like clams. Finally an old woman is noticed by an immigrant of Eastern appearance, and he immediately stands up...
A cute Dutch baby throws out of the tram window ice cream packaging, and his blond mother, who is no less cute, not only does not stop him, but also rummages in her bag and deposits some paper napkins out of the same window. Again, everyone pretends that no one has noticed...

There sits some Dutch meneer, perhaps a manager, full of self-importance, dressed in a suit, holding a briefcase in his hand... And he smokes right under the sign that says that smoking is forbidden, paying no attention to women or children around... I felt like rebuking him for this, but Sonny almost pulverised me:

- Sit still! It is none of your business!
- Is it not? And whose business is it then? Do we not all use these streets and these benches? Why can’t I put this arrogant boor in his place? Why should we respect his freedom, while he chooses to spit on the freedoms and rights of those around him? Is giving a seat to the elderly person not a “human value”, about which the West and Gorbachev’s perestroika enthusiasts were beating their drums so hard? Will Sonny not give up his seat? Why should I keep quiet then?

Since childhood I had thoroughly learnt the Soviet rule: “do not pass by”!

Perhaps, the quarrels between Sonny and me started with this one.
- Are you afraid of them? - I felt betrayed by him.
- I’ve told you, it’s none of our business. I am ashamed of you when you behave in this way! What will people think?
- Are these the “people”, which you mean? They know that it is not permitted to litter streets and smoke in here. But they do it, not caring what people think about them. Why should I be the one who has to worry what these “people” think about me? I don’t smoke and I offer seats to the elderly! And I’ve been ashamed of you, that you notice that abomination and do nothing! That’s why all the streets here are littered with dog excrement and everything else! They have “freedom”, you see: a freedom for everyone to spit and piss in the corners!

I’m not joking. I really had not even known what dogs’ excrement looked like, until I came to Europe for the first time.

And I was deeply indignant at the Dutch slopping over animals, which are treated better than people. No, I am harshly opposed to maltreatment of animals. But when on a frosty morning, you see dogs in overalls and shoes, well-fed on thirty kinds of “Pedigree” and their important owners passing by shivering homeless people lying on the benches near the train station, those wretches who had not been admitted to the shelter the day before just because they had failed to collect seven and a half guilders... Then the sight of this spoilt public - the fans of dogs and cats - gives you nausea. Are these also called “people”, Sonny Zomerberg?

I do not know what annoyed me more in Holland: that I had discovered what the vaunted Dutch “normen en waarden” really are or

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197 Gentleman (Dutch).
198 Norms and values (Dutch).
that I had no right even to express my opinion out loud here. Well, so much for the Western “freedom”!

As my protest was not supposed to be voiced and heard, resentment began to accumulate as gas in a continuously inflating balloon, which threatened a big bang one day. Looking back though, I should say that more than anything Sonny was afraid to repeat the fate of Señor Arturo - to become sick and left without a livelihood.

- I never go on the street selling the newspaper De Straatkrant! - he said, blaming Arturo for what had happened to him.

Oh yeah? So I have a sort of a social Darwinist for a husband!

I just sighed deeply, recalling, for example, what sort of relations the staff at my mother's work had. When one of the women in her department died in childbirth, the department took patronage over her newborn son. The grandmother, who took her grandson to bring him up, got gifts, material assistance was provided for her. And it was so until his coming of age, and it was not because someone made the staff of that factory do it. The factory even sent that child to study at university and paid him a scholarship (and the factory scholarship was higher than the government one).

I also recalled that when in Moscow, we used to visit the old widow of the former Director of Mum's plant - who had run it through the war years and whom this plant was named after. We also went to the cemetery to lay flowers on his grave. It is that people just had soul and conscience. Nobody said: “Ah, the old lady will pull through herself - she is paid a special pension by the government!” Even to think so was a blasphemy. And nobody had to proffer a begging bowl or lie at the feet of rich sponsors.

I went with my mother's colleagues to various socially important functions - to demonstrations on holidays, to the collective farm to help the farmers, on excursions to Moscow, and sometimes, although rarely, because to visit the plant you needed a pass, I visited my mother in her workplace. When I was a little girl, we went with all her department for a short break in a pine forest with an overnight stay on the banks of a river, where we camped out in tents. The adults cooked on open fires, and we, kids, to our delight, were driven in the side-car of the motorcycle “Ural”. Then we spent the whole evening running around it in the light of the fires, and it turned out, we wiped all the dust off it with our hands and dresses! It was fun, and it was so not only for us, but also for the adults. We sang songs and told jokes, there were a lot of funny incidents. Alik - Deputy Director, the old bachelor and lady-killer - usually cracked jokes. I remember a funny chubby-cheeked secretary called Lena with a large chignon, which were then in fashion, a film projectionist called Peter (the factory had its own small cinema), an artist - Ignat Alexandrovich - who in his free time played in an amateur theatre and was an avid traveller (he travelled all over our country with his family), Director, Mikhail Petrovich, who had a dog called Kutya, which wore his wife's knickers with a hole cut

\(199\) Newspaper for homeless (Dutch version of “Big Issue”).
Irina Malenko

through for its tail, when it had a stomachache after it ate cherries straight from the tree in his garden...

When during our trip to Moscow Lena, the ample secretary, got on the bus, and the bus slightly lurched to one side, the jester Peter shouted: “Do not swerve astern, Lena!” A special guide was hired with factory money, and she told us about historical places on the way to Moscow. Later I recollected those stories almost verbatim.

The department employees often went on excursions to VDNKh\textsuperscript{200}, where we would gladly walk around the pavilions (I loved the vast spaces and the special cars that could travel through its territory). Then we had time to make a round of shopping and went home. On the way back adults drank a little alcohol, and the whole bus sang Aleksandra Pakhmutova’s “Hope”\textsuperscript{201} in chorus! That song had just been released on air.

“Hope is my compass on earth, 
And good luck is a reward for courage, 
And one song is enough, 
If this song is about home”...

Soviet songs were highly melodious, their lyrics - heartfelt and imbued with deep meaning, and all the people just wished to sing them away. There were special lyrics poets, who teamed up with composers to create masterpieces. Western and present-day Russian songs are mere inarticulate babbling as compared to them. For example, “my bunny, I'm your bunny... you go running and I am next to you, you steal, and I'll get to jail...” - the top of today's lyric creativity.

And once all the department went on tour to Ostankino Tower\textsuperscript{202} And had lunch in one of its three high-rise restaurants: I think in the Bronze one. Besides that, we could select the Silver or the Gold one - like during the Olympics. All of us could afford it. And what view opened up to us!... Alas, today only thieves who call themselves “elite” can afford it...

The work on the farm was also a lot of fun - the main thing for us was that that the weather would be good! During the summer weeding the city-dwellers could be immediately distinguished from the locals: they tried to suntan in vegetable beds working almost in bathing suits and swimming trunks, while villagers, on the contrary, were always dressed “in sober habiliments” and hid their faces and hands from the sun. Probably it was because they had an opportunity to sun-bathe in the fields every day. At lunch we sat in the grass and laid blankets serving “what God sent us”. We all ate together, it was a large, friendly company, with laughter and quips. There were boiled potatoes, sour cream, salads and pickles, cakes and sandwiches on our menu... We drank cold brew which was cooled in a bucket in the river while we worked.

\textsuperscript{200} The Russian acronym for Moscow All-Union Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy.

\textsuperscript{201} A. Pakhmutova (1929) - one of the best Soviet composers of popular music. Moscow Conservatory graduate she composed music for Symphony orchestras, ballets, wrote songs for National Children Choir and numerous films. The song "Hope" (1975) remains one of the most favourite with Russians.

\textsuperscript{202} The TV tower in “Moscow”.

Usually we went to the farm for a day, but once we went there for a week. What an adventure it was! The village, in which we had been accommodated, was an hour's ride from our city, in the southernmost part of our region. The shuttle bus came to the village only once a week. We made beds on thick mattresses spread on the floor in the gym of the local school: girls on the left, boys on the right, I mean, that women - to one wall, men - to the other. When I felt like it, I climbed up on the climbing-ropes in that gym in the evening.

And what delicious meals were served at the collective-farm dining-room (all for free!), especially after a hot days of work! I got so sun-burnt during that week in the fields that to my delight the colour of the skin became close to a mulatto.

One morning our women were awoken by the local collective farm chairman, a handsome dark haired lad, who stood over them in his best white shirt.

- Excuse me, does anyone know how to milk cows?
- We could hardly think, half asleep, as it was 5 o'clock in the morning.
- Pardon?
- Cows - I'm asking if anyone knows how to milk cows.
- Well, we are all urban dwellers...
- Oh, what shall I do?.. It's time to milk the cows, and my girls are all asleep yet... They have been drinking last night...

Thus we were posted on the agricultural problems of the Non-Black Soil Belt. For those who have not yet understood I'll clarify: no one forced me to go to the farm with my mother and work in the fields. I wanted to go myself. I went to the farms as a duty with my schoolmates several times. But the agricultural tour with my mother’s work was absolutely voluntary, I liked it, there was such great company there!

It was also nice in autumn, when we were sent to harvest potatoes. We were often given potatoes for work. It was not necessary, as we bought potatoes in the grocery store or grew them in our own gardens. Nevertheless, that symbolic payment in potatoes came in handy. Once we gathered sugar beet, and found that it was yummy if boiled in a pot! I would sell it in stores, not just make sugar out of it.

My mother's department was like a big family: there were quarrels in it, but at difficult moments they were ready to come to each other's help. Also there were single mothers in it, and even people with disability certificates, one person - with a certificate from a psychiatrist, for schizophrenia. Those people were really privileged, in a humanitarian sense. The law forbade laying them off, and nobody would dare to lay off a woman because she has taken a leave to take care of her sick child. The Trade Union, whose permission was needed to make somebody redundant, would have just bite his head off, if someone would even think to make them redundant. They were the first to be given vouchers to rest homes and spas - with a big discount.

The factory had its own pioneer camp, its own hostel, its subsidiary facilities, a kindergarten, a football team, a club with lots of activities, its own disco, even its own houses and flats, provided for the employees.
of the factory free of charge, and of course, not taken away from them, but passed on to their heirs, even if they changed their jobs, retired or had deceased. Today certain uneducated creeps dare say that we were “poor” in the Soviet times. However, all this seems an unattainable rich fairy-tale now.

...I was deeply frustrated, piqued and distressed at the position taken by Sonny. And I had no idea, that I would very soon meet people who would later become my friends - in the Soviet sense of the word. They were an elderly couple, Adinda and Hendrik de Graaf.

Adinda de Graaf was an old biddy, a former French teacher, one of those who learned Russian in the group of Henrietta. But she wanted to take individual lessons, and asked me to teach her. Grammar came natural to Adinda, maybe it was the effect of her foreign language teacher skills, but she had more problems with speaking, and they were just looking forward to some practice with a visiting music teacher from Moscow ... Hendrik de Graaf was a music teacher by profession and a composer by vocation.... He was a lovely bearded old man, looking like Prince Bernhard.203 He wrote songs about struggle for peace. Adinda and Hendrick were actively involved in the movement against the deployment of American cruise missiles in the Netherlands in the 1980's, about which we talked a lot. And they were treated with great sympathy in the Soviet Union, although they were not Communists. They both spoke three European languages, plus the Dutch. Hendrick's children by his first marriage lived in Germany, and Adinda had no children.

Both of them were born in the Dutch colonies, into the families of colonial officials. Adinda was born in Sumatra, she was the daughter of a school headmaster, and Hendrick was the son of an official in the governor's office in Suriname. He flaunted the fact his ancestors included black slaves, but looking at him, it was hard to believe - he had such an Aryan appearance.

They had absolutely nothing of colonizers. The name of Adinda 204 was Indonesian. They were in striking contrast to the youth in Holland. Humane and sympathetic people seemed to be found only among those who had been born before the war or during it. Such people were a rare exception in the post-war generations. No cynicism, no indifference to others! Adinda took everything happening around her to heart, and even her love for her floppy-eared dog was not repulsive because it did not exceed her compassion for people. Adinda was the first human being who explained to me why the Dutch did not like it when guests came to dinner without warning. - My God, I am not mean, I've simply never cooked more

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203 Prince Bernard was the father of queen Beatrix.
204 Adinda was the character of a famous anti-colonial novel written by the Dutch writer Multatuli “Max Huvelaar”.

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than we can eat together at a time. I would be ashamed that it is so frugal, that a visitor gets almost nothing!

If Adinda saw some kind of injustice, she exclaimed:

- Mensen, kinderen!205 - And then immediately added, - Hendrick, do you think we can do anything to help?

Hendrik was an adventurer, but he travelled not for pleasure, but because he was really interested in life in all its manifestations. Even at eighty five he travelled to Suriname to visit some Indian tribes in the rainforest. There he fell into the river, broke his leg, but even that did not hamper his active way of life. I translated his song into Russian: “No” to cruise missiles!” He invited Russian children's choirs to the Netherlands - not for profit, but simply “to make people friends”. He laughed at Bush the elder when Bill Clinton stepped in:

- Well, where is this Bush of yours now? And Saddam is there to stay! Good for you, Saddam!

Adinda and Hendrick were the few among people in the West who realised what was happening already during the first Gulf War. At the time when Sonny sat glued to the TV-set, watching the first in history bombing “live”, which the entire Western public welcomed with curiosity. Like jackals peering from behind the tiger. Adinda and Hendrick also had no illusions what forces Israel represents...

I continued to give Russian lessons to Adinda, even when she left the group in Enschede. Once a week, I came to her in Almelo on a train, we ordered a table at the cafe in the store "Hema", read and translated, drinking my favourite koffie verkeerd206 and eating cakes (I prefered schwarzwaldenkirschentaart.207 It was not just making a livelihood (50 guilders for 2 hours), but also the fact that it gave me a lot of pleasure just to speak to them. Adinda easily comprehended most complex grammatical constructions, but she was shy to speak Russian. - The most important thing for me is to be able to read letters from Svetlana! - she said shyly. Svetlana was a Moscow colleague of Hendrick, a music teacher and the head of a choir. Adinda was an idealist.

- Hendrik,- she said sometimes,- perhaps you and I should think of learning about computers and the Internet?

- In our next lives, Adi, - he chuckled.

They were slightly obsessed with their “next life”, because of their advanced age. And though their village was luxuriously equipped with a nursing home of which they were well aware, neither Adinda nor Hendrick would like to live long enough to lie helplessly in bed and wait until a stranger - a nurse or an orderly - would wash you and give you something to eat.

"We have asked our doctor to prescribe something for us in this case... not to suffer too long, - shyly said Adi, - but he refused. He said he was a Catholic and had certain principles. Then we went to Germany, and explained our matter to a German doctor, who immediately ordered

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205 People, children! (Dutch).
206 “Wrong coffee” is coffee in which there is more milk than water (Dutch).
207 Black Forest Gateau (Dutch).
everything we needed. They say in Russia: one who searches always finds,\textsuperscript{208} right? So now we are content...

Now, many years later, I remember this couple with great warmth...

...It was my second summer in the Netherlands. I could speak Dutch sufficiently well, and when I read, I understood almost everything. I could speak even better if the Dutch only gave me a chance. But they had a very nasty habit: they answered only in English, as soon as they heard that they were addressed in Dutch with an accent. Now I laugh when I hear them fret and fume that the \textit{allochthonous} ethnic groups do not want to integrate. Isn’t it too late to fret and fume?

The classes ended, it was time to decide what to do next. I had successfully passed the final exams and said goodbye to Shura. Shura intended to move with her husband in Limburg and get a translation training there (I wonder how she could do it with such awful written Russian?). I also decided to get a linguistic education, but more profound than Shura: I intended to pass an entrance test in Dutch in one of universities (it is required of foreigners). The thing that attracted me was that there I could learn not only the Slavic languages, but also Lithuanian, Latvian, and even Georgian. I had not seen this variety of languages at the time even in Moscow!

And again I was in the grips of my “rosy dreams”… At that time, all the Dutch newspapers continued to sing praises to Gorbachev’s Perestroika. And I - I had no illusions about it any more. But I cherished a short-lived and selfish hope that at least there would be a lot of work for those who know the Russian language and the other languages of the peoples of the USSR. Surprisingly, despite all the theoretical knowledge about capitalism and a more limited, but very bad practical experience of it, somewhere deep down I continued to believe that the development of economic and other relations between our countries would benefit both sides. Our country would remain socialist, and in any case, it was sufficiently strong to make sure that this cooperation did not only one-sidedly develop on Western terms… It was extremely naive, like a Perestroika joke in which the workers believed that vodka prices would not go up because “that scientist Sakharov would not permit it”.\textsuperscript{209} And very few people suspected then that our reformers were similar to foxes in a hen-house...

A deep feeling of shame was aroused in me by the program shown that winter on the Dutch television: it was called “Charity. \textit{Help the Russians to survive the winter}!”

What? Was there a war? And even in war, have we ever begged for help?

And only God and Mr. Gorbachev know where the 20 million guilders was deposited, donated by the Dutch, who were moved to pity by the shocking images of the Siamese twins, Masha and Dasha. I suspect that it became the starting capital for some “New Russians”, someone from

\textsuperscript{208} All good things come to those who wait.

\textsuperscript{209} A Russian “anecdote”, i.e. joke.
the current “elite”. As for Masha and Dasha, they might be given at best a bottle of vodka... I could not understand what was actually going on in the USSR. Dutch newspapers painted rosy pictures and pitied the poor Gorbachev, whose progressive reforms were baulked both by all sorts of nasty conservatives, and also by ignorant protesters who take to the streets, so that he has to shoot at them here and there. The communication with the family was rare, they had no phone at home, and to call my mother to work from abroad was not convenient... From letters I could understand too little. “We’ve got a to-do developing”, my former Amharic teacher wrote. “It’s utter chaos. All those who can are trying to leave!” To understand this “all those who can” properly, allow me to add, that the teacher was from a “cultured” Moscow family...

My grandfather died in winter. It was very strange: the day Sonny and I went to the cinema, I rode, as usual, on the trunk of his bike, when an earring fell out of my ear to the ground. Sonny stopped, I snatched it from the ground, and a shiny gem fell out of it. Disappointed, I threw the earring and the stone into the bag and decided I would mend it at home. And what a great surprise it was, when we returned home after the performance, I opened the bag and discovered that the stone was in its place, as if it had not fallen out! I have never seen such things before, it was really eerie! A letter arrived three weeks later, from which I learned that precisely on that day Grandpa died. Maybe it was his last farewell to me... It was the first loss in my family, and I repented for a long time that I had not bid him farewell, when I was leaving for Holland: he was sleeping, and I did not want to wake him up...

...So, it is summer, the classes were over, but there was still a month before the exam to the university... I had obtained a permit to work, but there was no work. There was none at all, even a temporary one! It was awful luck, if you could be hired for a day or two to work at a factory, which produced salads in cans. To find a job, we had to leave Enschede, but Sonny continued his studies there! We decided to go for the summer to his family - in Tilburg, in the south of the Netherlands, where Señor Arturo had already moved. He was renting a room in the apartment of Harold - Sonny’s cousin - a bespectacled intellectual and a close friend of Sonny. Both of us were able to find a job there for the summer.

Tilburg was called none other than a “moderne industrie stad” in tourist brochures, but tourists came there very rarely. There are no special historical attractions in it as in Enschede, but the atmosphere there is somewhat brighter. Perhaps it is owing to Brabanters, the vast majority of whom have Catholic roots, their culture being closer to the Flemish than the sober and boring Protestant Twente inhabitants.

In Tilburg there were wide green streets with shady trees. It is a place for the summer funfair, largest in the Benelux, called Kermis. At the

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210 Modern industrial city.
211 Brabant is a province in the south of “Netherlands”.
212 Twente is the area in the very east of the “Netherlands” in the Overijssel province.
time of Kermis all the traffic on Main Street was blocked and attractions were built directly on it. Kermis lasts a full week in July. I got acquainted with numerous Sonny’s relatives in Tilburg.

It resembles the custom in our country, for families to group together. Antilleans moving to the Netherlands settled mostly where some of their relatives already lived. In Tilburg lived: Sonny's uncle Umberto, his wife Marbella, their little daughter Ashanti, pretty as a picture, Marbella’s sister Bianca, her other sister’s son - a fifteen year-old by name of Antonio, the son of one of Sonny’s aunts, already mentioned Harold (Harry) and Marilena, daughter of Umberto’s friend, a policeman from Curacao... Another branch of the family settled in Apeldoorn.

The Dutch have a heap of prejudices against Antilleans, which I did not know at the time. For example, they believe that all Antilleans are involved in criminal business and do not want to work. I haven’t met such Antilleans. Everyone, who had a chance to, worked or studied with pleasure and diligence. Uncle Umberto was in Holland to upgrade his skills, or improve qualifications, as we say in Russia. He held a very good position in Curacao and intended to return there. Of all Sonny’s uncles (and he has 8 only on his mother’s side!), he was the most prosperous. Capitalism had left its imprint on Sonny's entire family. They were materialists - not in the Marxist meaning of this word (materialism as a scientific view on reality), but in the modern capitalist sense. Material wealth and acquisitions were the most important things for them. Umberto was black, like Sonny, Marbella was of Hispanic blood. Her sister Omayra, which I later met in Curacao, was a complete contrast to he; she assured me that Marbella had married Umberto only for money. I do not know whether it was true or not, but they had a strong wedlock, reinforced by the material interests, like that of David Beckham. They have six children by now...

Antilleans were completely different to the Dutch in many respects. They were informal, open, and merry. Anyone who has ever been at an Antillean party would understand what I mean. Fiery Latino rhythms, laughter, singing... Really delicious food: sopi di kabritu, galina stoba, Johnny cakes, funchi, kos di lechi di koko, genti di kacho, keshi yena, empana...

My favorite drink is still poncho krema. It is customary to take children of all ages to such parties, including infants, although they

213 Soup with chevon.
214 Braised chicken.
215 Fried in oil a piece of dough of a special shape, which incised when it is still warm, and a piece of cheese put in it and fuse.
216 A kind of mush, similar to semolina, like West-African fufu
217 “Antilles” sweets made from coconut milk.
218 Literally “dog’s teeth” is a kind of sweets.
219 Farci piece of cheese.
220 “Antilles” cakes.
221 Poncho krema is a Venezuelan liqueur, made from rum mixed with milk, eggs, sugar, vanilla, lemon and cinnamon.
usually last well past midnight. Russians usually go home when the hosts, themselves and their children are tired. Antillean children run from room to room and play with each other till they drop, in the literal sense of this word. When they drop from exhaustion, they are brought to one of the designated quiet rooms, where a spread-out sofa is waiting for them, and ramped on it one after another... After the "civilized" Dutch society in which we can speak only what we are supposed to - which is deemed "progressive" by most Dutch - and you can come to visit somebody only on agreement two weeks in advance, my soul was literally refreshed among Antilleans. Nobody asks you why you are here and when you will finally leave for your country. Everyone understands what you mean when you call the Dutch "freedom" by the apt word "porkeria". - The Dutch take a bath only once a week. In Rotterdam, there is a church that provides narcotics. My Dutch neighbours go to the club for swingers. - Ay dios! Che! Porkeria, swa! Nan ta porko!223

We stopped at Harold’s house. As all the bed rooms had already been occupied, we slept on the floor in the living room. Since it was only for the summer, Harold said that we would not give him a slightest interference, and he was very pleased. Harold’s father was from the island of St. Maarten, so English was his second native language. I noticed that Antilleans are better disposed to you, if you speak English, rather than Dutch. Many Antilleans naively see Americans as the nation opposed to the Dutch colonialists. Apparently they are not familiar with the saying “to trade bad for worse”. And not only that: Antilleans grow up nurtured on American television and American popular culture to a much greater degree than Europeans. Everyone who can afford it, send their children to study in America. Those who cannot afford it, send them to Holland. Everything brand-new from America comes to the Antilles faster than to Europe. I saw there jeeps, security guards in shops and American refrigerators at the time, when in Europe such things were unknown.

One of the Harold’s rooms was occupied by Shantell, just arrived from Curacao, the younger sister of Sonny. She was seventeen years old and still at school. She was shy, though one could feel that she did have strong character. She was a nice girl, whose appearance was completely different then Sonny’s. She had no Zomerberg’s firm almond-shaped eyes: Shantell had her maternal ancestry’s appearance.

Señor Arturo was very glad when she arrived. He genuinely loved his family, missed it and could not wait when they finally reunited. Even with his modest allowance he managed to put aside a small amount of money for gifts to his wife and daughter. It always amazed me, how he did it. Soon Señor Arturo moved to the apartment that he rented for himself and Sonny’s mother, Louisa, from her sister Imelda, and there was enough room for the whole family. When Louisa herself would arrive and why she hadn’t come to Holland with her daughter, remained unclear.

I hoped that we would be friends with Shantell, but somehow that didn’t work out. Yes, our relations were decent, but they never became

222 Piggishness (Papiamento).
223 Oh my God! What piggishness, mates! They are pigs! (Papiamento).
really close. Shantell had lots of her own problems in Holland, similar to mine, but even more serious. Figuratively, while I was still "afloat", Shantell was almost literally drowning. She couldn’t find her place here. Shantell took a training as a confectioner, a hairdresser and a secretary. But somehow she didn’t study with heart. Besides, she had problems with her studies because of language difficulties - although Antilleans have all subjects taught in Dutch from primary school, that actually caused more difficulties as it is important to begin your education in your own language in primary school rather than being simply dumped into a foreign one. She didn’t make friends in the new place. Shantell shunned the Dutch - after several unpleasant meetings with them, disapproving of them even more than I did, and associated only with her “own people”. Taking into account the way the Dutch treat Antilleans, it is difficult to blame her. It was hard for her to get used to the fact that in Holland she couldn’t afford the things she wanted: she had been pampered at home. But even this was of secondary importance - the main thing was that she just felt like an alien in Holland, and everything there was alien to her. She missed the Antilles so much that the next few years - virtually every year - she went back with an intention not to return to Holland any more. But each time she was forced to go back again - because she couldn’t find work in Curacao. And how then would you live - on what money? For this reason - and not because they want to live in Holland! - Antilleans leave their home island...

From that summer on I started to have fits of depression: at that time as short as a summer thunderstorm, which is why I did not realize what was happening to me. I had sudden attacks of depression, when I wanted to cry, and if there was no obvious reason, I was looking for a pretext - a momentum to start howling. I wanted someone to pity me, but there was nobody to do this. Sonny’d hit a bad patch in his life aside from my problems: his relatives looked up to him as a “settler” of all their problems, and they appealed to him with all their difficulties. From "Sonny, tell Shantell that she has to come to her senses and begin to study!" to "Sonny, the people who we have let our house in Curacao haven’t paid for it for 3 months. Talk to them, please!" Sonny had never refused any of them - he was very serious about his manly responsibilities in the house. When I think now about his mental load, it gives me shivers. And he had never complained to anybody and kept all his emotions to himself. He took all responsibility that he could bear on his manly shoulders - and the price for this was that he believed himself to have the right to make decisions single-handedly. At first you feel with such a man as safe as "behind a stone wall", as the Russians say, that it, very safe. But after a while you feel like the wall is about to fall down and you’ll be smashed...

Nobody told me, what the Antillean culture was like - what was acceptable there and what was not. There were no books about it. You had to learn everything by experience, as the Dutch say “met vallen en opstaan”.

224 Vallen en opstaan – fall and stand up (Dutch).
so. It just had to be so, and that was it. I remember how surprised I was when Sonny met his classmate on the street in Tilburg. They started a lively conversation in Papiamento. I stood next to him as a stranger, and Sonny didn’t even introduce me, or say: “This is my wife”. Maybe it was okay for Antilleans? It was very unpleasant… But in general, their attitude towards women was romantic and gallant - it suited me much more than the Dutch one. The Dutch were “ongebakken machos” 225: on the one hand, they did not take women seriously and treated them as second-class beings, especially in professional spheres, on the other hand, they were stampeded by not knowing how to talk to them and how to please them. Perhaps one was somehow connected with the other. I confess, the Dutch males repel me.

I felt like a birch transplanted in alien soil, I was mentally anguishing. Whether I would overcome it and take well in a new place, or wouldn’t survive during the process and wither at the root... So far I felt more like the second.

To find a job in Tilburg was fortunately much easier than in Enschede. I found it already during the first week: at a McDonald’s restaurant. For those who begin to (rightfully) frown reading that title, I feel I should explain, that it was the time when McDonald’s had just opened in Russia and was considered to be the latest rage. It was the time when Yulian Semenov226 eulogized it in his “TASS Is Authorized to State” - without really any idea about their quality. He was merely overenthusiastic about the “brand”. So do not be surprised and do not curl your lip, if I tell you that I was really proud when I got that work nearly immediately. Shantell was trying to get a job at McDonald’s with me, but they refused her. They took me - they rightly interpreted the expression on my face. I would work hard, like a draft horse, “to justify their trust”...

I was somewhat surprised that the juniors were paid so much less for the same work: the restaurant didn’t want to hire 16-year-olds, as, by law, they could not be left to work night shifts, so the best for the restaurant was to hire 18-20-year-olds, for since you are 21 years old, they have to pay you the maximum rate. In fact, they didn’t take Shantell because of her age - too young for evening shifts. But it dealt a serious blow to her faith in herself. If she wasn’t able to get even that work...

At least now I would scrounge off neither Sonny, nor the government any more, and I will honestly “earn my bread crust”! I haven’t really hoped that I would enter the Dutch university that year. I still heard obese Marinus and his family’s ringing insulting laughter, when I called the orange “appelsientje”. “Appelsientje” turned out to be a brand of orange juice. And the orange is known in Dutch as “sinasappel”. Why

225 Underroasted macho (Dutch).
226 Yulian Semenov (1931 - 1993) was a Soviet writer of spy and crime fiction. The film made after his novel "Seventeen moments of spring" still remains one of the favourite on Russian TV. In it Soviet spy Colonel Isaev works in deep cover in Berlin during Second World War.
they laugh at it, is to be found out from the Dutch norms and values experts...

...The first lesson I learned at McDonald's is that today's capitalist is not satisfied if you just "work sweat": as a director of the famous Yuri Nikulin's clownery, he needs his "typical hard workers" to "work cheerfully and even more cheerfully sweat"! "The culture of enforced fun" begins on the lowest steps of the "entry into society" ladder...

Today, looking at numerous job offers that advertise work at that restaurant in swarming with vacancies Dublin, I amusedly remember what joy it was for me to get something, anything, even that job in Tilburg. I felt proud as a peacock - because I'd earn a living myself, for me it was one of the main criteria of self-respect. What is McDonald's and what role it plays in the global economy, I honestly didn't even think about. The first two weeks my job was scrubbing the floor. (Again, this is not something what I am ashamed of - in the USSR we were brought up to respect all types of work - and I write this not in a plaintive mood: not like "look at me, a poor girl with higher education, who is forced to scrub the floor"! It was nothing special to me.) Then they set me in the kitchen. I worked hard because of my young age, and I didn't care that I had to work six days a week, and during the famous Tilburg fair Kermis, I worked till two or three o'clock in the morning every day. After all, we were paid for hours. The more the better.

I was twenty four - pretty expensive for the restaurant - but I worked so hard, that replaced at least two workers. That's why they preferred to keep me in the kitchen - firstly, not all customers liked my accent, and secondly, sometimes five cashiers were selling at the same time food I was cooking alone, running from one grill to another. However I didn't care: I was a shy, quiet girl and the work in the kitchen with its mechanical menial character helped me to relax from the mental load...

The work in the kitchen of such a restaurant is similar to work on the assembly line. Creativity, of course, is not required. After a while your movements gain such automatism, that your head is completely "turned off" during the work. It's easy to work on the toast line with bread. Even the number of burns was low: except in case the bread gets burnt, and you have to pick it up with your hands. The work on the dressing is even simpler: one "shot" from a ketchup "pistol", one - from a mustard "pistol", then a pinch of onion, a couple of pickle's wheels and - depending on the order - one piece of cheese. We tried to economize on cheese and sometimes even removed it from finished rolls and put it back: one slice cost 40 cents! The only disadvantage was that after the shift on "dressing" my hands had a awful smell of onions, and it was impossible to get rid of it for a few days, whether you washed them or not. The work on the grill was not a pleasant one, boiling fat could seriously burn your hands. After a couple of months of the work, your hands would have small red marks, some of which wouldn't come off all your life. And after a long standing near the hot stove I got flush, although I had never had it before. The most dangerous work, if we speak about the burns, is the work on fries. The really pleasant one is the work with chicken, although you can get burns there too.
The conversation in the kitchen was a mixture of Dutch words with English commands: “Twaalf petties down!” I noticed that women in Holland carry heavy loads (in our case - heavy boxes of frozen potatoes from the pantry), and nobody thinks that it may be harmful for their health. In the Soviet times we had strict rules on that point. In the present “free-from-the-yoke-of-communism” Russia we have female “weightlifters” - like in the “civilised” West, and mothers with young kids are forced to work night shifts without a twinge of conscience from employers. You don’t want to? - Quit!..

The worst thing was probably standing on my feet for many hours, but you don’t notice it, when you are young. You could eat restaurant food - for half the price (drinks were free, except for milkshakes). The belief that everything is fresh in a McDonald’s is of course pure nonsense. Fresh - in the sense that nothing is kept on the counter for more than ten minutes (after this period of time it’s impossible to eat that food anyway); but everything is frozen, including the ingredients for salads. Onions are dried. We poured them with water and let them swell for half an hour. On the boxes with potatoes and meat one could see the dates of manufacture: the majority of boxes were already several years old! The meat was the telltale British beef. At that time nobody knew what it was.

The restaurant was mostly staffed with young Dutch: they were either not well educated or students. There were not too many foreigners: a pair of Surinamese, which was all. I had decent relationships with my new colleagues, I didn’t feel an outsider in the team. And once I even became the “Employee of the Month”. In Holland there are two kinds of McDonald’s: belonging to the corporation and franchisees. Ours was a franchisee’s. From time to time the owner visited, one of those who, by the words of the Russian advertisement of Yeltsin’s times, “didn’t work himself, but money was working for him”. Well - and we, of course. When he appeared, the managers and workers were working like mad. I liked our manager - a cheerful Dutchman with Indonesian blood, who didn’t shirk hard work and worked together with us in the kitchen, when it was necessary. But watching him fawning upon our boss was disgusting.

During the Kermis times the restaurant worked every day till two or even three in the morning - depending on the inrush of customers. Even the toilets at that time were paid. The kitchen was unbearably hot, all the windows were open, and outside the window continuous music was rattling and the amusements inviting lights were flashing. Till its closure late at night. On those days Sonny picked me up on his bicycle - he worried how I would get home alone. It took forty minutes of fast bike riding to reach Harold’s house. (During those nights the city was full of drunks, who were returning from the fair.)

Sonny also got a job - in Tilburg there ware lots of plants. However, while I’d got a regular job, Sonny had a temporary one - here and there - and nowhere. After work, he immediately went to bed - the alarm was set at one o’clock in the morning to wake him up and fetch me. After we came back, he went to bed for another couple of hours: he had

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227 Twelve hamburgers on the stove.
to wake up a seven. I worked mostly in the afternoon. With such a crazy rhythm of life, we almost had no possibility to visit the fair (only once in the whole week), as well as to spend some time with each other.

But I was satisfied with my life: after a year of living on the allowance of about 800 guilders per month, 1500 and more seemed to be unprecedented money. (By comparison: our apartment in Enschede cost about 500 guilders a month!) Satisfied so much that I even didn’t want to quit the job in case I entered the university. Evidently, in that case, it would be impossible for me to have a full time job.

I passed the exam in July, not particularly reckoning for success. The daily interaction with my Dutch colleagues obviously helped me. I remember that old university town with its cobblestone streets, windmill and boats in the canals, which I had visited before, during my first trip to Holland. I couldn’t even dream about studying here. The exam itself, to my surprise, seemed easy enough. On the way back I was surprised to see something that had never noticed before: how many streets were named after the royal family’s members! Beatrix-Lane, Prince Claus Street, Prince Bernard Quay... And they are the same - in every Dutch city! In every village. And after that the Dutch still dare to laugh at the fact that in every Soviet city there was a street named after Lenin? In Russia we say: one sees the speck in another one's eye and ignores the beam in his own...

In August when I was still working at the McDonald's the news of Gorbachev’s overturn (known in English as the “1991 Coup”) came in. The State Committee for Emergency (GKChP) seized power in the USSR. At the restaurant everybody was offering me their condolences about the "establishment of a dictatorship" and asked if all my relatives had been shot(!), but I was not afraid. I detested Gorbachev profoundly. (I had already put up with the fact that it was useless to explain it to the Dutch - so thoroughly brainwashed they were!) But I had never had a feeling that what was established would be durable. I do not know why, but from the very onset I was haunted by the thought that it was an incredible, almost phantasmagoric theatrical farce. No serious party to the plot would have left Yeltsin alive and let him harangue from a tank under the flying cameras of the CNN.

After three days it was over. The Western TV stations broadcast programs in the tinsel-style, finishing with "and they began to live happily ever after". It was hard to imagine what would happen next. People couldn’t even imagine then how massively we could be manipulated. We - and the whole world at the moment - were still quite inexperienced in the technology of "colour revolutions". (And it’s so annoying that the Ukrainians, Serbs and Georgians have not learned from our experience!) I wasn’t an exception in that situation.

We should have become more cautious when we found out where Yeltsin was directing his steps if his White House was going to be attacked. If someone forgot or did not know - to the American Embassy! But we hated Gorbachev so much, that we believed nothing worse could
happen. Many were even sincerely happy that the West had finally "opened its eyes to reality" and abandoned support for its pet. In fact, the West by then, apparently, had realised, what kind of personality was Boris Nikolayevich, and how they could use him. Didn't like Gorbachev, did you, folks? Well, get your Yeltsin, then...

It is surprising how easily and carelessly we could sell our home and everything that our forefathers and fathers had fought for - to the man who bought us by the trifling things: a couple of times he went to work on the subway and visited a few shops on foot - for a used pack of fine words about democracy, sovereignty, market economy and the "500 days" program, after which "we all would live like lords". Not a soul remembers that now. In the West, people are taught to protect themselves from the frauds and scams: "if you feel their promises are too good to be true, they usually are". But we hadn't had experience of prevention against various thimbleriggers, including political spin-doctors (the brand of Western democracy) - there had been no such need before, because we had been protected by the Soviet government from all that crap.

And when nowadays I see the election somewhere in Zimbabwe, where people vote for the opposition, just because they think that "it wouldn't be worse" I want to call: "My dears! You would be much worse off, believe me!" My criterion of the leader’s evaluation is now based on the principle old as the hills: Tell me who your friends are and I'll tell you what kind of policy you will adopt when you come the power. Save the words of freedom and democracy for imbeciles!

... Soon after that, I received a letter saying that I had entered the university. There was nothing to do but to live and rejoice.

By September we had to decide where to live and what to do. My University was too far away from Enschede. It was almost hour and a half from Tilburg by train. By that time the Dutch had already introduced OV Jaarkaart for students, and Sonny made a heroic decision: we would give up the apartment in Enschede, and stay at Bianca's place. She rented out a room (illegally, because she was on the social), from where both of us had to go from Tilburg to our respective cities to study every day. More than anything, Sonny wanted to live in Rotterdam, where there were a lot of Antilleans and he had pretty many friends. However, it was a kind of "non-science fiction": almost for decades people had been queuing up to rent accommodation in Rotterdam from housing corporations, and we couldn't afford to rent an apartment from a private landlord. There was only hope against hope.

I still wonder how we managed to squeeze in one small room everything that we had kept in Enschede in two rooms. Our bicycles hung over our heads from the wall. Sonny got up every day almost at five in the morning. He had to go to Enschede to his practice, and he spent on the trains four to five hours every day. My road to the university was shorter,

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229 Ambitious program of transition to “the market economy” in just 500 days written by Gregory Yavlinsky and S. Shatalin that virtually promised the people paradise on earth after such transition.

230 Annual public transport ticket for students (Dutch).
but it was difficult for me too. Two months later one morning Sonny stood up - and suddenly fell unconscious near the refrigerator, which we also had squeezed into our little room. So tired he was. I was very scared, but Sonny came to within a second and tried to assure me that nothing terrible had happened...

   Living in someone else's house was uncomfortable, Bianca reminded me of the Snow Queen - not in appearance, of course: she was a fat, unattractive woman, with small eyes - but in nature. I tried not to breathe and even not to go to the kitchen more than was absolutely necessary. The only person who brightened up my life within the four walls of that house was Marilena - the daughter of a policeman from Curacao, who also rented a room from Bianca, next to us. It was a kind and cheerful girl, who studied in Holland to be a designer. But in December she got into in a serious car accident and injured her back. And although her injury wasn’t too dangerous, for Marilena, who was already pining for home, it was the last straw. Once she was released from the hospital, she flew back directly to Curacao with a metal hoop around the head, which hadn’t been removed yet: she didn’t want to miss Christmas...

   Life at the university proved to be quite interesting, but still not quite what I’d expected. Firstly I was excused from attending many classes in Russian, so I didn’t strike up a close friendship with other students: we didn’t spend too much time together. Secondly, the languages that I wanted so much to learn turned out to be either taught in terms of historical grammar: no one taught you to speak modern languages; during the course we were comparing modern Lithuanian grammar with, for example, the Lithuanian language of the seventeenth century(?!), or were taught modern languages in an original way: for example, at the lessons of Georgian we were not taught the Georgian alphabet itself: all the texts were given in Latin transcription. And even more traditional Slavic languages were taught by professors who knew their grammar, but couldn’t actually speak them! Well... that’s the face of the vaunted European education! I’ve never seen anything like this before.

   I was frustrated and quit several courses I had signed up for. Fortunately, they could be neglected: there were only a few compulsory subjects, and for other you only needed to get a required number of points for the whole year. Nobody cared what you were actually studying. My overall impression about the Dutch system of higher education is an amazing lack of system! The knowledge was given in some fragmented pieces: a piece of that, a bit of this... The Soviet system, in comparison, might be associated with a solid construction, which is build brick by brick on the broadest foundation. The Dutch education is an eclectic agglomerate built on sand.

   Studying was easy enough, despite the fact that all the lectures and textbooks were written in the foreign language that I was studying only for one year. I think it was thanks to my Soviet foundation. I had a feeling that studying in Moscow - in my native language - was more difficult. The requirements were higher, the knowledge - deeper. The volume of knowledge was greater. I was thunderstruck by easy
choice" tests. Every idiot could pass them in the Soviet Union - with a slightest capacity for logic!

But the Dutch students complained that the tests were difficult... However, when I saw on a television program in which some Dutch who had graduated from school couldn’t show on the map their own country(!), it ceased to amaze me.

One of the compulsory subjects in my first year was the introduction in *Ruslandkunde*\(^{231}\) - a sort of Sovietology in Dutch. It was not only the history of our country - in from the Dutch perspective, but also social studies, economics and even law. In other words - a grab-bag.

After the first year, you could choose that direction as a specialization, in order to become an expert (*deskundige*) in Eastern Europe and give "wise" comments somewhere in TV programs of the *Aktualiteiten* rubric. When I first read the tutorial for this subject, it made my blood creep. This was the book which was proclaimed that our women are working because their husbands do not earn enough money to live on (!) There were a lot more nonsense claimed. For example - quite seriously - that the USSR had no Labour Unions. Such "experts" - in whose own country there’re almost no female doctors or female professors, apparently because their husbands do earn enough! - graduate from Dutch’s higher schools...

I was happy when this course came to the end. I was unable to lie about my own country only to pass the exam, and therefore answering the question whether the Bolsheviks’ power was legitimate or not, I wrote a lengthy sentence, the meaning of which added up to that if you look at it from the Western perspective, it was not (otherwise I knew I couldn’t pass the test!). But who said that we all ought to look at history from the Western point of view?...

...The most disgusting times for me in Holland in the year were Christmas and New Year. I couldn’t get used to the dark, wet, cold streets without snow. Longing for home in those weeks became so strong that I almost wanted to cry. I was still afraid to go home - because I didn’t ask permission to marry in the Netherlands. Who knows how long the authorities would make me to stay there... The emigrant press and our home-grown Dutch experts on Soviet affairs and teachers intimidated such folk as I that we would be prosecuted as traitors. How long I had to stay in Holland until I was able to see my family, wasn’t clear. And that was why I felt sort of blue.

But on New Year a small miracle happened: we were responded to our ad in a Rotterdam newspaper that "a serious young couple was looking for an apartment"! She spoke with a strange accent, and her name was clearly not Dutch - Popescu, but what’s the odds! On the next day off we went to Rotterdam to take a look at the apartment.

The house was located in a historical district in Western Rotterdam. There we immediately felt at home - there were all kinds of nationalities there! Turks and Arabs, Surinamese and Antilleans, Yugoslavs and Chinese. And even a whole neighbourhood of people from the Cape

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\(^{231}\) *Ruslandkunde* – Studies on “Russia” (Dutch).
No one looked at you askance if you were not blond. Visa versa you were looked askance at if you were.

I had to wait for Madam Popescu for a long time: she was late for almost an hour and I was ready to burst into tears when she finally appeared. She was a young - younger than me - pretty girl, but tied down by a small child; she was a dyed blonde but her dyeing was made so unskilfully that she looked red.

- Suzanne - she introduced herself. - Sorry for the delay, we were visiting our aunt in Brussels. A middle-aged lady with a resolute face - her mother - strode right behind her. We went up the old stairs, worn off by thousands of boots, right inside the house. Popescu owned the ground floor, on the first one lived some Dutch artists. The front door was conjoint. The house was built in 1911 which is a rarity in Rotterdam, it was almost entirely destroyed by bombing during the war. It looked like it hadn’t been repaired since then. There were high ceilings, two rooms separated by the glass partitions and the door (the floor in one room was higher than in the other), a kitchen, a tiny utility room and a biffy on the floor area of two square meters.

- Here in the basement we have some stuff, - said Madame Popescu’s mother.

- We'll take it later. In the room, whose windows faced the street, the gas fireplace was built - the only one way of heating the whole house. In the second room, which faced a small triangular garden surrounded from all sides by the same old sullen houses, there were no radiators at all. Nor were there any in the kitchen. The stairway led from the window to the garden, using which you might reach the door to the basement - the underground floor. I’ve seen in Amsterdam the basements in such houses being restored and leased for housing. But here was the utter devastation: some old couches stood there and lamps and jars of pickles which Madame Popescu obviously was going to take away from there some day. She opened one of the cans with her hands pulled out a big canned red pepper and ate it with gusto. Suzanne’s mother led almost the entire conversation. This scene was so strange that I couldn’t resist to ask them how they had got that apartment.

- We inherited it from my grandmother, - explained Suzanne. Her face was frank and open. - Is it all right?

I and Sonny looked at each other. Despite the deplorable state of the flat, for us it was a palace: two rooms, a garden and only half an hour’s way by tram from the centre of Rotterdam! The tram was right there, around the corner, just two minutes from home.

- That's a deal.

- 600 guilders per month. (And only 100 guilders more than our hut in Enschede cost!) With the advance deposit. I will come to take the money myself. Now my Mom and I are live in Schiedam. This is my phone number.

So we signed the contract.

- What to write - for a year or for two? - the mother asked.

- We would like it for an indefinite time.

- Let it be undefined, that’s even better! - Suzanne agreed.
We still didn’t know that there was our salvation in this phrase.

...In mid-January we moved to Rotterdam. It was only half of an hour for me to travel to the university by train, and Sonny was preparing to go back home in Curacao for six months training, so he didn’t have to stay here long. Señor Arturo still didn’t receive the housing in Tilburg so we decided to take him with us temporarily. Moreover, now there was enough place for everybody! The mood was festive.

We arrived at Nieuwe Westen 232 on Saturday but in order to reformulate the gas and electricity supply on our name we had to wait until Monday. For two days our teeth chattered, and all three of us slept in winter coats, covered by all the blankets we had...

After that the gas stove worked in the house almost through the day. The bills for gas were surreal! But it was the only way to get warm somehow. Señor Arturo kept a portable electric heater beside the bed in his room, but still had to sleep with a heating pad. The home’s water was heated with a gas column (geyser) in the kitchen, like in some of our "khrushchevkas" 233. Periodically the geyser spontaneously extinguished, and we inflamed it, risking our lives (who knows, maybe the gas was still coming out?). It was so cold in the bathroom that we bought a separate heater for it. The floor after a shower wasn’t drying for days and the black mould instantly spread across the walls. The windows in the room which faced the street were constantly draped – it was not very nice when passers-bys watched you from the street. And it was at once clear that we weren’t the Dutch: they curtain their windows very rarely!

A couple of months passed, and we were quite accustomed to the new place. Finally, we lived in a big, international city! That’s what I dreamed about, that was the little thing because of which I still had a liking for Holland...

The quarters had bad reputation, but nothing happened to us through the five years of living there. Once you were known in the quarters as locals you become treated accordingly. The Moroccan neighbour from the coffee-shop helped me to convey home a Christmas tree in a bucket (Sonny was crucially against celebrating any holiday, and in such cases I adorned the house alone). Everything was near: the tram, the metro, even a convenience store whose owner was a man from Cape Verde, who had initially taken Sonny for his compatriot! Round the block from us there was a half-Surinamese "Chinatown", where you were able to have a snack - a tasty roti. (Exactly there Sonny would later find his second wife, Chun-Li). On the opposite side of the street there was a mosque, on one side of which there was a shop selling delicious fresh Turkish bread, like pitta in Georgia. The Dutch were such a rarity in our neighbourhood that when the elections took place at the school, located behind the mosque, and 2-3 true Aryans appeared on the street, people looked at them as if they were from the moon, and they were even afraid of us! The Dutch had never been notable for courage, despite their long tongues (grote bek).

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232 Quarter in Rotterdam-West.
233[52] Apartment in the building constructed in the times of Nikita Khrushchev.
The neighbours on the other side were Moroccans. They lived above the archway leading to the garage and warehouse, which spread behind our house. The neighbours were quiet, pleasant. Periodically, their children threw their old school notebooks into our garden. Well - good, that not nappies. (By the time our relationships with Sonny had reached the boiling point, the outer wall with a ladder at Moroccan neighbour’s place collapsed during the night, and the government immediately gave them a new apartment, and the wall was boarded up with plywood hastily. The house lived out its last days.) An artist from above, with whom we shared the front door, Caroline, was a very small and skinny girl with a large heavy old-fashioned Dutch bicycle. Despite her fragility, she made a great noise above our heads, when she was walking in her room - such creaking floors we had. On the other side we had the coffee shop wall. You've probably heard what the Dutch coffee shop is. That's right, a place where it is allowed to sell "light" drugs. The owner, also Moroccan, was very polite, and the coffee shop itself - very calm, although there were lots of clients: cars pulled up and off before you could say Jack knife. The only one who disturbed us, was the Dutch neighbour in the next house: the entire week he kept silence, but on Saturday, in the dead of night, around four a.m., rock music began to rattle - so loud, that the walls were shaking. Sonny just pulled the blanket over his head and remained silent. It was I who called the police in such cases...

...Another spring came. "Spring is here, chirp-chirp-click-click..." the spirits became higher, the gas bills became lower. As for the rent, Madame Popescu regularly came once a month for her mail and money. She had a key from the front door. We no longer saw anything unusual in the fact that a Romanian immigrant owns some ruin in the old part of Rotterdam, which is inherited from her grandmother: who knows, Maybe this grandmother emigrated to Holland right after the Second World War, and then just brought her relatives there...

In March, Sonny went to Curacao - to have an internship in his specialty. He hadn’t been home for several years and he was preparing for this trip impatiently. It was a pity we had to part, but I promised him to come for the summer vacation. Since I became a student, I at first got the half-rate at my McDonald's in Tilburg (the manager was not very happy to lose a good full-team worker, but he didn’t argue), and then, when we moved to Rotterdam, I also got a part-time job - at the local McDonald's, where our acquaintance Aidan worked as the host. I worked Wednesdays and Sundays and saved my earnings for the upcoming trip.

Tilburg was not the worst place where I had an occasion to work. At my new job - near the Feyenoord stadium - during the football matches I had to sneak into the restaurant under the protection of the Mounted Police.

While our Indonesian Tilburg manager at difficult moments rolled up his sleeves and joined us in the kitchen with songs and jingles, to expect the same behaviour from Rotterdam managers was absurd. But there were more foreigners there, and I immediately made friends with them - with Greeks, Moroccans, Turks, Antilleans and Surinamese. Managers counted every piece that we ate. Once I even lost my temper...
and responded to the remark of one of them: “I’ve paid for what I eat!”

They usually forbade us to take food home, even after closing the restaurant when it was thrown away anyway (among us were those whose who had at home five or six children, and parents had no choice, what to eat). Sometimes, when they were throwing the food before out faces, a plump mama's boy (or girl), working exclusively for his (or her) own pocket money, cheerfully proclaimed to the entire kitchen, dumping over a full tray in the trash: "This is for Ethiopia! This is for Zimbabwe!" And laughed.

After a while some of our things started to disappear. A migrant worker’s brand-new bike disappeared from a private courtyard of the restaurant. Instead, the administration gave him a cheap watch with apologies. A few months later the thief was suddenly revealed. By rather a heterodox method: the anonymity claimed that under the guise of customers, guests from corporate headquarters planted the purse. The guy who found it - a cleaner, a “migrant worker”; honestly gave it to the manager. Some time later the owner came back for his wallet, but the manager told him that we hadn’t found any purse. The purse was hidden in a safe. There was only about 200 guilders in it. A trifle, compared with the manager’s salary. They asked the thief to resign voluntarily.

Six months later I met him at the airport, in another public catering facility, where he was managing again "some migrant workers", teaching them how to work! I bet if the thief had not been a blond Dutchman, this scandal would have appeared in all the newspapers, with a precise indication of the geographical position of the country, from where the thief’s ancestors had come.

...Sonny was gone, and Señor Arturo and I were left alone. We got along well, cooking dinner in turns and talking about politics in the evenings. Unlike Sonny, he was not annoyed by my habit of commenting on news aloud. I'm used to it from childhood, when we all watched the evening program "Time" - conducting a kind of dialogue with TV. Sonny hated it, but Señor Arturo - no.

Periodically, Sonny called, sometimes even at night (due to time difference) and was very offended when I said: "You know, what time it is?" In the sphere of feelings Sonny was a maximalist: in his view, a person who loves you would be so happy to hear your voice, that wouldn’t ask such a question. But I had just returned from an evening shift at McDonald's, and in the morning I had an exam...

...A few weeks after Sonny’s departure an unfamiliar respectable Dutch gentleman knocked on the door and asked for Madame Popescu.

- But she no longer lives here! - I said.
- That's interesting... - he said. - She rented a housing for her, and has not pay for it for three months now. Excuse me, and who are you?

My heart missed a beat and dropped in my stomach.

It made no sense to keep anything back, and I honestly told him who we were and how we had got there. The gentleman was deeply shocked - no, not because of us, but because of Madame Popescu. It turned out that the housing was owned by one of the Rotterdam housing
Irina Malenko

corporations, where Madame Popescu rented it. But she hadn't paid for the last several months, so he came to find out what was wrong.

- Beg your pardon for my indiscreet question, but how much do you pay her?
  I said. The gentleman seized at his heart.
- Do you know how much this apartment really costs?
  Of course, I didn't know.
- 220 guilders 41 cents per month. What she is doing to you is a blatant robbery!

It was my turn to clutch my heart - and not so much because I grudged the money, but I was scared: what would happen now? Sonny's far away... What if we would be tossed out on the street? Hearing the sound of conversation, Señor Arturo came in. When he realized what was going on, he also clutched his heart. I showed the Dutchman the signed contract with Madam Popescu.

- It's good that you've got this document - he said encouragingly. - Better still, that it says “for indefinite time”. If there was a certain time - well, say, a year, then next year she might turn you out. Now - I suggest you take this document and go to a good lawyer. And don't be afraid, no one will evict you. At least we will not. And she as well - she has no right, because it is not her property.

I asked him to start paying to the housing corporation.
- No, you're not supposed to. We have a contract with mevrouw Popescu, not with you. The longer she does not pay us, the sooner we can cancel that contract with her through the legal proceedings - you see? Actually, this may take a long time. Even a year. And after this we will sign a contract with you. And you will stay in this place. I sympathize with you about this situation. And do you know her new address?
  - No, I don’t, I know only that she lives with her mum in Schiedam. Here is her phone number.
  - Fine! Thank you, this will be enough...

And he left. There are also decent, proper people among the Dutch! Señor Arturo and I could not get over the shock for ten minutes - we were just speechless. What should we do? Call Sonny and tell him everything? But he would be so alarmed he immediately quit his internship and come back! So we decided to keep mum until his come-back and to handle the whole situation ourselves. To be honest, I was afraid: I never got into a legal trouble, especially in a foreign country...

...The lawyer advised:
  a) stop paying madam Popescu (the contract is illegal, she can try to force us to pay, but it is unlikely that the court would be on her side), saving the money aside, just in case: this will force her to give up the apartment sooner;
  b) to change the lock in the front door so that she could not take her mail any more and send this mail back with the marks “addressee no longer lives here”.

Which we did.

...The mother of Madam Popescu (somehow I sensed that it would not be she herself) came to us late in the afternoon. Apparently, the
pleasant gentleman from the corporation had called them. Fortunately we had already replaced the lock, and I left a note on the door, that she was to contact our lawyer. She long raged under the door and banged on it with her feet, but Señor Arturo and I sat quiet as mice, pretending that we were not at home…

Finally, having achieved nothing, the angry fury got on the tram and went home to her Schiedam. The Rubicon was crossed.

Since that situation occurred for the first time in my life, I was very worried and hadn’t even slept at night. My nerves began to fail. Every day I was afraid to approach the door, lest someone called, I was afraid of the arrival of the postman. I hated this state ever since. I felt the same two or three more times in my life in different circumstances.

... As fo Sonny, we both said nothing to him - until I myself went to Curacao. The situation lasted for almost a year really, with the exchange of threatening letters, written by our and their lawyers, which were hardly understandable due to a specific jargon and a foreign language. When finally the case was settled - by the termination of the contract with Madame Popescu and signing it with us (she still had to pay the corporation a pretty penny for all those months) - it was a great relief! We started to live in our old house quite legally.

A year later Sonny ordered a home delivery pizza by telephone. The courier handed the pizza through the window - right away Sonny impatiently snatched the piece out of the box - and said:

- Suzanne says you hello!
- What Suzanne?
- The one who used to live in this house. She works for the pizzeria on the phone.

Sonny almost choked with a hot piece and, it seemed to me, grew pale. He even refused eating his pizza (and it was a tasty calzone234).

- What if she wants to poison us? - he whispered to me.

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... The time of my departure to Curacao was coming. I was happy and nervous. I had never flown across the ocean. Aidan, who was so socially active and who had so many acquaintances in the Antilles circles, that it was time to think if he was preparing to be the Prime Minister in the future (his good luck was that he was silver-tongued!), helped me to find a cheap ticket. Oddly enough, but it was cheaper to get from Maastricht to Curacao than from Amsterdam: you should first go by train from Rotterdam to Maastricht (!), then fly from Maastricht in the crop-duster “Fokker” to Amsterdam, and then - to Willemstad235. In my opinion, there was not any logic in this, but the logic and prices in the system of capitalism are incompatible. Apparently, from Maastricht there were simply fewer people willing to get there. In any event, it meant that I would have to leave a day earlier! Aidan and his girlfriend, an ox-eyed black-skinned beauty, student Marina volunteered to accompany me to Maastricht airport.

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234 A pizza with some stuff inside, like a pie.
235 Capital of the Netherlands Antilles.
- Hey, why don’t you go with us to our festival? - Marina suddenly asked me.
- What kind of a festival?
- On your departure eve we have a song festival for Antilles students in the Netherlands. Some of my friends will be there singing, and even Shumaira from your McDonald’s!

Shumaira was an Aruban girl with an entirely European appearance. No one would have ever thought that she was from the Antilles, be it not for her name. To look at her singing would be really interesting. Maybe she danced as well?
- Oh, I don’t know...
- You don’t know what?
- If I will go or not. And what would Señor Arturo say?
- And what could he say?
- Well, I am now a married woman going without her husband to some parties...
- Come on, you’re not married to a Muslim! If you want to, I can talk to him...

I was very surprised that I responded this way, but by that time my relationship with Sonny was of such a type that he was terribly jealous of me, even not being a Muslim; jealous even for the actor Jeff Goldblum - after I told him that Jeff was handsome. If after classes I went to someone from my Dutch group mates, I always gave him their phone number, and after a while he began to call them - ostensibly to make sure that I duly got to them. As if I was an unreasonable child. Señor Arturo was just an old-fashioned man of another generation, with his own views on such events as this festival: he considered them to be not serious.

But still I went to the festival: it was unbearably dreary at home. All this time I hadn’t realized it, and now it suddenly occurred to me that since the marriage I’d had practically no female friends, and even fewer male friends!

At the festival I again felt as I used to feel at home. Frustrations, accumulated during two years of life in Holland, gradually began to fade in the background. As I had somehow foreseen, Shumaira was a very poor singer. I really liked Marina’s classmate with a Scottish name who sang a song composed by him, “Stranger of a Destiny”. But to be objective, best of all - a truly professional! - was a dark-skinned girl from Sint Maarten, who studied at the Conservatoire and sang an aria from some musical! It was so obvious that she was head and shoulders above other amateur performers that I was quite surprised by the reaction of my new friends from the Antilles, who believed that they were discriminated on the basis of their origin (ABC islands\textsuperscript{236}), having lost the victory to that girl - just because she was English-speaking. I didn’t know that there were such serious conflicts among the inhabitants of these small islands! It was almost the way my friend, Guinean Mamadou from the plateau Fouta Djallon, spoke about some of his compatriots from another part of Guinea: with contempt, calling them “les forestiers”\textsuperscript{237}.

\textsuperscript{236} ABC- Aruba, Bonaire, “Curacao”.

\textsuperscript{237}
The winner, as if feeling that not everyone was satisfied with her victory, left the room with her head bowed, but still beaming with happiness.

- Congratulations! - I said to her in English. I generally spoke to Antilleans in English, just in case that (God forbid!) someone of them might think I was Dutch. But for her English was the mother tongue as well, which at that moment I didn’t realize. Having heard the words in her native language, she replied to me with gratitude:

- Thank you so much! - And I even thought that her eyes were filled with tears.

There also sang a guest at the festival - a cheerful middle-aged Aruban man, called Efren Benita. Aidan told me that he was quite a well-known singer among Antilleans, but I had never heard of him. The greater was my surprise when, a few years later, living already in Ireland, I saw him on television at the Eurovision contest singing for Estonia! And not just performing, but bringing a victory to Estonia!

After the competition itself there was dance party, and I, to my surprise, ventured to dance merengue publicly for the first time in my life! With Marina’s cousin, Mario.

Mario was a lot younger than me - I viewed him almost as a child, so I was not afraid that my dance with him would cause any gossip. In addition, it was something like that he looked on you on a different level than the rest of Antilleans. He had no typical Antillean "machismo" at all. He had large black eyes, like a wild antelope, was tall, thin and flexible as a reed. He had an earring in one ear. Talking to him was easy and simple.

I danced well; Sonny, who had been my teacher, had told me the same, but I’d never dared to show my skills outside the walls of our house. I was afraid to be as funny as the Dutch dancing Latin American dances - jumping like goats, instead of moving hips almost on the spot. Although they themselves did not bother, it was like in a famous joke - “scary” and I was only too well aware that Antilleans laughed at them behind their backs about it...

But thank God, I danced merengue, unlike the Dutch, decently. I could not do the salsa, and I would never even dare to try to dance it in public, not knowing how. I did not feel a change of rhythm during the salsa, did not feel where and what side you have to turn. Merengue is much easier!

Mario praised me too, and I could not for a long time believe that I dared it! (By nature, I am terribly shy, but those who only know me now, would not believe it, too). A couple of weeks later I boasted about it to Sonny, however he was not enthusiastic, but offended instead. Only now not because of his traditional jealousy:

237 Les forestiers - people from the forest, Southern Guineans.
238 The joke is about a Soviet man who comes home and says to his wife that their party secretary was abroad and had seen a striptease show there. “What is it?” — asks the wife. “Go stand on the table and start undressing!” — says the man. So she does. Man looks at her and says: “Our comrade secretary was fully right: it is really a scary show!”
- It means that you do not want to dance with me, but with a mariku!\textsuperscript{239} - he said with reproach and contempt. 
- Mariku? Others would be happy in his place! There was no reason for jealousy.

Those who are familiar with the Antillean culture, know that marikunan\textsuperscript{240} try to emigrate from Curacao. And it is no wonder, why. Imagine the picture: a young man goes along the road, wagging his hips like a woman, with a ladies handbag and lipstick on his lips. Somewhere in a different country, perhaps, he would simply be not noticed, but not in the Antilles. Cars can't pass him without honking and cheerful hooting of the driver and passengers:
- “Hey, mariku!”
- When I was in the Antilles, from all sides, all the windows rattled a popular at that time reggae hit of a Panamanian singer named Nando Boom:

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… No queremos mariflor,
No queremos mariflor,
No queremos ma-ma-ma-ma-ma-mariflor
… En Colombia, no queremos mariflor, ah
En Panama, no queremos mariflor, ah
En Costa Rica, no queremos mariflor, ah
En Puerto Rico, no queremos mariflor, ah…”
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And even:
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«Busca la solucion para echar a un homosexual
Pam, pam, muerte es la solucion…”\textsuperscript{241}
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I did not know Spanish or Papiamento (and therefore I understood only "no mercy" and the sounds of automatic fire from all his songs), but I really liked the rhythm of that song. It was so good to dance to it. I had no idea that it called for shooting someone like Mario…

Looking ahead, I will say that Northern Ireland is not much different from the Antilles in this regard.

I wonder whether Nando Boom ever played this song in Europe?
… I can imagine that the "civilized society" would have set up a howl! Well, everyone has his own faults. Somebody insults mariku. Others, who think that they are more civilized, give no peace to Muslims and go to any length to prevent them from social life because of another way of clothing. I don't see any difference!

During the disco after the festival, an interesting incident happened. Aidan acquainted me with Enrique - the Person, Who Knew Bobby! Enrique Schonewolf (it is translated into English as “beautiful wolf”) was a puny dignified Antillean boy from Lelystad: he was already a professional singer and even released a CD (but a place where you could buy it was a mystery).

\textsuperscript{239} Mariku – homosexual (papiamento).
\textsuperscript{240} Marikunan – plural from mariku.
\textsuperscript{241} The song of a “Panama” singer Nando Boom «No queremor mariflor» of anti-homosexual content, that was very popular on the Antillean islands in 1992.
Lelystad is a city in the Netherlands, one of the newest administrative centres of the province Flevoland, which was built on the artificial land created after the drainage of the sea by the construction of the dam.

- Zhenya, I remember, you once said that you take interest in Bobby Farrell. Our Enrique knows him very well.
- My knees trembled, the palms of my hands were sort of struck by electricity. I suddenly felt like a schoolgirl. Sonny, my marriage, my life in Holland, kaaskoppen\(^{242}\), the coup d’état - all drifted into a kind of haze...
- Really? Well, how is he, where is he? - I could only squeeze out of myself.
- His things are bad, - smiled Enrique, - he lives on the dole (he had had his property confiscated in Germany for tax evasion, and he and his wife moved to Holland), Sociale Dienst \(^{243}\) is always on his heels thinking that he earns on the side... In short, no good with him. But I respect the old fellow; he is such a strong personality and a true professional!
- Old fellow? But what does he understand! Love and compassion for Bobby overflowed my heart with force unheard of since 13 years of age. Poor Bobby! He deserves better! My God... I live in one country with him... It is just incredible! I can see him live! It is not just like a fairy tale, it surpasses it in all respects. Yes, if only I could tell him how much he meant to me in my life... how happy he had made me - he and his colleagues - in my childhood... I even got married, thinking about him...!
- Oh, could you give him my regards? I would so desperately want to talk to him at least once in my life! - I blurted out in spite of myself. Enrique puffed his cheeks with importance and promised to help. At home I decided to share my joy with Señor Arturo. But he didn’t share it with me.

Alas, there was no good news until the day of my departure to Curacao. Enrique went to Bobby several times, but he said Bobby had gone off, and even Bobby’s wife did not know where he was. That seemed a little strange: might the wife not know where her husband was, if he hadn’t been at home a few months already? I found out the reason later.

Soviet worshippers of an actor, singer or a writer differ from Western fans. It is impossible to compare us. I remember when I first saw a movie with idiotically-behaved fans of the Beatles - with their hysterical screams and swooning - I felt deep disgust because of it. For Soviet fans such behaviour would mean absence of respect for themselves and their cult figure.

First of all, the Soviet fan sees in his favorite actor or singer a talented, creative personality, rather than a “sex symbol”. Secondly, he or she respects the right of the object of their reverence for quiet private life, and therefore will not dawdle under his or her windows, throw their panties on the stage or even declare love in a written form.

«Pray, be not pained -- believe me, of my choosing.»

\(^{242}\) Cheese-heads (nickname for the Dutch)

\(^{243}\) The organisation giving the dole (Dutch).
I'd never have you troubled nor yet distressed”, - as Alexander Pushkin wrote in his I loved you, and that love… - and it is the credo of a Soviet fan.

Moreover, even if such a worshipper meets a celebrity on the street accidentally, he or she just looks at their idol, smiles at them - at the most asks their autograph - and goes their own way, albeit with a strong heartbeat: a deep respect for the peace of the idol. It is incredible that famous people would be happy, when somebody tears out their last hair on the street! I remember, how “Boney M” were amazed at the responsiveness and dignity of our audience at their concerts: while no one got up from their seats or started dancing, after all the songs there was a round of stormy applause! It is in the same vein, as what I have said above.

I am a very old-fashioned, Soviet-style fan. I would never hang on Bobby's neck, even if I had not been married. I wouldn't seek out where he lives. But it didn't mean that he became less important to me. I wanted to breathe the same air with him. On the next free day I went to Lelystad to see what it was like. It turned out that it was a most boring town with new buildings. How on earth had HE come to live there?

...Before flying to Curacao, I was again immersed myself in dreams - almost as a child. Returning at night from my shift at McDonald's, I dreamed that Bobby - of course, quite unexpectedly for me - was waiting for me around the corner. There was no one, of course, around the corner. Except a bunch of prostitutes: we were transported by taxi after our shift and my route went through a Rotterdam quay, which was their zone of “job” at nights. Prostitutes threw open their short coats before cars and demonstrated “sexy” clothes. Mohammed from Schiedam, who usually was my fellow traveller, winced with disgust. Mohammed had a wife, five children and a dream - to run his own vegetables shop. There were no prostitutes in his dreams.

Mohammed’s attitude to me was fatherly. He shoved me residuary burgers after shift, when the manager didn't see. The Dutch would be surprised, if I told them that all my Arab and other Muslim colleagues at work treated me very well, with respect. We talked French with some of them about the works of Lenin. They were polite, attentive - and never allowed me to carry heavy weights. They always took upon themselves the hardest work. None of them gave themselves the liberty to make ambiguous jokes like our Dutch managers - about beautiful Russian girls of easy behaviour - as the Dutchman Bas, one of the managers, told me winking.

- We've learned this smut from you! - I retorted.
- Fragmentary, vague, alarming news reached from home. About some vouchers, that drove everybody crazy - they imagined that they’d get rich. There began plant closures, and people started to turn into “shuttle traders”, travelling to China and Turkey with rags and truly believing that that was the way to happiness and prosperity. I drove dark premonitions away. Did those who had come to power under such good slogans not know what they were doing?

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...I was glad, when the university, "McDonalds" and Holland itself had become the things of the past. Ahead was Sonny and three months of sun, sea and getting familiar with a completely new life! Even Bobby could be postponed.

...It was an endless, sunny and happy day. Infinity - thanks to the time difference, because I was flying to the Western hemisphere. From the early morning in Maastricht, where I got into a Dutch "puddle jumper" in a provincial airport to the evening dawn on the Caribbean coast it seemed an eternity. When you fly back in the easterly direction, day and night are crumpled up, mixed with each other, as an egg-flip. You cannot tell one from the other.

For the first time in my life I flew on the two-tier "Boeing" from Amsterdam. Airlines did not economize back then, and on the road we were fed and watered as prize turkeys. Beside me an Aruban girl was sitting, who went home for the holiday. She had just quarreled with her boyfriend and soon entered into a conversation with a Dutch passenger behind - a typical two-meter kaaskop - one of those who put his feet on the adjacent seat in the aisle because they did not fit in. He flew to the Antilles to have rest.

The first two or three hours of their conversation was rather decent, but soon they both grew weak from alcohol. An hour later, the Dutchman already hung on her neck and even tried to read over my shoulder what I was writing in my note-book (I sketched a scenario of a new film with Ica Veron all the way). Naturally, he couldn't read anything, as I wrote in Russian, but the Dutch nincompoop thought those lines were scattered before his eyes because of the amount of alcohol.

- Hm-m-m... I feel I've had a little too much! What is she writing there? - he said loudly to the whole saloon, as if I wasn't sitting next to him. I've noticed that in other countries (and even in flight towards them!) the Dutch can take the liberty to do what they are not allowed to do in their own country: to be themselves. Maybe that's why they usually have such sad faces when they have to go home?..

I was deeply disgusted to observe that couple making out just two or three hours after they met. They had already agreed, where they would meet in the Antilles, and exchanged phone numbers. But I couldn't brush aside the picture of a black slave and a white planter. Well, are there differences between them? What has changed over a couple hundreds of years? She has a slave's inferiority complex and needs a "white man" for self-assertion, and he is the same - thinking that he is a gift for an indigene, like all planters... Have these Pocahontas a slightest dignity?

The flight to Curacao is rather long, no less then nine hours. It was difficult to fall asleep because of smell of the last night alcohol, which was already emanating from the Dutchman. They never stopped to serve alcohol, and I breathed with relief only when the plane started to alight finally.

The dazzling red earth was visible from the top, it sharply contrasted with the deep dark blue of the sea and was dotted with thorny cacti which seemed toy from the height. I did not know yet that this area
of Curacao was called Tera Kora. Somewhere in the background of the desert, like a Martian landscape there could be seen heads of wind electric turbines, like white daisies.

As soon as I stepped on the stairway, I was enveloped by hot air - it was so hot that it took my breath away for a second. I could not get used to it for a few weeks: after the air conditioning (at that time it was a rarity in Europe!), I completely forgot about how hot it was outside, and every time I stepped out of the cool, comfortable depth, it amazed me.

And I realised that even the strongest hair fixer would not help to save your hair in order here - so strong was the wind. For the same reason most women here wear pants or short tight overalls, which locals call "pegaditu", or at least bike shorts under their skirts: the wind lifts skirts mercilessly.

Sonny was already waiting for me. During the time he spent in his native island, he put on weight, but it was even becoming to him. And he got tanned! His skin darkened and became the colour of cocoa without milk. He even had freckles on the nose! We were unable to tear our ecstatic eyes from each other - like two dairy calves, first released on the vast grasslands bathed in the sun...

It was Saturday, his day off, there was no reason to hurry. It seemed that the day had began for me eternity ago, but the sun still burned unmercifully. I’d never been to tropics and could not imagine how powerful it could be.

Sonny had seen off his mother to Holland just the day before - we had missed each other accidentally. As it turned out, he had lived all that time not in his own house: mom had leased their house to some tenants. His grandmother had sheltered him.

The family of Sonny's mother lived near the airport. All his childhood had passed there, and he showed me his house with pride. I looked around curiously, and local children looked with no less curiosity at me. Some of them were white, but swarthy - although, as I had noticed until we reached Sonny's house, that most of the island's population were black. One of the girls ran up to me and said something in an incomprehensible language. I was confused, and Sonny laughed.

- They are our neighbours, Portuguese. I told them that you're Portuguese, and they believed it! You, Russians, resemble Portuguese.

- Only Portuguese are still is engaged in agriculture in Curacao. Soil is too arid here. There are no rivers on the island, it is dry almost the whole year and rains sweep noisily and with the lightning speed, and after them everything dries out almost immediately. Besides groundwater springs in some places (people who have it on their sites, also usually have a well near their house), drinking water is extracted by the desalination of seawater, and it is very expensive. The same water is used for irrigation, and therefore good green gardens are a luxury that anyone can't afford.

And the Portuguese are famous for their wonderful ice cream.

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Tera Kora – Red Earth (Papiamento), the region on the north of “Curacao” not far from Hato airport.
The land around was quite dry, though not so red as close to the airport. There were some plants that grew here spontaneously - thorns and all forms of cacti. From the top of the plane they looked like toys, but in fact they were so tall that many inhabitants of Curacao have traditionally planted them around their houses instead of the fence: cheap and cheerful. And there were trees with the crowns curiously driven on one side by the continuous sea wind, similar in shape to candles, blown out by a strong wind. They were called divi-divi.

Homeless flocks of goats wandered and devoured even small cacti and all kinds of thorns, and everything that got in their path. If they come across a decent garden with fruit trees, a terrible panic began: the wealthy owners, coupled with the gardener, and even other employees were chasing goats with anything to save the garden.

Sonny's Grandma was waiting for us in the kitchen of her house. The building was old, but big, bright and spacious, with an open stone veranda, called with the American word "porch", on which an old rocking chair stood. It had a roof covered with vines. All doors and windows in the house were wide open, the wind swept through the house, and fans worked in all the rooms. It was cool and good. The mice rustled underneath somewhere in the corner of the kitchen. Sometimes fast as lightning lagadishi ran across the walls and ceiling, they were small lizards, which attracted only my attention, and no one else's. At first I was terribly afraid that they would fall down on me, but after a few days I realized that lagadishi hadn't intention to fall on a human head. And soon I got quite used to them, like the Islanders, and even began to consider them cute.

Grandma, Mai, was a beautiful majestic woman with a very dark, almost black skin. She had the unquestioned authority in the family, and she was extremely devout. Mai went to church not just once a week, but every day. She was a true matriarch! As in any African village (though some Antilleans might be offended for such a comparison, but I do not see anything offensive in it), the majority of her children lived in separate houses around her house or in the immediate vicinity.

Judging by the photos, Sonny's grandpa, who had died long before, was of a much lighter complexion than she, and many children took after him - in skin colour, and pointed ears. They had twelve children: four daughters, among them Louisa, Sonny's mother, and Petronella, Harold's mamma, and 8 sons. They had very different occupations: a taxi driver, a construction worker, a policeman, a teacher... And even a bodyguard of one of the known Antillean politicians! Uncle Hugo, heavy, with the face of a boxer and his lovely wife, of Aruban Indian type, with three adult children, lived next door.

Mai spoke Dutch fairly well. In her house, except her, there lived Sonny's uncle Edgar, suffering from the Down syndrome, the only one of her twelve children who had a disability; Jeanette, a fifteen year-old daughter of Sonny's aunt, whom she had left as a baby in Mai's house.

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245 Lizards (Papiamento).
because of going to Holland, and Carmela, Mai's Colombian housekeeping help.

All the uncles and aunts paid Carmela together. Carmela was ten years older than me, with the first grey streaks, running through her beautiful thick hair - and the only one in Curacao, with whom I had to explain literally in a sign language: I did not know Spanish, and she did not know the languages I knew. But by the end of my stay at Mai's I had understood Spanish half decently. The main responsibility of Carmela, besides washing and cleaning was to look after Uncle Edgar: he tried to sneak inside the fridge without asking, went to the neighbours to play baseball and even now and then pilfered a bottle of beer from the barn. Mai's small business was contained in the barn: it was a home shop. People came there at weekends and late at night, when ordinary shops were closed, and bought the same, but at a small surplus charge. This practice was called "speculation" in the USSR.

Uncle Edgar had two passions: cars washing and laundry. If you gaped and left some of your things lying about, he immediately sent them straight into a huge, old-model washing machine with the loading from above, just like my grandmother's. And then he would run around all aunts and uncles who lived near their house and asked to wash their cars. It seemed that he had been born with a rag in his hands.

Edgar was still at "school", although he was over forty.

- I've got a wife! - he said gaily and with the logic of an infant school kid. - It's our teacher!
- Has Hugo a wife? - Señor Arturo teased at him when he still lived in Curacao.
- Hugo has three wives! - Edgar pointed with the fingers.
- You think Edgar is a fool? - Arturo told me then. - He knows that he is talking about...

Uncle Edgar didn't speak Dutch. He embarrassed me by calling me "Señora". "He does it because he likes people like you - white body and dark hair!" - Sonny explained. "You have similar tastes", - I thought.

Jeanette - a pretty and sad little girl - came to life after her recent return from Holland. Auntie Imelda, her mother, who had not seen her for about 12 years, suddenly decided to take her to Holland. Of course, Jeanette had brightened up: she had missed her mother! But it turned out that her mother was simply looking for a free nanny: she had married for a second time, her husband was a Chilean, and they gave birth to two kids in the Netherlands. Jeanette wailed over such life after three months. Accustomed to living outdoors, in the unhurried environment of the Antilles, she hated Holland with every fibre of her soul, but she couldn't do anything. Uncle Umberto's wife Marbella helped: she bought a ticket to Curacao for her and took her to the airport. Since then, Aunt Imelda hadn't talked to either Marbella, or uncle Umberto...

- Ah, you are here! Sonny has already got tired of waiting for you, - said Mai. - Welcome, I hope that you enjoy it in Curacao. I have baked Bolo pretu 246 for your arrival, taste it. But first, you should eat. I suppose you are tired of the journey?
- And despite the dissimilarity of the thickets of cacti with white Russian birch trees, I immediately felt like home.

Other relatives arrived for supper: all of them were curious to look at me. The Dutch were found in this large family sometimes, but none of them had ever seen a Russian, only on television.

I have already mentioned Uncle Hugo. Besides him, there were uncle Ricardo - the owner of a construction company (his employees, contractors from Venezuela took up a two-story mini-hut at his grandmother’s yard, the hut was draughty with dusty wind), uncle Oswald - the oldest, the taxi driver (all of his children lived in the Netherlands), uncle Thomas - he had the most handsome face, black skin and a peevish character. He was always dissatisfied with everything, I remember when somebody was getting a job, he complained that young people were untidy: to come to an interview with one’s hair hanging loose was simply a disgrace! (“Ha! You ought to have seen him with his Afro in the 1970's!”- Sonny whispered to me). There was uncle Patrick - tall, thin and elegant, a police and customs officer in one person, who managed to earn money on the side: he had his own security company, besides, he leased the house to the Dutch, and even in his own house he leased the first floor at weekends - for parties and dinners. Uncle Patrick was famous for his eccentricities: he was a big fan of the United States of America. He was indeed so big a fan that he always hung an American flag on July 4 over his house and named his youngest daughter Nancy - after Reagan's wife.

All the aunts and uncles had been already been divorced and married again, three or four times, and everyone had a lot of children, except Mariella, who was a teacher at primary school. She had got married just recently. Uncle Thomas’ daughters were pretty little girls, eight and nine years old, with typical “sounding-like-Russian” Antilles names Toshka and Nadyushka. They came to him after school every day, and in the evenings their mother took them back home. The plump cartoon-cute Nadyushka pouted aggrievedly and hid in her father’s car, when she saw me.

- What is the matter? - I asked.
- Oh, nothing, she just likes our Sonny very much. The baby is jealous! - Omayra laughed. Omayra, sister of Marbella, uncle Umberto’s wife also had a room in the grandmother's house - in another “shed” where we were going to live. She was to become our neighbour for these three months. The appearance of Omayra was completely Indian. Small and frail, she seemed the living embodiment of fun, and only when I got to know her better, I learnt how difficult and not very bright her life was.
- It was giddy from the abundance of new faces and names.
- E ta hopi kansa, - Sonny said to the relatives. - Lagele na pas.247
Well, well, let her rest! See you tomorrow! - Mai didn't object.

Finally it began to darken after that endless day. I did not know that in the tropics it got dark so early and at lightning speed: it seems the

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246 Bolo pretu – literally “a black cake”, a long Antillean cake, containing prunes and alcohol. It is cooked on special occasions.
247 She is very tired. Leave her alone! (Papiamento)
Irina Malenko

sun has shone just now, and suddenly black night sets in - and the sky is filled with stars! And it was only about 7 pm...

Sonny took me outside, but to my surprise not to our "lean-to", in which we have already dumped my suitcase, but to the car, which was lent him by Uncle Ricardo on this occasion.

- Let’s go!

I did not argue, I did not even ask where we go. Curiosity far exceeded my fatigue.

A sultry evening descended on the island. Unhurriedly, people lined up at small kiosks that traded different local tasty treats along the way. Some danced to the accompaniment of audible Latin-American music that sounded from the cars driving along.

Women walked the streets or sat behind the car wheels straight in curlers, sometimes even uncovered with a neckerchief (which is indecency in my country). For the most part women and men wore rubber slippers. The Afro-combs were tucked in the hair of many men. The lamps in the houses and on the streets were mostly daylight; such lamps are used in Russia mostly in offices and stores. Now I understand why Sonny was so addicted to them.

Everything breathed peace, and Sonny breathed happiness. One could feel that there he was in his element; I had never seen him so natural and relaxed in Holland. We passed a few more turns - and suddenly found ourselves right on the beach! It was the Caribbean Sea, about which I had read many books, so many of my music idols grew up on these shores! It was hard to believe, so fantastic it was...

The remnants of a distant sun on the skyline drown in the water and the sky is full of stars. Cars with couples of lovers have lined up across the beach - at a respectful distance from each other. We join to them and the darkness thickens... How romantic! To be here and see this was worth enduring a year of burns from boiling oil and arms, reeking of onion and mustard... Wimp Holland was left behind like a nightmare, and I wished that dazzling warm evening lasted for the rest of my life!..

...The room where Sonny and I settled down was small and stuffy, despite the fact that all the windows were open all night and fans ran at full blast. There were no kitchens in the house, only two small bedrooms - ours and Omayra’s, in addition there was a shower room with a toilet and a hall, that was reinforced with rusty dusty fitness machines on which Omayra practiced from time to time because of boredom.

Although it was Sunday, we still woke up early in the morning, even before daybreak. The reason was grandma’s cocks. She had four vociferous cocks, and they used to meet with their morning ritual songs just under the windows of our room! Furious, only half-awake Sonny ran to catch them, and I ran to catch him, because I did not want him to wring the neck to any of them. The bird was not to blame, there is no arguing against nature.

But Sonny did not think of wringing the cocks’ necks. He contrived to catch one of them and locked it in an empty cage beneath the windows of grandmother’s kitchen.

- That will serve it as a lesson, - he said sternly.
Irina Malenko

Then, already in broad daylight I went to look at it and was horrified - there was not even water in its cage and it stood in full sun! I could not but released it, in secret from Sonny.

By the way, they are not particularly ceremonious with animals in Curacao. I do not want to seem so “animal-concerned” as the Dutch (whose attitude towards animals has been described above), but I couldn't for the world of me understand why they should throw stones at any of the passing cats or dogs. I tried to clear up the views of local people in this regard. "Let them know their place!" - was almost a unanimous verdict. Cats and dogs knew it: when people approached, most of them cleverly hid. And not only dogs and cats did: a green, huge, shy iguana that Sonny showed me in Westpunt hid, too. They knew that one could make soup with them.

Beside chickens, Mai had a couple of goats. Her attitude to the goats was better: at least they grazed in the shade. And someone brought a small dog to Mai, with which I loved to play. But before we went in Holland it had been locked in the same cage that was on the sun, and I still try not to think if it survived that punishment or not, though it was more than 10 years ago...

Sorry that I began the story about Curacao with such gloomy notes. A "civilized" reader - a frequenter of shops with blankets for dogs, of course, will be outraged and exclaim that this island is inhabited with some monsters, but it is just not so. It seems to me, that a lot of fermenting frustrations were accumulated by these people for centuries of slavery and discrimination, so they have to vent it out on someone. As a rule, people project their frustrations on those who are weaker - regardless of the degree of their civilization. It's enough to consider, for example, the present epidemic of violence towards children after divorce (perhaps in line with the saying "to cut off one's nose to spite one's face"). Now the same proverb has embraced the affluent Netherlands.

The same situation happens in Northern Ireland, which is peaceful today. Rapes are reported now almost daily in this country, but Ian Paisley assures, that this place must become a model for the rest of the world...

Not to mention of how the "children of the peace process" set dogs on cats here (because the IRA is no longer fighting drug traffickers and other petty criminals, and nobody else is really doing it)... And it's better to say nothing about the attitude to people, let alone animals, in today's capitalist Russia that has adopted "common human values": So, “let him be the first to throw a stone…”

Amazing days began... I was lucky enough that my stay in Curacao was not just recreational and I did not lie all day on the beach among the Dutch and Americans somewhere at hotel Van der Valk, knowing only those local people who offered me drinks and cleaned my room. I was in the thick of local people, lived among them, even worked part-time and had an opportunity to know them in real life and see their life without

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248 Westpunt – extreme West area on “Curacao”.
249 Ian Paisley – Protestant Unionist politician in Northern Ireland, leader of the DUP, First Minister in the first joint local administration with Sinn Fein.
embellishment. The most wonderful and inexplicable was that I did not feel myself as a stranger in Curacao, although, of course, everyone knew and saw that I was not local. For the first time in my life I had been in a minority among people with another skin colour and God grant that “civilized” Europeans treated the people of another skin color in the same way, as inhabitants of Curacao treated me!

In such countries as the Antilles to be a tourist in the Western meaning of this word seems to me shameful and disgusting. It means to put myself above the people, “favouring” them with tips. Such tourism is not for me. It is abhorrent to a Soviet person.

Of course, I wanted to see many places on the island and did it every day - always something new. Technically, it was difficult though. Sonny had no car, and he did his work assignment five days a week. Usually some of his relatives drove him to the place of his job and took him back home, too. At weekends, when I wanted to go to the sea - there is no point in pretending not to, he wanted just to relax: to lie in the hammock in the shade of palm trees.

Please mind that the sea to him was probably something like that well-known museum-house of a famous Russian writer in our part of the world to me. I’d never been there, although it was so close from my house, and only had visited it when my Dutch friends had asked me to accompany them there. But no matter how interesting a sight, when it is so close, you always think that you would have time for it in the future.

Public transport was developed very poorly on the island, as I could see. From time to time small buses passed by our house, locals called them “konvoi”, but they did not even have real schedule. The problem of transport did not bother me: I used to walk on foot a lot, I did it at home and in the Netherlands. I figured out on the map the distance from Sonny’s home to Willemstad and told him that he shouldn’t worry: I could walk to town on foot and walk back while he worked.

- You’re crazy! - Sonny said.
- Why? This distance is easy enough for me.
- A white woman will walk alone on the roads??
- What? I can take a bike.
- You are mad! - and I couldn’t get another explanation from him.

By the way, in 1992 Curacao was not so dangerous as today. Practically nobody had firearms. Only once during a street festival someone pulled out a gun. I was in the crowd and didn’t see him, he did not shoot, but panic began and the crowd burst into running in different directions. It was clear, that that event was out of the ordinary. It’s interesting that the firearms flooded Curacao at the same time when the U.S. Military arrived, which is still there now, allegedly to combat drug trafficking...

If I appeared somewhere alone, nobody accosted me. Men from Curacao, like Cubans, attract your attention with the help of snake whistles and hissing:

- Ps-s-st! Ps-s-st! - I heard from around the corner. At first I did not even understand what it was. And when I realised it, it amused me deeply. It sounded too funny!
- So I think the problem lay in Sonny's jealousy. By the way, it was absolutely groundless. I hadn't a slightest interest in other men. Even in Bobby.

In any case, our trips to town or on the beach were rare. And it was even good: they became something really special for me!

Willemstad looks like a celebratory cake: at least its main streets, with their Dutch colonial houses. I fell in love at first sight with both of its bridges - finally and irrevocably. Of course, they were named by the names of Dutch Queens (what else can there be in the "free civilized world")?

The pontoon bridge for pedestrians, swinging under your feet, was taken away when ships exited from or entered Willemstad's bay. And the other one was high - so high that any cruise ship or tanker could pass under it - a bridge for cars, it was forbidden for pedestrian walking. However, it was a favorite place on the island for people who wanted to commit suicide... These two bridges connected two parts of the city - Punda (centre) and Otrabanda\(^{250}\), the newer part of the city. Generally, there are no a sharp boundaries between the settlements in Curacao. If you get from Sonny's home to Willemstad, it seems that buildings stretch in an almost uninterrupted wall. There are expensive jewellery shops, stout American tourists in shorts, a lot of fast-food restaurants and the oldest functioning synagogue in the western hemisphere. And also there is a floating market, where hot Latino campesinos sell fresh vegetables and fruit directly from the boats. Practically all the greens in Curacao are imported from neighbouring Venezuela; most of food is also from there and from America.

This was apparent when Sonny and I went shopping in the supermarket - "Esperamos", nearest to his house. There were all sorts of different features, about which I had never heard in Europe, for example, the American beverage powder "for the poor" - Cool Aid. "For the poor" - because it was much cheaper to dissolve it in water than to buy natural juices.

After living in the Soviet Union such things did not cease to amaze me in the West: we had all of these things natural - juices, cotton fabrics etc. They were much cheaper than artificial ones. I did not understand advertisements, in which natural products were praised. Is it not obvious that it is normal?

For the first time in my life I saw working children in Curacao. They earned by packaging products in bags at the exit from the store by the cash registers. They helped you fetch bags to your car. It was really embarrassing. I'm not used to being served upon. Am I disabled or a war veteran?

Besides the bridges, "raffinaderij" caught the eye in Willemstad (that's a refinery) - the oil refinery almost in the centre, not far from them. Once it belonged to Shell, and employed a lot of the male population of the island. At the time of my visit there it had long been leased to a Venezuelan company - after the dismissal of most workers -

\(^{250}\) Literally “another side”. (Papiamento)
and oil was processed in Venezuela. Quite an atrocious stench emanated from the plant at a certain angle. One of Sonny’s aunts (not from maternal, but from paternal lineage) lived very close to the refinery and there was a time clock to wear a gas mask near the house... The environment was in some places awful in Curacao.

One time during my trip a small fire broke out at the plant... No kidding: almost the entire island stopped working, and all who could gathered there to see what would happen next, thank God there were no casualties...

There were not so many entertainments: the entire population of the island sat watching television almost every night. They watched the next part of the Venezuelan television serial “Cara Sucia”\textsuperscript{251} on the channel “Venevision”. We hadn’t had endless serials, as inane and useless as chewing gum in the Soviet era and it was difficult to get used to this genre, especially without the knowledge of the language. For company’s sake, I sat in front of the TV with Sonny and Omayra, who vied to recount to me on what was happening on the screen.

On Saturdays Omayra certainly watched “Super Sabado Sensasonal” on the same channel. She addicted me to Colombian vallenato music. At that time in Colombia a popular singer Raphael Orozco was shot dead, and one of those Saturday evenings was devoted to his work. Omayra virtually cried, because she felt sorry for him, and then immediately jumped up and danced to his happy-sad songs accompanied on the accordion. The untainted sincerity of her feelings deeply moved me, and I also loved his “Ritmo cha cun cha” and “Recorriendo Venezuela”. Although up to this time, my emotions for Latino music had been rather cool. Apparently, if you want to love some particular folk music, you should plunge into its atmosphere, in which it was created and executed...

There were no opera or theatre in Curacao at that time. I do not mean only European, there were no local playhouses too. There were discos, casinos and bars. Even cinemas as a sort of entertainment had already died out in Curacao. There were only the empty buildings of cinemas.

The big event in the life of the island was the coming of Venezuelan TV personalities from the same Saturday TV show. They filmed a jump stunt (bungee jumping) from my favorite high bridge on one of fine bright days. Again, almost all the island gathered to look at that, although the shooting took place during working hours. The stuntman jumped just once, and then a man loudly announced on the megaphone:

- E no ta bula mas\textsuperscript{252} — so all went home.
- Then far from the city, a live broadcast of the concert of local and Venezuelan musicians took place on Saturday night. I remember how Guillermo Davila, an actor playing in “Cara sucia”, performed there. Omayra wanted to see it and went with us, even being ill. Mai forbade her to leave the house (an amazing thing: Mai was not even her relative, but

\textsuperscript{251} “Cara Sucia” - «Slob» (Venezuelan soap opera).

\textsuperscript{252} He is not going to jump anymore (Papiamento).
she obeyed Mai!). But we secretly took Omayra to the concert at the back of the car and covered her with an old blanket on top...

After the TV show about Raphael Orozco Omayra and I quite seriously intended to go along with Carmela to her native Barranquilla, when she was going on holidays to her relatives. We made a detailed travel plan, when Sonny found it out. He grabbed his head and said that if I wanted my dead body to be found somewhere in the Colombian roadside bushes, then he certainly would not stop me... Thus the intended trip to Colombia failed.

Omayra became my greatest friend in Curacao. She could be trusted everything, even massaging the ailing back of my husband. She was a very happy, almost carefree woman - and yet somehow deeply tragic. She differed from her three sisters.

- I grew up not at home, but in a hospital, - she said. - I spent my childhood in hospital with my diseased liver. My sisters are all obsessed with money and things, but I spit on it.

- Omayra had the only son and she loved him very much. He was twelve. But he did not grow up with her, he live in the house of one of her sisters in Holland. Omayra could not provide for him with her shop assistant’s salary.

(At that moment you can recollect the Soviet film "Ladies call out Gentlemen", in which a modest shop assistant asks for a vacation and darts away head off to a resort, without rhyme or reason, and without any financial problems. This film is not a fairy-tale; it was quite ordinary reality for us!). Omayra saved up her money for a pair of trendy sneakers - and dreamed about a day when her son would finally come home for a vacation...

And also she had a secret which she told me: a few years before she had tried to commit suicide and swallowed sleeping pills, but she "had blabbed about it". The family didn't let her fall asleep, hosed her with cold water and forced her to walk around the room. And when she came to herself, they send her to live in Mai's house - far away from her own relatives.

When I remember that Omayra's birthday on the same day with Lisa, I feel very ill at ease... It is not good to be so superstitious, but I can't do anything about it.

Willemstad was two-layer as the surface of Omayra's merry life. The other city was hidden from the main streets that were carefully scraped every morning in anticipation of draining tourists' wallets. There were dilapidated old buildings and poverty there. It was real poverty, that I had never seen in my life before Yeltsin's "achievements" in this area.

Not only the unemployed lived in misery. There were people who worked as hard as Omayra, but they couldn't afford to switch on electricity cut because of non-payment. Money was rather spent for petrol - it was necessary for getting to work. Naturally, such people didn't have possibility to use a refrigerator, and because of it groceries, that should be fresh every day, cost more. It was a vicious circle.

People, who had such an opportunity, ran from poverty to Holland. Or, at least, they tried to remove their children there, sending them to
relatives living in Holland. They ruined families and hearts against their will. And when you listen to the Dutch, you can think Antilleans emigrate because of being spoiled or out of laziness.

The island was full of unfinished houses. People started to build them for occupying the territory (it was occupied if the building works were started officially). There were no money for finishing constructions and therefore deserted foundations and walls showed through brushwood of thorns.

But there were also such people who couldn’t afford to emigrate anywhere. They lived at the edges of the island in wooden huts through which wind blew. I’ve seen such huts only in documentaries about Jamaica. Sometimes posh Mercedes cars of local politicians dressed up in European fashion suits, were passing those huts swiftly. Dutch politicians who loved talking about the Antilles with their ready in advance judgments, never appeared there at all.

And there were also such people to whom even life in Curacao seemed to be paradise on Earth; people in whose own countries life was even more unbearable. Curacao is being flooded year in, year out with more and more Colombians, Haitians, Jamaicans and Dominicans. Yes, those very same Jamaicans who so often passionately shout that they “don’t want to live in a dictatorship like in Cuba”!

I remember how surprised were Sonny and I when we discovered during our visit to a bar on top of a mountain in Willemstad that our Carmela, apparently, had an eye on Uncle Thomas, despite his annoying character. They danced salsa together so sensually that we both understood where the things were heading to. A short while after that Uncle Thomas bought for her a book to learn Dutch.

Soon I also got to know another of these poor people - Jean from Haiti, a small, skinny, always with bare feet and very dark skinned in comparison with yu di Korsou\textsuperscript{253}. I met him in the garden of Uncle Patrick. Jean worked for him as a gardener.

His real name wasn’t Jean at all, but nobody knew his real name. Many people in Curacao simply called all Haitians “Jean”: the first the best French name that they knew. Just like all our girls are called “Natasha” abroad...

They looked a bit down at Haitians there. Just like at Colombians and women from Dominican Republic. The irony of the situation is that Antilleans are just the same economic migrants in the Netherlands as Haitians and Dominicans on their home island. The only difference is that the Dutch didn’t find yet the way to deprive the Antilleans of the Dutch citizenship, while at the same time keeping the power over their islands, even though they dream about it for a long time.

Me and Jean became friends - possibly because I was the only one from people around him who didn’t look at him as at a silent servant, but was genuinely interested what he lived like, and in his native island - the first independent country of the Western hemisphere (we learnt about the

\textsuperscript{253} Natives of Curacao (Papiamento).
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uprising of Toussaint L’Ouverture at history lessons in the secondary school).

Jean spoke Dutch a bit, because before coming to the Antilles he lived and worked in Suriname where his girlfriend, a local Chinese girl, still lived. Sometimes she sent him tapes with her voice where she sang in a tiny little voice some sad, long, unfamiliar to me songs, and Jean listened to them (I secretly gave him uncle Patrick’s tape recorder) with tears on his big brown eyes...

We communicated in a mixture of Dutch and French. He told me how he loved sailing around his native island on a small boat with friends. Even though they were risking their lives, because apparently, none of them could swim. I could not understand how could anybody live their whole life next to a sea and still not to know how to swim, but apparently, some people could... Sometimes I secretly (so that Sonny’s relatives won’t see because they were of opinion that one shouldn’t spoil servants) shared with him my favorite meal from the local Chinese takeaway restaurant: steak Spanish style (I have water in my mouth even when I think of it now!)

I wanted to take him into our house, once Sonny and myself would move to Curacao for good - because uncle Patrick didn’t treat him well.

“You shouldn’t allow too much to servants!” - Sonny taught me, - “Otherwise they’ll jump on your neck”.

- You’re lucky! You can find such good job here, - tried to convince me Jean.
- A good job? Me? In Curacao? What kind of a job?
- With your languages they’ll hire you in any casino! - not hiding his slight jealousy, explained Jean.

And that’s what men call “a good job” here?

Jean didn’t know where I was from. He was illiterate. I tried to show him my country on a map, but that didn’t mean anything to him. I tried to explain with words.

- Soviet Union. L’Union Soviétique. Sovjet Unie. Russia, Russie, Rusland?

He just smiled with his shy smile and shook his shoulders. I despaired: how else can I explain?

- Communists, - said I. With this word he livened up. He knew this word.
- Communists - that’s bad. Ils sont tres mauvais, - said Jean with absolute surety. A man who has never seen our country and didn’t even know its name or where it is situated...
- Est-ce que tu veux dire que je suis mauvaise? Do you think that I am bad? - I asked him straight.
- No, you are kind. Nice. There are no people like you here. But communists, they are bad, - repeated Jean.
- Well, Jean, I am a communist. So, think about it, please.

He looked very surprised and promised to think about it.

When I met Jean, life on Curacao was less difficult and not as without prospects as it is now. At that time it was still possible to live there. But the IMF and the World Bank got there too and squeezed this
beautiful island into such bench vise, that today every its 8th inhabitant is considering emigration. To a place where he would also become a sort of “Jean”. To a place where they’ll treat him the way uncle Patrick was treating Jean...

...At night Willemstad was full of chollers (homeless people). At that time, many years ago, they weren’t aggressive. They were just looking for an opportunity to earn their bread. My heart was bleeding when Sonny was taking me out in the evening in his uncle’s car, and as soon as we got out of it, somewhere from the darkness several men appeared with already prepared buckets and cloth and were asking us to allow them to wash our car. Sonny proudly allowed it to one of them, but I felt sorry for them all. I came to Curacao with 900 guilders for 3 months and was prepared to give it all away.

Chollers were honest. Sonny gave them money in advance, we went out, and I, to be honest, expected that when we will come back, the car would be just left dirty, but it was shining as new.

Please just don’t think that Holland is somehow different in this sense than the Antilles. Before I came to the “civilized” world, I have never seen real poverty and I have never seen real homeless people in my life. Gypsies were begging sometimes in the Soviet Union, but not out of poverty: it was simply their way of life, and that’s why people didn’t pay much attention to them.

In USSR we were completely deprived of freedom to be homeless and unemployed! What a disgrace! What a horrible violation of human rights!

First thing that shocked me so much in Holland, was exactly horrendous indifference with which people treated the homeless. It was as if nobody saw them as human beings. In Rotterdam most of them lived around the train station. From the time when I began going to university by train on a daily basis, all city’s homeless became more or less familiar to me.

One day I was on a train where a young man whom I already remembered, was begging, He smelled bad. His clothes were too big for him.

- If I don’t collect today 7 guilders 50 cents, I’ll not get a sleeping place in a shelter tonight, - he complained. I looked into my purse. I couldn’t give him 7.50, but I gave him some coins and, feeling guilty that I couldn’t give more, gave him already opened by me box with bonbons. I did it automatically and immediately became even more ashamed: what am I doing, he’d be offended; who offers to people already opened boxes? But the homeless man, to my surprise, stood as it struck by a lightning.

- Classy! - he exclaimed in excitement, - I didn’t taste any bonbons for ages!

It was a Dutchman, still a young man, but when he opened his mouth and smiled, I saw that most of his teeth were rotten. And I became even more ashamed...

When my university friend Femke told me that she was surprised that it seemed there were more and more homeless people in Holland, I was shocked at her naivety. What’s there to be surprised about? She
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should have just read Karl Marx. He described things like that namely very well...

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I formed a complicated relation with the Caribbean sun. I began to suntan sitting on a chair outside the house when Sonny went back to work on Monday. Because I didn’t want to waste time. I imagined that the Antillean sun should be a bit like ours on the Black sea. Or at the very most, like the French Mediterranean sun. But Antillean sun burnt your skin completely in approximately twenty minutes, and if you’d stayed under its rays for an hour, it would just completely knock you out. During these three months I lost my skin completely - even under the eyebrows and on my eyelids! - at least five times. And once I had a sun stroke: when Sonny left me alone on the beach in Seaquarium, and I fell asleep. I remember how people looked at me with surprised eyes, when we were going home, but I thought it was because I looked so irresistible in my bikini. When we came home, and I went to the shower, I fainted there. I really was irresistible: red like a lobster!

Sonny got really scared when I fainted, and brought me to a botica. Botica is not a boutique, but something similar to a chemist shop, even though they sell there not just medicines, but other things as well, for example, suntan lotion. And a whole shelf was full with different colored little bottles on which - I mean it! - there were labels with “elixir for unhappy love”, “medication for passing the exams” or even “bewitching potion”! In botica they gave us cream for sunburns and advised me to stay at home for several days.

At that time we just moved, temporarily, to Marina’s parents house in Dominguitu: they celebrated graduation of their son in Holland and asked us to look after their house and their two dogs while they’d be away. Dogs needed to be fed with meat and boiled rice twice a day. The small one had a silly for dog of such size name Rambo. The house was big and chic in comparison with granny’s room for lodgers: stone floors, bidet in the toilet, waterbed that I have seen before only in horror movies, pomegranate trees in the garden and even air conditioner in one of the rooms. That’s where I was licking my wounds, having locked myself up in that cold room for a whole day and with pleasure chattering with my teeth from cold.

There were many beaches on the island: private in hotels, the ones for tourists and the ordinary ones. They were mainly on the southern and the western coast: in the North and in the East Curacao sharply falls into the sea rocks. We visited each beach at least once: from fashionable Barbara and Jan Thiel where sand was spread around with barbeque installations and most visitors were local rich, to Seaquarium where almost out-of-date Dutch women were baking in the sun their hanging milk glands (it was pure porkeria!) and to my favorite one, Kleine Knip on the West Coast where to my pleasure were almost no tourists, just locals. Locals behaved with dignity on the beach and never undressed overly much in a show-off manner, the way sexually frustrated Dutch do. I also like the beach in Sonesta that was meant to be for a hotel, but hotel wasn’t built yet, so for now it was available to all. The waves in Sonesta
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were so high that if you didn’t pay attention, they could easily knock you down! I jumped in the sea water, to their rhythm, and felt so light as if I was on the Moon: with every jump the wave grabbed you and threw you extra in the air! At the same time Sonny’s cousins of both sexes dug him into the sand up to his neck and sticking to him various self-made out of sand body parts... They thought it was very funny. Well, everybody has his own way of amusing himself...

When Sonny had an opportunity, he tried to show me the island. Bit by bit we travelled it all around, even the far eastern coast where almost no people live except for some fishermen families, and there is even no electricity in some places. Everything there was covered with divi-divi trees and the groups of South American cattle were pasturing there quietly. When I saw a South American bull for the first time, I even got frightened: he was so huge that he reminded me of an elephant! By the way, we also saw on Curacao ordinary, Dutch black & white cows. One of them was sadly sitting on the red soil in Terra Cora, fed up with the heat. There was not a single piece of grass around her. She reminded me of a reindeer in the heat of midsummer in a Stockholm zoo.

A lot more I liked the West coast! Sonny brought me there at the time where there was not a single soul on the beaches! As well as on the roads: he was even offering me to teach me how to drive, but I shamefully chickened out (nowadays I wouldn’t, but it’s too late...) It was happening not far from a dilapidated house with letters “Rasputin” on the walls, to my big surprise. The car was flying over the road in the air, and I was squeaking like a half-cut pig, to Sonny’s pleasure! But that wasn’t the only reason why I liked the West coast so much: it was cosier, more authentic and not so full of the pale-faced as the South of the island.

From time to time my Dutch frustrations began hounding me again in Curacao, especially if, god forbid, anybody thought that I was Dutch! It came to the point that I began to act as if I didn’t understand any Dutch language at all, because to admit that you do understand it meant automatically to risk to be seen for a Dutch. There wasn’t anything more hurtful to me than that. When wife of one of Sonny’s uncles told me during our picnic in the Barbara beach that I can sunbathe there any way I like, “even topless”, I almost choked her for such offer: “I am not Dutch, I am not a whore!” Poor woman, probably just thought that Europeans must be all the same...

Another couple of such tantrums, and Sonny’s relatives have decided for themselves that Sonny’s wife was “Rusiana loca” - “Crazy Russian”, but I couldn’t help myself. Feeling of hurt, feeling of emotional trauma, feeling of disgust towards the Dutch way of life were stronger than me. If I just had a hope that I won’t have to spend the rest of my life among the Dutch, I could really move mountains!

I was avoiding the Dutch on Curacao as much as I could. I saw how brutal and shamelessly they behave there. Even those who already lived in Curacao for many years, won’t bother to even try to learn the language of local people that I mastered to a reasonable degree within a couple of months, without any books or lessons. They were just absolutely sure that everybody is obliged to speak in their language with them: the language
of masters. Those who don’t like it so much when women in burqas and headscarves walk around the streets of their own cities, apparently, consider it to be OK for themselves to walk around somebody else’s cities and even to pay bills in the banks almost in trunks and swimming suits. And these cities also have their own norms and values!

As a protest I died my hair black, so that I won’t look like Dutch at all. And I achieved the desired result: people started shouting to me: “Venezolana!” and speak to me only in Spanish...I was quite pleased when one Dutchman on the street even mistook me for a local.

Uncle Patrick was sympathetic to such my faddiness. He also disliked the Dutch: his idols were, as I already mentioned, the Yankees. He even attempted to enlighten me what a brilliant country it was. Because this took place before Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, I let him get away wit it.

Uncle Patrick sincerely wanted to entertain me: he invited me for a dance on his birthday party where he was dressed in bright white suit beautifully contrasting with his skin color; he offered me a temporary job in his private company and even gave Mai’s phone number to a Russian ship captain who harbourced in Willemstad at that time. Uncle Patrick was working for the customs and found out about this as one of the first people. “My nephew is married to a Russian woman!” - decided he to make captain happy. Nowadays, of course, you won’t surprise anybody with that even in Papua New Guinea, but at that time captain was a bit surprised. And phoned me.

We spoke for about fifteen minutes. Captain invited me to visit the ship, but I was shy: who know how my Othello would react to this?

- Well, do you like it here? - I asked him, because myself I already loved Curacao to such extent that I thought I already knew how he was going to respond. And I heard his answer:

- Well, it’s OK, but there are some much more beautiful places.

I was even offended. I simply could not believe this.

To work in Uncle Patrick’s office was easy. I was working as a receptionist: answering the phones and typing on the computer. I received for this around 500 Antillean guilders per month (one could not live on such money, but I was only earning a bit of extra while on holidays). The company was hiring private security men for various shops. At that time civilization in Europe didn’t reach such level of development yet, and there weren’t any private security men in the shops there; Curacao was ahead of time. Just straight behind the favorite country of Uncle Patrick, the United States...

In the beginning I thought that Uncle Patrick and other Sonny’s relatives (four of them created this company together) were simply too greedy. Later I understood that they are only trying to survive: on wages of a policeman or a customs officer you won’t have palm tree gardens in your yard...

But in general, the Gosepa family (a typical Curacao surname is based not on men’s but on women’s first names; probably because everybody knew who the mother of such and such slave was, while who was the father, wasn’t always clear) was really money-minded. The whole
family. And from time to time they were arguing with each other because of money, even though they usually helped each other in hard times.

The better I got to know them, the more strange it seemed to me why Sonny’s mother and Señor Arturo got married. Zomerberg family had nothing in common with Gosepa family. Zomerbergs were mainly intellectual and poor - exactly what Sonny was afraid for in his own life. For Señor Arturo his marriage to Luisa Gosepa was his second one. She was fifteen years younger than him. Maybe, he just liked her looks? But what attracted her in him? His respectability? Her relatives didn’t like him and didn’t attempt to hide it.

And I also found out one more thing that Sonny didn’t want to tell me: apparently, Zomerberg isn’t Curacaoan, but Aruban surname. He was of the same origin as my idol Bobby! Probably that’s why Sonny didn’t want to admit it: he couldn’t stand “Boney M”.

- They act as stupid as you, Europeans, would like all of us to be! That is how you want to see us.

I do see his point. I just never looked at it this way when I was a child.

I was very close to visiting Aruba - “motherland of my hero” - again, thanks to uncle Patrick who already arranged for some boat to take us there for a couple of days. But it wasn’t meant to be: again, because of Sonny...

...I liked my job at Uncle Patrick’s. I was typing on the PC the whole day through, looking from time to time down from the balcony of this 2 floor’s large building surrounded by high palm trees that Jean watered every morning. Once Uncle Patrick asked Jean to paint the fence, and Jean painted it with much sincere efforts - from one side only.

- Nobody would see it from the other side anyway! - he explained to me.

- Lively road to Westpunt passed next to the building. There were often accidents on Curacao roads. Along the roads they sold local lottery tickets to win in which there was a much bigger chance than in Europe. But the chance that something might happen to you on a road was even bigger.

From time to time we received job applicants: those who wanted to work as private security men. I was only taking their paperwork, uncle Patrick was interviewing them himself. Especially well I remember one of these applicants: in rubber sleepers on bare feet, with a comb stuck in his hair and with a face of somebody who doesn’t give a damn. His pregnant wife literally dragged him into the office. She was also the one who answered for him all the questions. I felt so much for her.

- Maybe you’ll give him a job, Uncle Patrick? - I asked when they left, - I feel such sorry for this woman, she was really doing her best. After all, it’s not such an important job, is it?

- Señor Patrick smiled and made a speech meaning of which was as followed: from a human point of view he completely agreed with me, but he wasn’t from the business point of view. But all I thought of was their future baby... I don’t give a damn about some “business” if a child will be hungry! He didn’t choose his life, after all.
Of course, not everybody on the island was Americanized to such extent as Uncle Patrick. The attitude towards the Dutch was in general limitedly-disliking. But attitude towards the issue of independence was more complex: despite all the dislike for colonizers and realizing the facts of discrimination and exploitation, very few people wanted independence at any cost. People simply did not believe in themselves. They gave as examples other small Caribbean countries where life after reaching independence, to put it mildly, did not become much better. Naturally, the most evident example of this was the oldest independent country in the Western hemisphere - Haiti. But a big role in this attitude was also played by Americanisation of the young generation, very visible in Curacao. A native of Curacao grows up with American culture much more so than European kids. In an atmosphere of almost religious admiration for Americans and all things American, artificially created by those Americans around themselves. “If you won’t praise yourself, who then will?” - used to say my granny’s brother. That’s about Americans. It looked like people of Curacao saw in them some sort of a balance to the Dutch and attempted to play on their contradictions. Usually without much success.

But at the same time I discovered to my surprise that many in Curacao sympathized with Cuba and admired Fidel. One would think that with such moods as so many people there had, it would be more logical for them to support the madly anti-Cuban tirades of their colonial masters and its fake-left intellectuals, not to mention the American investors. But the people of Curacao knew very well that Cuba has excellent medical care and in general, quite a normal life. Many brought there their relatives for medical operations: it was a lot cheaper and better than in Venezuela or Colombia. Chavez wasn’t in power in Venezuela yet back then...

At the very end of my stay in Curacao one more event happened in my life. I got baptized. In a Catholic church. By the local bishop himself and under his direct guidance. Not because I suddenly became such a believer, and not because I wanted to please granny Mai (even though she, of course, was in seventh heaven from happiness!) Just because my own mum-communist asked me to do this: for some reason, now she thought that Catholic Church is “much less corrupt than our own”. I should probably have asked myself at that point: what is really going on there, back at home, did they all become crazy? But I didn’t even raise any questions - so much all my thoughts at that moment were busy by this beautiful island.

Mai made a big party for this occasion. Mai even suggested to us to get married in the church on the same day. Why waste time?

We were legally married for already two years at that stage. Our disagreements weren’t fatal yet, but already reached such a degree that it was enough for me to have doubts in the necessity of such a step. I knew that a church marriage can only be one in your life, and I already back then wasn’t hundred percent sure that I want that with Sonny. But I couldn’t, of course, say loudly that I doubt in the strength of our union - after two years together! That is how I became baptised, confirmed and married on the same day...
During these three months Curacao has grown into my soul. I already could not imagine to myself my future without it. Sonny wasn’t interrupting me when I was making plans about our future there together. And that’s why I was sure that he was supporting them!

...I didn’t want to leave to such an extent, that I was crying with bitter tears. Omayra was crying too, while wiping tears from my cheeks. And even when the plane was already in the air, I still had tears in my eyes. To go back to the hated Holland for me was worse than a bitter radish.

But I believed at that time that I would be back to Curacao very soon. Not later than three or four years.

A lot more time has passed since...

And when I was divorcing Sonny, it wasn’t just divorce with him. I was also divorcing his motherland, his relatives, all my Antillean friends. I was divorcing our dreams. And that was a lot more painful than a divorce as a judicial fact.

My last memory of Curacao was of a small field behind Sonny’s house when I accidentally found a cotton plant between weeds. A reminder of that time when his ancestors created by their hard work the wealth of those who continue to hold this beautiful island in their deadly grip and yet, continuously scream that Antilles are just a burden...

Potverdomme,²⁵⁴ if it is just a burden to you, then why are you so desperately holding on to the place?

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²⁵⁴ Damn! (Dutch).
Chapter 6. “But you have freedom now!”

“Why things don’t feel right?
Even though it looks as if nothing has changed…”
(Vladimir Vysotsky)

“My mum is anarchy; my dad is a bottle of port”.
(Viktor Tsoi)

...You may ask me, how did I manage to end up with my ideals and views in such an endlessly capitalist hole as the Netherlands... And of course, you would be absolutely right to ask this.

I am not going to say that I am not responsible for my own deeds, but an absurd coincidence of personal and historic circumstances also played a big role...

I was more or less certain that when I’ll finish school, I’ll leave my home town (by the way, out of my whole class I was the only one who did). It was because I wanted to see the world so much, and no matter how deep I loved my place of birth, I knew too well that if I’d stayed at home, I’d never be able to do that. So, I wanted to go to the capital not because of seeking more comfortable life. Of course, if I could travel to Africa for my work and then come back into the shadows of apple trees in my garden back at home, I’d do that with pleasure. But naturally, we didn’t have that sort of jobs in our town and we were unlikely ever to have them.

I felt that my life was going to be an unusual one, and was a bit anxious in anticipation of it. But at the end of the day, it happened to be not at all the way I was dreaming.

...I didn’t really like travelling to Moscow back then, despite my respect for the place. At least, if we are talking about a day trip for shopping. Usually people from my town departed very early for such trip: at 6 or at the very latest, at 7 AM, and came back by 10-11 in the evening. We travelled op an electric train about which they used to joke: guess what is long and green and smells like a sausage? It was truth, my fellow country men for some reason had special weakness for Bologna sausage. On the way back long loafs of Bologna sausage were sticking out of the string bags hanging on the walls. I personally didn’t share that passion and in general, could easy live my whole life without the sausages. But the tastes do differ... By the way, for those who complain that there were some sausage shortages: in the capitalist countries which you like so much to use as example, you are highly unlikely to meet anybody buying a whole loaf of sausage: it would be too expensive to buy that much at once!

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255 Viktor Tsoi (1962- 1990) was a Soviet rock musician, leader of the band Kino. He is regarded as one of the pioneers of Russian rock and has many devoted fans across the countries of the former Soviet Union even today.
A train ticket’s price was 2 roubles one way and 4 roubles return. Not like in the West where a single ticket always costs more than a half of the return price (why should it?) When I began to study in Moscow, ticket’s price was even less for me: students had 50% discount during school year, and I went home every weekend, and in general, could go home any time I liked, without even thinking about price of the ticket. Close distance to Moscow was the main reason why I decided to study there and not to chance it in Leningrad, on the Oriental Studies faculty where demands to party membership and gender were not that strict as in Moscow... But I’ll be getting back to it later.

...By the time when an electric train approached Moscow, the shops there were already getting open. Straight from the train station people were diving into the metro. I always loved Moscow’s metro. It looked so gala-like, even on an ordinary day, with all its very different from each other stations that were cheering you up with their feisty beauty - how could anyone compare it with dirty, desecrated by graffiti and stinking like urine undergrounds of Rotterdam and Amsterdam? My most favourite station was Novoslobodskaya, with its colourful see-through stained glass windows. And I also love refreshing wind from its tunnels mixed with the sharp smell of rubber. And escalators! On escalators people were standing and reading: books and newspapers. It was also very handy to arrange rendezvous in the metro, especially in cold weather. It was well worth to travel to Moscow just in order to see the metro! You could really spend the whole day there, moving from one line into another: entrance price was only 5 kopecks, and you didn’t have to pay anything for changing lines while you were still under the ground. In my student year a sole monthly ticket for all 4 sorts of public transport on Moscow cost around 5 roubles.

We didn’t often visit the Red Square in those years, and that is why such visits were especially well remembered. It’s nowadays that they are having pop shows on it and other nonsense, but back than this place was really sacred. The Kremlin towers seemed to me really reaching the sky with its stars! And when you heard in real life, not on the radio, the famous beat of its chime, you really felt goose-bumps on your skin. This place was a history itself! During my school years I visited Kremlin, Armoury, Tretyakov Gallery, History Museum, Lenin’s Museum and many others.

But most frequently we still travelled to Moscow for shopping. I wouldn’t say that we did it out of some desperate needs. When my granddad was travelling to Ukraine during the Civil war: to swap things for food, now, that was really out of need! But none of us knew what hunger was like. We just wanted to get something special, for example, for a holiday or a birthday, and it is only natural that in a big city the choice is wider. Examples were the bonbons for decorating the New Years\textsuperscript{256} tree. But it is very much the same like in Western countries: people from small towns and suburbs do go to bigger cities with their shopping centres to get Christmas presents and like, and nobody screams that this happens

\textsuperscript{256} In the USSR and Russia it is called not “Christmas tree”, but “New Year’s tree”.

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because of “shortages”. So, please do not overestimate the importance of
the “sausage trains”. They were an extra. From things that were hard to
get in my home town, there was only one I was prepared to queue for:
bananas! They were really a rarity. But that’s not an item of essential
need, is it?

Naturally, from all shops I was interested only in few: toy shops
when I was still a child and later on, when I became a teenager, book
shops and record shops. I remember our trips to the “Detsky Mir”
(“Children’s World”) where an amazing huge clock was hanging on the
wall: with a face of the Sun instead of a dial, that was moving its eyes to
the left and to the right, and with various fairy tale heroes coming out of
their houses when it was certain hour. The little Sun with its funny face
seemed to be alive. There we were buying things that they didn’t sell in
our town: stereo slides from GDR portraying scenes from various fairy
tales. I adored them. Or film-strips for my filmoscope. Modern children
don’t even know what it is.

Here one could also buy children’s clothes, school uniform, winter
coats (usually they bought you one coat for several years, until you grew
out of it). When I saw for the first time how much children’s clothes cost
in the West, I almost had a heart attack. Quite often they are even more
expensive than the adult ones. But a child, unlike an adult, grows out of
everything so quickly! In USSR children’s clothes, shoes etc were
subsidized by the state and cost virtually nothing. So, when some smart
ass who himself never experienced any need in anything, continues to
chant to me about “Gulag Archipelago”, I remember prices for
baby’s bedding and clothes and shoes in USSR. If to subsidize them, to
subsidize public transport, to provide people with free housing, free
medical care and free education, “is not state’s duty”, then what do we
need such state for?

When I came to Moscow with Sonny after 5 years absence, we came
to “Detsky Mir” for a while too. I wanted so much to show him that
amazing clock from my childhood - Little Sun. But it wasn’t there already.
Probably, some “business minded” Russian had sold them abroad or into
some private collection. Our “businessmen” are by their nature just
marauders. All their “business” consists of grabbing and selling off things
made by others. Today they sell all sorts of rubbish in “Detsky Mir”, I
think, even car parts, but nothing for children. On one of the floors there
was a supermarket. Sonny wanted to go in, but the owner, a man with
Middle Eastern looks, has shown us by gestures that first of all, we’d have
to leave our small bags with him. He didn’t know a word of Russian. Rage
hit me into my head. Look at him, sitting there, a fat-bellied bourgeois,
commanding as if he was doing as a favour by allowing us to enter his
shop!

- First of all, you’d have to learn some basic Russian! - I said,
grabbed Sonny by the hand and we walked away...

...On Kalininsky Avenue was another of my favourite shops,
“Melodiya”, where you could buy LPs that they did not sell in my home

257 Famous children’s department store in USSR.
Irina Malenko
town (probably because nobody there would have bought them. “Melodiya” company didn’t know about my existence!) For example, “Traditional Music of Ethiopia” that nobody would listen to in full without being prepared. I scared my neighbours with the song called “Fano” in summer, when I brought my record player into the yard.

Next to the “Melodiya” shop you could also buy foreign LPs, usually from the GDR or Yugoslavia: there were always some boys with diplomatic briefcases hanging around the shop pretending that they were waiting for somebody for some really serious matter. You had to approach them and ask them (not too loud) for what you were looking. Usually one or another had it (they were “working” as a group). After that you went with him to some back yard, where a black market trader would show you his goods, and you would make a deal. They were honest, in the sense that the quality was good. But the price of a single LP was up to 100 roubles (my mum’s salary without bonuses was 250 roubles per month). Usually I would get one or at most two such records per year: for the New Year and for my birthday. Shurek and I were so careful with them that we would blow a single piece of dust off them; we re-recorded them on tapes and then would listen only to the tapes, so that the LP wouldn’t get any scratches. Another group of people who traded in foreign LPs were DJs, usually Komsomol activists, who only recently appeared in our country. One such activist from my mum’s factory disco, called Vava, reminded me of a diplodocus (small head and very big everything else). He fancied my mum a bit and brought LPs straight to her work place for me (despite all his tender feelings, they were not free of charge, of course). But I didn’t feel any admiration for black market traders. Quite the opposite: I knew that they were speculators and that what they were doing was illegal, so even if we had to use their services sometimes, I despised them. Everybody knew what they were doing, and Andropov’s years showed us that it was quite easy to stop their “business”, if there was a will: they momentarily disappeared from the streets like cockroaches from a kitchen sprayed with dichlorvos258. To be honest, that was exactly why I didn’t take them seriously and didn’t see them as a threat to our state system. It was so easy to throw a book on them, providing the will to do that was there! Later on, during Gorbachev time, when they began to multiply like cockroaches again, I liked to tell to their faces, if they were too annoying about offering you their stuff (yes, but that time they had already become so brave that they began to hassle people!): “Pity that Andropov isn’t there for you!” When you said that, you somehow felt better. But their numbers didn’t begin to diminish. And soon the whole country became one big dirty market. But that is already a very different story...

At that time I only went to all the other shops in Moscow because I had to, with my mum, and usually I complained non-stop that I was tired and wanted to go home. I especially hated a shop called “Wanda” with Polish cosmetics and make-up and the queues there. I could not understand why my mum needed all these silly things: she was so

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258 Dichlorvos (DDVP) - is a widely used insecticide to control household pests, in public health and protecting stored products from pests.
beautiful without them. (To be honest, I don’t understand it up to this
day!) My mum also liked to visit other shops with goods from socialist
countries, many of which were in the suburbs: for example, “Jadran”.
There were also separate shops from our socialist republics in the capital.
What beautiful traditional silk they sold in the shop “Tajikistan”!

Mum was tireless and ran from one shop to another with the speed
of a hurricane, in order to manage everything on time. I barely managed
to catch up with her. Usually if she could find a corner in a shop where
she could leave me with all the bags that was exactly what she would do,
and then she went to buy whatever she needed. Of course, within the
same shop, and only when I reached a certain age, approximately 12 years
or so. As I already said, we went to Moscow not for items of first
necessity, but for something special, interesting, something we didn’t
often have. I considered shopping - this sort of shopping, not simply
buying bread, butter or sweets, like at home - a waste of time and a very
unpleasant way to spend time. When I heard for the first time that in
Holland many women consider shopping to be their hobby, I laughed long
and sincerely. And my opinion hasn’t changed up to this day. Yes, they
don’t have queues or their queues are shorter than ours were (except on
the eve of the holidays), but this didn’t make it more pleasant. Well, of
course, one can forgive the Westerners for having such hobbies: because
after all, what else do they have in life?

Often Mum or Shurek (or sometimes both of them together) went
to Moscow not just in their free time, but for a one day business trip, and
would do their shopping only after completing their work. It is hard to
describe with words, but one of my favourite moments was to wait for
Mum and Shurek after such “expeditions”. Usually I and granny went to
wait for them on a tram stop, close to 11 o’clock at night. The train
station itself was too far away from our house. Our tram stop was on the
hill that stuck out over our block, and where the tram line turned sharply:
so that we could hear well from home the creaking of the tram on that
turn in the early morning and late at night when it was quiet. The stop
was in the shadow of enormously tall poplar trees, next to the vodka shop
that was still nicknamed by locals by the surname of its pre-revolutionary
owner. But by 11 at night, of course, it was long closed, so it was quiet all
around it. We weren’t the only ones who were waiting for our relatives
coming back from Moscow, so we weren’t lonely. How impatiently I
waited for each tram: looking if it would be number 3 or number 9, the
only two trams that came from the train station. And if they were, then I
could already try to look into them: are Shurek and/ or mum inside? (You
could easily guess if the Moscow train had already arrived by the number
of passengers in the tram.) There was something almost magical in their
eyes when they appeared in the tram’s doors under the pale light of the
streets lanterns. Don’t ask me to explain why. I don’t know. That was just
what I felt. Then we walked down our hill, helping them to carry their
bags, and they would tell us how they spent their day... And all of this,
again, without haste, without fear to be on the street that late at night...

During the 1980 summer Olympics, Moscow was closed to people
from outside the city. At that time I was upset about it, but now I fully
Irina Malenko

understand that it was the right decision. There were 250 millions of us in the country. Can you imagine what Moscow would have been like if even 5% of the population would decide to travel there out of curiosity? Especially because back then travel was well affordable for people. It was the only summer when we didn’t stop watching TV the whole day, from early morning till late at night, despite beautiful weather (there was only one rainy day in the whole 2 weeks of the Olympics). Shurek was on his annual holiday, and we both liked sports, at least, as spectators. On our 1st TV channel in those days there was practically nothing else: just Olympics and the news. But we both were quite content with this. I supported all the Black sportsmen, from Cuban Silvio Leonard to Brazilian Joao Carlos de Oliveira, who I was certain, were robbed of their victories, up to the British Daley Thompson. But everybody’s favourite in our country at that time was, of course, the Ethiopian long distance runner, Miruts Yifter. Small, fragile and already far from young, this father of 6 kids completely conquered our public by his victories in the 10,000 and 5,000 meter run. The tribunes chanted his name!

It was a time that might be hard for contemporary youth to imagine. When professional sportsmen receiving millions from their sponsors were not allowed to compete in the Olympics (and Western sportsmen usually became professionals only after completing their career in the amateur sport). When there were no commercials of any kind in any stadiums. When a victory was first of all a matter of pride for your country, not a way to fill your bank account. Do you remember these words:

“Walk proudly to the Olympus, aiming for the sun’s prize,
For the sake of your Motherland, for the sake of sport’s beauty!
You should win honestly, you should live this life radiating energy!
They’ll make songs about us too, and it will be hot in heaven!”

These weren’t just simply words. There were students, soldiers and workers among our sportsmen.

Of course, they got some discounts in terms of the time they spent in place of their professional duties; of course, they received some material prizes too, but they weren’t in sport for the money and they didn’t participate in commercials for underwear or watches with a phoney smile. Just look, for example, at my mum’s favourite sportsman, ice hockey player Vyacheslav Starshinov, who also had a PhD. Sportsmen couldn’t be bought and sold as commodities, as they are today. And no

259 Silvio Leonard Sarría (born September 20, 1955 in Cienfuegos) is a former sprinter from Cuba. He was the second athlete to run the 100 metres in less than 10 seconds.

260 João Carlos de Oliveira (May 28, 1954 – May 17, 1999) was a Brazilian athlete who competed in the triple jump and the long jump.


262 Words of the Soviet song “Heroes of sport” that was often played during opening ceremonies of various sport events.
matter how much they show off their wages to each other, they are now simply expensive slaves. But even more pathetic are modern TV sportscasters who continue to count other people’s money: “You know how much he’ll get if he manages to take this height?..”

...When the Olympics were over, Mum and I went to Moscow, and I was almost trembling walking around Luzhniki Stadium, thinking that my feet were stepping on the same stones as Miruts Yifter’s...

In the kiosks around Luzhniki they were selling the rest of the prepared food packed in plastic for feeding the participants: sliced Finnish salami and “Fanta” in small bottles that we tried for the first time back then. What can I say about it? It wasn’t the choice of my generation... And “Pepsi-Cola” I think, tastes like soap. The Muscovites weren’t that happy that Moscow was open again and that we provincials came back. “If it was up to us, these Olympics would last forever!” And I noticed that it was mainly those who had moved to Moscow only recently themselves, disliked provincials so much...

But there was also another Moscow - peaceful, quiet, and nice. I saw it when Mum and I went there not for one day, but for a week: usually to VDNKh263 for her work. In those days there was no need to run around to shops and after that to the train station to catch the train. We usually stayed in one of the hotels near VDNKh - like “Altai”. At that time they were decent hotels, not hostels for migrant workers. Even though we usually shared a room with another woman on business trip in Moscow. During the day we were usually at the VDNKH: Mum’s factory often sent its exhibitions there. But after that we had plenty of time to walk around the city. To go to the Red Square when it was already dark. To have breakfast and lunch in my favourite canteen near the new hotel “Cosmos” (I still remember handsome Yugoslav builders who were building it), where they had tasty sour cream in glasses and lemon jelly. For dinner we bought thick and creamy “Mozhaisky” milk with tasty Moscow’s bread in a milk shop. And most of all, not to have to hurry anywhere... I really would like to live and work in that kind of Moscow. But it ceased to exist long ago...

...Just in case, I prepared myself in case I could not get a place in the institute at the first attempt. And I even thought of what I would do for a year, if I didn’t (to work as a photographer at my mum’s factory). First of all, so that I wouldn’t be too upset in such a case, secondly, because we all heard so many stories that “all places are already given out to children of those with connections”; thirdly, because in the institute where I brought my papers, there was a quite severe competition: 8 people for 1 place. That meant, I had to get at least 18 points out of 20 on the 4 entrance exams, so I’d have to get at least two “5”s (A’s) and two “4”s (B’s). Or one “3” (C ) and three “5”s (A’s)...

Our class lead teacher, who didn’t like me because I was absent so often, attempted to spoil my results by writing in my reference letter that I “worked independently a lot”. She was hinting that I was absent for at least half of the lessons. “Wow!” - they said at the institute when they

263 State Exhibitions of products made in USSR.
Irina Malenko

accepted my papers. To work independently was exactly what was expected from a good student.

I must say that I never went anywhere alone yet, even though I was already 17. But here Mum brought me to Moscow to pass those entrance exams, signed me into an old hostel in Stromynka and left me alone. Not only did I panic when I thought about the exams, as any normal person would - even more for the first few days I was afraid to go outside on my own. Not because I was afraid that something might happen to me, but because Moscow blinded and deafened me with its size and tempo of life, and there was nobody from my family around. It was one thing to come there with Mum and completely different to stay there by myself. But I had to go out: I had to get food, drink and attend consultations at the institute. I closed my eyes and dove into a bus, then into the metro, got to the institute and after that went straight back to the hostel. I ate either in a pancake café near “Sokolniki” metro, or hot, melt-in-your-mouth doughnuts covered with sugary powder, bought near “Komsomolskaya” metro station. I didn’t know yet that there was a nice and very cheap canteen in the basement of the hostel itself. I didn’t feel much desire to research this dark building with its high ceilings and windows, with one big bathroom for the whole floor to wash your face in the morning (to be more exact, with two - one for boys and one for girls) and with a kitchen where you often had to stand in a queue to heat up your tea kettle.

I shared a room with 4 girls: one from Naberezhny Chelny that was temporarily called Brezhnev then, one from Ufa and one from Ukraine. We were all trying to enter different faculties, and our exams were on different days. The girls were nice, quiet and didn’t disturb me from studying. All five of us sat in the room the whole day going through our books. Only the Ukrainian girls went to the cinema on the eve of the exam - I was horrified even by such a thought! And as I expected, they failed their exam after this.

There were 4 exams altogether. First was a literature thesis: for all except those who had finished school with a gold medal. Those with a medal passed history first; if they got a “5” for it, they didn’t have to pass any more exams; if they got less than a “5”, they still had to pass another three exams. For some reason, virtually everybody finds writing a thesis the scariest of the exams, but for me, both at school and here, it was the easiest. I remember that my thesis that time was about Lermontov’s Pechorin.

After the thesis many were sent home straight away: the lists of those who received a “2” (“unsatisfactory” or D) hung on the walls for all to see, and 3 places were immediately freed in our room. I remained, along with Ilmira from Ufa, a very cute and modest black-eyed Bashkir girl with a long, almost white, pony tail.

Before the next exam, history, I was almost shaking with fear, especially when I realized how many of us actually didn’t pass the first one. I wasn’t on the list that meant that I passed, but I would only be told the result during the history exam. I answered the questions and watched the faces of the teachers who took my exam. Judging by them, it was not
too bad; but when the chairman of the commission read my surname, he became somewhat nervous and whispered something to his colleagues; after that all three of them began to look at me with a strange, unhealthy curiosity, it seemed to me. My heart sank again.

- Well, thank you very much, that was enough, said the chairman smiling when I finished answering. And now let’s go back to your thesis. You know, there is an issue with it...

I almost fainted, but that bastard just continued to smile.

- What is the issue? - I could hardly speak.

- You see, you are the only one of all the candidates in our faculty who received a “5”... Congratulations! - and he shook my hand.

I couldn’t utter a word and just opened and closed my mouth in silence like a fish.

- But why are you taking part in all the exams? he continued, looking surprised. - Aren’t you a medal holder?

I began to come back to life.

- No, I have one “4” (B). For the BMT.

- For what? - the whole commission looked at me a bit lost.

- That’s Basic Military Training.

- Kalashnikova has a “4” for the Basic Military Training! - smiled the chairman. - What an irony! But please do not worry; it is all in the past now...

I came out of that door with my knees shaking.

The rest of the exams also went well. Even though French was the most difficult, just as I expected. But the teachers also looked at the results, and my “5” for the thesis brought them such a thrill that they didn’t even ask me any further questions. At the end I got 19 points out of 20 and obviously should win my place. But I was so superstitious that I was still afraid to believe it... Who knows what might still happen... How could it be that I, an ordinary girl, would get a place in such a highly desirable, prestigious institute, without any connections and without paying any extra tuition? It was like a fairy tale! Today I think that those myths about the “impossibility of getting a place without connections” were made up by those who failed the exams to justify themselves. No, that doesn’t mean that we didn’t have any people who got their place because of their connections; there were some, and we all saw their parents whispering something to the teachers in the hall during the exams. And they were even more obvious later on, when we began to study: they found studying very hard. But their total percentage was not that high: in our group of 25 people, for example, there were just two. Too many high-placed fools were not needed in the people’s economy. Plus, my institute wasn’t the Institute of Foreign Relations, after all. But I am getting ahead of my story again.

Thus, I still refused to believe that I had become a student. A letter officially confirming this came near the end of August, when Mum her then boyfriend Victor Petrovich and I decided to go to the Crimea in his car for a holiday.

After such a nerve-wrecking couple of weeks I fully deserved it...
Victor Petrovich was chef in a workshop at my mum’s factory. When they began to date, he was still officially married, to the great disgust of my granny. I also didn’t like him, just as I never liked anyone my mum dated. He looked a bit like Frank Sinatra. It would have been much better if he sang like Sinatra! Because he and Mum had annoying habit of loudly singing classic Soviet songs together when he took us for a drive in his car, and both of their voices weren’t the greatest in the world... To listen to that for a whole day, as I’d have to during the journey to the Crimea, was not easy.

Victor Petrovich smoked a lot and liked to repeat that a man “should look just slightly better than an ape”.

- Well, he wasn’t far from it! - I mentioned to Mum with poison on my lips. I couldn’t understand at all what she liked about him. But he was the only one who dared to approach her! The rest of the men were too afraid of this sharp-tongued beauty. Plus, my mum liked to pull the object of her attention up to her own level in the process of a relationship, to bring him to the theatre, to advise him what sort of books to read, how to dress tastefully and so on. And not every man is capable of withstanding this, even though she had the best intentions. If she failed, she just shook her shoulders:

- Well, a farmer is a farmer! You can’t change his nature!

After a while she began trying to change yet another one... My mum reminds me so much of a heroine of the film “Pokrovsky Gates”, Margarita Khobotova. And, by the way, she is one of her favourite heroes!

Victor Petrovich reminded me a bit of Shukshin’s heroes. He liked to speak philosophically, with a look of being deep in thought, despite his lack of knowledge in many areas. My conversations with him reminded me of table tennis: I always had a word to answer, just as any teenager would. After listening to yet another of my razor-sharp words (at least, that’s what I thought of them myself) and arguments, he just shook his head and smiled:

- Just you look at this little piggy!

It was not offensive, the way he said it, but it didn’t make me more sympathetic to him. I remember how I waited for Mum to come home after work, because I wanted so much to spend some time with her. Finally she came back, was having dinner - and then bang, there he was, in his “Moskvich” car! How I hated him at such moments! He never knocked at our door or window; he just sat there hoping that somebody would notice him. Granny mumbled unhappily:

- Nadya, there is that your fellow again... Go...

And off she went: for the whole evening and sometimes even until after midnight. Granny didn’t sleep until she came home, and to be honest, I could barely sleep either. Who knows, there could have been a car crash or something... But Mum didn’t take our feelings into consideration. I already said that she was used to waving away other people’s feelings easily and cheerfully. She still continues to do that...

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264 *The Pokrovsky Gate* is a 1982 Soviet *comedy film*. Margarita Khobotova, its heroine, was a very controlling lady.
today. Mum was about the same age back then as I am now, and I am sure that today she also wouldn’t approve such behaviour on my part, being a granny. But she still refuses to understand how Granny and I felt back then.

For the winter Petrovich put his car into the garage, so that then they didn’t see each other that often. To my delight! Only from time to time they went skiing together.

The only times when I bit my tongue and left my thoughts to myself was when Petrovich took me with them for a drive in his “Moskvich”. I was rarely in a car since my dad’s stepfather died. I liked to fantasize about everything in the world while riding in a car, looking at changing landscapes though the window. By the age of 14 to 16 I had as many dreams and fantasies as previously. Sometimes I thought that Boney M’s song “Oceans of Fantasy” was written about me...

Probably in their youth everybody considers himself to be the one and only one, irreplaceable. Everybody thinks that they will avoid making the mistakes their parents made, that their life will be miraculous, unlike the lives of other people. At least I believed this. And not just believed, I was aiming for it. And that is why my whole being childishly protested against the good old Soviet song “I love you, life!”

I love you, Life
That is not new in itself
I love you, Life
I love you again and again
The lights are already on,
I am walking home after work, tired
I love you, Life
And I want to make you better
I have been given a lot -
The space of land and sea
I know for a long time
What is a true selfless men’s friendship
In the sounds of every day
I am so happy that I am restless
I have Love,
Life, you know what it is
How the nightingales sing...
Semi-darkness, kiss at dawn
And the highlight of love -
That’s a great miracle, children.
Together with them we’ll go again
Through childhood, youth, train stations, harbours,
Then we’ll have grandchildren,
And everything will happen over again
The years pass so quickly,
And we get sad noticing grey hair
Life, do you remember those soldiers

265 Music by E. Kolmanovsky, text by K. Vanshenkin.
Who have died defending you?
So, go on, enjoy it, and make it happen.
In the sounds of the horn or the spring anthem
I love you, Life,
And I hope that the feeling is mutual!

I was annoyed by the fact that everything seemed to be so pre-
destined in that song: children, grandchildren... And who decided that I
necessarily should live like that? The Party and the government? And what
if I, for example, do not want to have children? Why do I have to have
them? And what if it is not enough for my happiness to walk home from
work, tired, in anticipation of a waiting for me at home plate with borsch?
But mum and Petrovich loved that song a lot. Because unlike me
they knew the value of life. I am telling you, my generation was simply far
too spoilt!

There was another, just as much disliked by me for the same
reason song - “The migrant birds are flying” where I disliked most the very
first verse:

“The migrant birds are flying
In autumn blue sky,
They are flying to the hot countries,
But I am staying with you,
I am staying with you,
My native forever land!
I don’t need Turkish shores
And I don’t need Africa”.

Why “I don’t need Africa?” - I was angry, - I do need it, very much
so!

Since that I long ago reached the stage needed to understand and
to value both these songs. They are not imposing anything on anybody. In
the first song a man is simply sharing his joy with you! And the second one
describes feelings of a war veteran who finally came home and who knows
from his own experience what it is like to be away from your Motherland...
And that’s why I am double disgusted when I see that very same, well
familiar to me teenage infantilism of the modern Russians who are not 15-
16 like I was, but already in their 30s! Guys, nobody is forcing you to have
children, to live “like everybody else” or not to travel to Africa and
Turkey. Only when you’ll finally understand that you can swim against the
tide, it’s just that this road is unlikely to bring you at the end to
happiness, it will be too late. One should grow up in time - not earlier,
but also not later than it is required...

...I went to Crimea with big pleasure. I was even prepared to accept
such company. Before that I was in Crimea once, with my mum, in Yalta,
but it was in spring school holidays, so I wasn’t able to swim in the sea
back then...

266 This song was written in 1948, by and M. Blanter and M. Isakovsky.
We were driving for almost 2 days, stopping only for the night. At that time it was so safe that you could stay overnight practically anywhere, in a tent, in any place along the road that you liked. And there were no borders with rude border guards and queues. From the first day I most remembered for some reason a small town Oboyan\textsuperscript{267} in Kursk region: cozy, homely in some way, with streets covered by white fluffy dust. And from the second day - city of Melitopol\textsuperscript{268}. Ukrainian round bread called “palyanitsa”, Ukrainian poplars reminding me of candles by their shape and bitter smell of absinthe in the steppe near Zaporozhye\textsuperscript{269}, heated by the sun. I also remembered Sivash\textsuperscript{270} and how a Ukrainian driver who almost crashed into our “Moskvitch”, shouted at Petrovich with a sweet Ukrainian accent:

- Where the f*** are you going to?

Petrovich was confused by this sweet, almost singing intonation: it was impossible to realize from it that you were cursed at.

- What did he say?

I and mum explained it to him in no uncertain terms.

Ukraine at that time was a flourishing, joyful land. Ukrainian villages with their well looked after houses and gardens and vegetable plots full of fruit and vegetables looked paradise on Earth in comparison with the Russian countryside from which people were moving en mass to the cities. In Ukraine villages were full of people. And these people, the Ukrainians, were wealthy, proud of the fruits of their work, not in a hurry to anywhere, kind and hospitable. It was joy to the heart to look at that land. Even on the eve of the disbandment of USSR, in the late 1980s, Ukraine still remained one of the most desirable places for the graduates to be sent to. But today the whole regions of Western Ukraine are being overgrown with wild grass, while millions of Ukrainians, unable to find work at home, are working abroad, for miserable salaries and often without any elementary working rights and protection. From the 28 millions of working age population of Ukraine every fifth person is working abroad. They are already preparing to build a monument to 3000 Ukrainians who died while working in other countries. And these are exactly those boys and girls who were playing in the streets and gardens and swimming in the sea when I was there in the mid 80s...They were eating ice cream, going to summer Pioneer camps, taking part in school interest groups, preparing themselves for university, and just like myself,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{Oboyan} is a town in Kursk Oblast, Russia, located some 60 km south of Kursk. Population: 14,100 (2005 est.); 14,618 (2002 Census).
\item \textbf{Melitopol} is a city in the Zaporizhia Oblast\textsuperscript{11} of the southeastern Ukraine. The estimated population as of 2007 is around 158,700.
\item \textbf{Zaporizhia} or Zaporozhye is a city in southeastern Ukraine, situated on the banks of the Dnieper River. Currently the city is the sixth largest one in Ukraine and has population of 776,000 people (as of 2011).
\item \textbf{Sivash} or Sivash also known as the Rotten Sea, is a large system of shallow lagoons on the west coast of the Sea of Azov (northeastern coast of the Crimean Peninsula, Ukraine). Sıvaş (pronounced as Syvash) in the Crimean Tatar language means dirt.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
were certain of happiness. You see, nobody “opened their eyes” back then yet, that apparently me, my mum and Petrovich were “exploiting” them and in all possible ways tried “to restrict their rights”, that’s why they felt happy! By the way, speaking about rights: book stores there were full with books in Ukrainian language and such books that we could hardly find in our own shops in Russian: Jules Verne, Dumas, and Conan Doyle… And television in Crimea was also in Ukrainian language, and we were watching it together with our landlord’s family. And all the factories were working, and the mineworkers weren’t dying every day in accidents at work, and their salary was one of the highest in the country, and their labour was very much valued and respected by all of us...

...And today... “International human rights centre La Strada has initiated creation in Ukraine of an institution of fostering of children whose parents went to work abroad”. Congratulations, guys! Now you truly became free and independent!

Isn’t this a paradox that the most pro-Western course is now taken by the very those ex Soviet republics where life in Soviet days was even somewhat better than in the rest of the country? Maybe, they are so angry exactly because nobody stopped them from becoming “independent”? 

By the evening of the second day we reached Sudak271. I have read a lot about Sudak and its famous Genoa fortress. In general, I never travelled anywhere before reading in advance about the place of my destination all I could possibly find. But even that did not prevent us from getting into a silly situation in Sudak...

When we drove into this little town, reminding of an old oil painting, it was already getting dark, and we felt uncomfortable about knocking into people’s doors in search of a place to stay for the night. We decided to spend that night camping somewhere and then in the morning, with fresh energy, to go and look for a room to rent for the rest of our holidays.

That’s what we decided, so that’s what we did.

We didn’t drive around much. Petrovich decided to drive up some hill “so that we wouldn’t be stuck under people’s feet”, and soon we found a suitable one. From that hill there was an astonishingly beautiful view of the town itself, of the fortress and of the dark red August sun quickly sinking in the Black sea. As always, we started the camp fire and began to boil potatoes. Around us it was already completely dark. Lilac sticky twilight was being replaced by a black and warm Crimean night. Brushwood was crackling in the fire, we were cooking our modest, but tasty supper. The water in the cooking pan soon began to boil, and half an hour later we were eating hot, falling apart potatoes, blowing at it with full force, trying to cool it down. Then a sea breeze began to blow and finished that job for us. Our hearts were filled with joy. I felt as if the whole life was in front of me, like an endless road behind a door that just

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271 Sudak is a small historic town located in Crimea, Ukraine situated 57 km to the west of Feodosiya (the nearest railway station) and 104 km to the east of Simferopol, the capital of Crimea. Today it is a popular resort, best known for its Genoese fortress, the best preserved on the northern shore of the Black Sea.
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went open... Mum and Petrovich were also in a romantic mood. They were searching for the Big Bear in the sky together, when suddenly we heard a drunken man's voice out of prickly bushes nearby:

- You know, only you and me are alive, but we are surrounded by dead, I am telling you! - he was saying passionately to his drinking mate. We were a bit surprised by the subject of their conversation on such a beautiful night. But what can one expect from a drunkard! The men didn’t remain in the bushes for long, they went away for their own business, and in the meantime we were ready for the night. Mum and Petrovich put up the tent, and I went to sleep in the car. After so many miles that day and this warm supper we fell asleep very quickly, into a really deep sleep.

- In the middle of the night some noise woke me up. I opened my eyes. A huge, almost orange moon was hanging in the sky, low above the sea, and on the bonnet of our car a black cat was sitting. Probably, that’s what woke me - the noise from its jumping on the bonnet. The cat was silently looking at me with its big fiery eyes, but I was so tired, that I just waived at it:

- You know what, dear, go away, and let me sleep! - I said, turned to the other side and continued my snoring.

...In the morning I woke up early, got out of the car and stretched myself. The night landscape changed into the morning one, even more beautiful. A new day was rising above Sudak. Early birds were singing, the sea was tenderly shining at the horizon. At the bottom of the hill people were getting water from a pump (it is very dry in Sudak, and during summers they had some problems with water supply, so people were usually collecting it every morning with buckets from a pump for the whole day). We really did put our camp right above the town, and it was lying there, in front of me as if in the palm of my hand. I took a deep breath from such beauty, deciding to look around so that I would remember it forever, and...gasped! Our tent and car were standing in the middle of low growth cacti and prickly bushes and were surrounded... by some ancient graveyard crosses, with some German names on them!

I remembered the night and the black cat and froze for a second. Now I also understood the sense of that strange drunk men’s conversation yesterday. And another second later I realized that it is not just us who see the town as if in the palm of our hands here: we were also displayed, in all our beauty, in front of the whole Sudak! “Tourists must have gone completely nuts”, - locals probably thought of us, - “Spending nights in the graveyards!”

- Mum, Victor Petrovich, get up! - I shouted, - We spent the night in the graveyard!

There was some movement in the tent, mum came out, and within 10 minutes we disappeared from that hill as if blown by the wind!

How we were laughing about it afterwards! But that was already later. At that moment it didn’t seem to be funny to us.

That’s how we were passing the last days of my childhood...
...I couldn’t believe for a long time that I became a student, not even when I already got a confirmation letter of this from my institute. Not even when I was already working for several compulsory days before the beginning of the school year: scrubbing the kitchen of the institute canteen in the basement of the institute building, along with another future student, a girl from Moscow.

I think I only fully began to believe in it on the 1st of September, our first study day, day of our confirmation into students, when they brought us to the Red Square. That’s when I visited Lenin’s Mausoleum for the second time in my life...

These 5 years were the most intense, the most interesting years of my life.

There were 100 students in our year, divided into 4 groups of 25. I looked at my future study mates with big curiosity. Most girls, both Muscovites and provincials, were modest yesterday’s schoolgirls, but there were also a few Moscow’s “society ladies”, as they would say today, “from the elite”; those who were into brand clothes and foreign make up, as well as provincial “hot girls” with whom I wouldn’t like to live next door in the hostel. There were representatives of different nations of USSR - and of course, I was eager to find out if there would be any Africans at all... I noticed some Arab faces and, to my pleasure, 2 curly Ethiopians, a short one with a scar across his face, and a tall one, with fine features of his proud face and a hairstyle reminding lion’s mane. The foreigners were keeping themselves a bit apart from the rest. Later on I understood that it was more of the opposite: our students preferred to keep themselves away from the foreign ones...

We read the lists dividing students into 4 groups that were hanging on the wall. Unfortunately, all foreign students were in another group. That meant that we’d see each other only during lectures, but all practical lessons and exams we’ll be doing separately. Somebody touched my shoulder. Lida Basina!

- Well, are there many lads in our group? One, two, three, four...
Oh look, what a name! Cecen Alexeevich! He must be simply gorgeous, with such a name! Cecen! It’s not a name, it’s a poem! We’ll have to find him...

We saw him during the muster. Cecen Alexeevich appeared to be a short, bandy Kalmyk...

The day before this big day we moved into our hostel. Here I was lucky twice: firstly, because I happened to end up in a small group that was housed not in Stromynka that frightened me, but into the hostel of one of the aviation institutes, near metro station “Rechnoy Vokzal” where our institute was renting one floor. Here there were not 5-6, but only 3 people per room, plus a bathroom, a kitchen and a toilet per every block of 4 rooms. It couldn’t ever be compared with the dark Stromynka, this

272 Kalmyk people or Kalmyks is the name given to Oirats (western Mongolic people) in Russia, whose descendants migrated from Dzungaria in the seventeenth century. Today they form a majority in the autonomous Republic of Kalmykia on the western shore of the Caspian sea.
going high into the sky 20 floor’s skyscraper! Only one thing there wasn’t appealing to me: it’s strict entrance regulations. Sometimes they didn’t even want to let our parents in. I think that was linked to the status of the institute that owned the building. But the living conditions were great. There was a canteen taking the whole 15th floor, a library, a TV room, a “red corner” (that was the Soviet name for a function room) and a table tennis room... Every two weeks we got our bedding changed, getting all clean and ironed bedding - free of charge. The room was furnished modestly, but nice: beds, chairs, and a table. They were giving for temporary use everything: curtains, tea kettle, even an iron... All rent, for the whole year, was 24 roubles, all-inclusive, that is inclusive of electricity, heating, water, even cleaners. For comparison: our monthly student grant was 40 roubles, for excellent students - 50...

Secondly, I was lucky because when we were waiting for the keys to move into our new hostel, I met a girl who became my best friend ever. That was this Lida Basina from Zhitomir273 region in the Ukraine. Quite possibly, if I wouldn’t have met her, I would be a different person today.

Lida had an amazing ability to communicate with people: you spoke to her just for 5 minutes and you already had a feeling that you knew her all your life. I was shy to the extreme at that time and very introvert, I was even a bit afraid to go shopping on my own, never mind to speak to somebody I didn’t know. And for sure, it would have been very difficult for me to get used to my new independent life, if it wasn’t for Lida.

I noticed her because at that time, after my friendship with Emilia Veniaminovna and mum’s and myself mutual trip to the concert of a musical group “Freilach” from Birobidzhan274 that was dedicated to the jubilee of the Jewish Autonomous region, I was very interested in our Soviet Jews. That’s because I knew very little about their culture, and their music I practically heard for the first time in my life when I became 16. It wasn’t fashionable at that time to be a Jew, as it became later. “It would be so nice to have a Jewish friend!” - I often thought. But we didn’t have any Jewish girls in our class. And when I saw Lida’s big brown smiling eyes behind her thick glasses, I automatically said “hello”. She smiled at me with a disarming, charming smile and began to speak to me as if she knew me since nursery school times! The ice melted...

- Let’s move in together! - She offered to me.
- OK, - I agreed immediately.

And we shared a room for 5 years and didn’t even have one serious argument during all this time. People who knew us both, later on often expressed surprise about our friendship: we were so different that it seemed, we had nothing in common at all. But despite this, we got on fine. From Lida I finally learnt something nobody yet managed to teach me, neither at home, nor at school: how to communicate with people.

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273 Zhitomir is a city in the North of the western half of Ukraine. It is the administrative center of the Zhitomir region. The current estimated population is 277,900 (as of 2005).
274 Capital of the Jewish Autonomous region in the Russian Far East.
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I think that is what attracted me to Lida most: that she was so unlike me. And she was attracted to me, among other things, by the fact that I wasn’t the slightest interested in our male fellow students and that I practically always went home for the weekend, leaving the room free at her disposal... As you may already have understood, Lida was very interested in the opposite sex. And for some reason - in just one particular category of it at the time: in our first year only in policemen, in the second year - only in Azeris\textsuperscript{275}, after that - only in professional Komsomol workers... In the first year she was dreamily telling us various self-invented romantic stories that were all ending with the same phrase:

- The tree leaves are falling down slowly, and you are walking holding hands with the policeman in an alley, and...

For some reason Lida had very low opinion of herself. She was certain that “nobody would ever marry her”, because she is “already so old” and because she is “frivolous”, even though nobody forced her to be frivolous, and she wasn’t even that much frivolous, she just made that impression, by her way of talking. In reality she was very loyal and loved for a long time one and the same man, only for some reason she expressed these feelings to him in constant mocking him... It was as a law of nature: if Lida Basina is mocking somebody, it means, she is really in love with him. As Beatrice from “Much Ado About Nothing”. But men don’t understand such things. Especially men from Azerbaijan.

Lida Basina was a walking version of Internationale. She was born in Kazakhstan, in a family of geologists who met each other in Turkmenistan, in the Karakum desert. She could speak Kazakh a little bit, Polish a little bit and fluently in Ukrainian, even though she was already quite big when they moved to the Ukraine. Before moving to Zhitomir Basin family already lived in Krasnodar region, in Donetsk region and even in Sakhalin! I didn’t know back then yet that even though Lida is of Jewish origin, she is one of those Jews who feel them Russian, by culture, by the way of upbringing, and feels that it is more important than the ethnic origin. She was probably right. It is more important. But despite being fully Russian in her spirit and upbringing, Lida possessed an unmistaken, natural Jewish sense of humour that soon became legendary in our institute. If I considered myself to be a reasonably gifted person, Lida was truly talented, not just gifted. If she only decided to us this talent, she could have easily become anything: a poet, a writer, a TV presenter! But she was a little bit lazy. And apart from that, she already tried twice to enter an actors’ school, but wasn’t accepted, which affected her self-confidence. Why she wasn’t accepted, I don’t know. Maybe it was her slight Southern accent, just like the hero of Irina Muravyeva in the film “Carnival”\textsuperscript{276}, or maybe because she was petite, and, as Carlson on the Roof would say, “not the first beauty in the world”, even though she was

\textsuperscript{275} The Azerbaijanis are a Turkic people living in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Commonly referred to as Azeris.

\textsuperscript{276} Irina Muravyova (born 1949) is a Russian film, television and stage actress, who is most well known for her performances in Moscow Does Not Believe In Tears (1979) and Carnival (1981).
very charming. She had an unusual combination of velvet brown eyes with light, almost ash-like hair, thick glasses and a figure, the main feature of which was defined by herself as “Basina’s belly”. No, Lida wasn’t obese, quite the opposite: she was thin as a match, but for some reason, she combined bony back with quite a round tummy. Lida was 2 years older than me.

Our third room mate, Valya with big blue eyes and a long nose, unfortunately, didn’t fit into our collective and moved out quite soon with a scandal, having got herself a nickname “Horse”. It was a spoilt little girl from Naryan Mar, who god knows how managed to get into the institute as a “national cadre”. The system was so that some places in the institute were reserved for “national cadres” - natives of various republics. Of course, on one hand it was a way in for some local apparatchiks’ sons and daughters, and quite a few of such students who didn’t have to make any effort to get this place, from Mordovia, Georgia, Kalmykia, - very quickly had to quit the course. But on the other hand, quite a lot of others, from Uzbekistan, Lithuania, Estonia, Armenia, graduated successfully and went to work back home. The idea behind the system was to make the entrance easier for them because they didn’t have to write the entrance thesis in Russian. But Valya wasn’t Nenets at all, so what right did she have to enter the institute as “national cadre” from Nenets Autonomous Okrug? I disliked a lot how she spoke with despise of the aboriginals of that land. But even more than that Lida and myself disliked that when Valya received a parcel from home, with canned cloudberrries, she didn’t even think about sharing it with us, even though before that she was well eating Lida’s Ukrainian lard and my granny’s pies. Instead of sharing Valya hung her parcel box out of the window, so that it would remain fresh, and at night, when we went to bed, she was getting out her cloudbberries and beginning to gob on them in bed. She probably thought that we won’t notice. Why she couldn’t eat it in daylight, but so necessarily had to hide it from us, we never found out. We decided to teach her a lesson. The next day Lida and I bought a big juicy green apple each in our canteen and as soon as The Horse put curlers into her hair, turned the light off and went to bed, me and Lida got out our apples from under the pillows and began to slurp on them as duo, as hard as we could… The next morning cloudberrries disappeared from the room all together.

And soon, The Horse disappeared as well. Her tender nervous system couldn’t handle such stress, she moved to live into a private apartment in the city, and we got a new neighbour, Lyuba Safonova from our group. That’s how our trio was formed.

Lyuba was a daughter of long haul driver and a nursery teacher from Kursk. She was a medallist: got a golden medal graduating from her secondary school. That meant she only had to do one entrance exam instead of 4. But when talking to her, you would hardly believe that this

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277 The Nenets are an indigenous people in Northern Russia. According to the latest census in 2002, there are 41,302 Nenets in the Russian Federation, most of them living in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug and Nenets Autonomous Okrug.
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was the case. She wasn’t overly cultural. She was straightforward, reasonable girl, who was always openly telling you what she thought of you, but she was a bit rough and a tiny bit tasteless. Her cheeks were rouged so much that she resembled a circus clown. Lyuba always tried to imitate Lida in everything, but what was charming and elegant in Lida’s actions, in Lyuba’s actions became flat and vulgar. I and Lyuba were also considered to be friends, but we never managed to have truly deep friendship, with understanding of each other’s souls. We were together simply because Lida was our link.

Lyuba and Lida usually went to do their heroic deeds together, it wasn’t my cup of tea, and I didn’t get involved into this. Already in the 1st year into Lida’s life burst her big love: a guy from Azerbaijan called Nariman. This love burst into her life suddenly and unexpectedly: when Lida went to the kitchen in the evening to put the kettle on. Under the accompaniment of shouts and knocking of scraps that Nariman and his brother Latif were using for cleaning our chute there... Nariman and Latif were students of the Aviation Institute, they just earned some extra money with cleaning the chutes in the hostel. They were natives of the South of Azerbaijan, of the Talysh Mountains, and spoke Russian with a strong accent. We discovered to our surprise that in the Aviation Institute students from Azerbaijan received extra tuition in Russian instead of lessons of foreign languages. But of course, technical specialties are so much more difficult that the need for such tuition is quite understandable.

The same evening policemen were gone and forgotten by Lida forever. At least, until the time when she later graduated and began working for the police herself... The whole night through she was tossing and turning in bed, and the next day after the lectures she went straight to a book shop and bought herself a Russian-Azeri dictionary. A few days later she was already trying to learn Azeri language, on her own:

- Men seni sevirem...

Nariman frowned, not understanding why she would need to know something like this, but finally told her.

- Oh, it sounds so beautiful! - admired Lida, - Just imagine, Latif is walking down the stairs, and I say to him: “Neja maragly oglandy!”

Nariman frowned even more.

That’s how we got to know our neighbours - future aviation engineers. Like all technical people, they didn’t take our studies seriously. When newly aquired Lyuba’s boyfriend Mukaddas (everybody called him simply Misha) passed his exam on resistance of materials (after passing this one any student was traditionally considered to be matured enough to get married!), he said to Lyuba slightly looking down at her:

- You are historians... Big deal! You told your fairy tale, you got your “A” grade!

None of us had any prejudices about the Azeri’s or any other our ethnic group. So, what if somebody comes from Azerbaijan? The main

278 I love you. (azerb.)
thing is if he is a good person. Lida’s schoolmate, a Jewish girl who was also studying in Moscow, in the Agriculture Academy, married a Kyrgyz boy out of big love and moved to Kyrgyzstan with him. In the USSR mixed marriages weren’t uncommon, every 6th marriage was mixed, and nobody was surprised by it.

I was waiting - in the future, I had no haste - to meet my one and only African revolutionary, and because of that I wasn’t interested in any men, of any other nationalities. But I noticed that when you socialize with guys from the Caucasus, a lot depends on how you behave yourself. I was treating them friendly, but without any flirting, and they treated me with respect. I didn’t go into their rooms for a cup of tea, along with Lida and Lyuba: I went once, but I felt that one of the guys began to show a bit too much attention to me, and I retreated just in time.

I was simply for different sort of friendship in Lida’s life than the one that she had with Lyuba: we went to the theatres and cinemas together or just for a walk around Moscow. For myself, I had to accept that Lyuba and not I was most probably Lida’s best friend; because they spent more time together than Lida did with me, and it made no sense to be jealous. That is why I was so surprised that when we moved to a new hostel in our 3rd year, where there were just 2 persons sharing a room, Lida chose me to be her room mate, and not Lyuba. I was flattered by this, even though I think that apart from personal, Lida also had practical reasons: I went home every weekend, straight after the last lecture on a Saturday and came back only Sunday late at night, with the last train. So for the whole weekend Lida had a free territory for her romances...

We were studying 6 days per week, from 9:30 AM, to 3 PM, sometimes to 4:50 PM. The most difficult it was when we had “lecture number 0”: the one that started at 7:50 AM! In order to get to the lectures on time, we then had to leave the hostel almost at 6 AM! In the break we were literally sleeping with our heads on the tables.

- Why is that; I am getting up so early, have to walk somewhere, am freezing here, and he is nicely sleeping there? - Said Lida resentfully one dark and cold winter morning on the way to the metro station. - That’s not right!

We reached the station; she took 2 kopecks coin out of her pocket and ran to the telephone booth. Nariman and Latif had a phone in their room, because they were classified as working personnel of the hostel.

- Hello! - Said sleepy Nariman who was woken up by her call.
- No... - he still didn’t understand anything.
- Well, why did you wake up so early? - And she hung up on him.

How could he understand after this how much she loved him?

It was only difficult to get used to my new life for the first few weeks. Sometimes, especially during the P.E. lessons (and here I could not avoid them: nobody was free of P.E here; there was a special group even for people with disabilities; so I just signed myself into an ordinary one),

279 Today in capitalist Russia racism against ethnic minorities (as well as various ethnic mafias) is widespread.

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somewhere in the “Dynamo” stadium or even in the famous Gorky park where we had our lessons in good weather, I suddenly got a sharp feeling of “what am I actually doing here?” Where is my family now, what are they doing at home? And in such moments I awfully wanted to go home. But that passed quickly. Because there was too many interesting things going on around me, to begin with the studies themselves. For the first time in my life I actually had a feeling that I was really studying not because “I have to”, but for myself! Yes, to be a student is quite a different thing than to be a school pupil!

Among general subjects in our first year we had P.E. (with a great teacher who didn’t demand world records from us, but at the same time motivated us enough), history of CPSU and medicine. Yes, that’s right. The thing is that all girls with university education at the same time were receiving the second profession: civil defence nurse. In case of the war. Retired military medics were giving us lessons. We had those lessons for 3 years, after that we had a state exam and became reservists. To my big disturbance, because according to Constitution women shouldn’t have been reservists and only could join the army voluntarily. But in practice during my time it was practically compulsory for all women who went to university: it meant a compulsory stamp in your passport that you were a reservist and issuing of a military card to you, along with the registration in the local military authority office. “Do they really want all educated women to be shot?”- I was angry. Other students didn’t share my feelings: war seemed improbable, and they pointed at the fact that we really learnt a lot of useful things for ourselves at those lessons. That was true: they taught us not just anatomy, not just how to protect ourselves from biological weapons and what was Sarin, Soman, Tabun or Yperite\(^\text{280}\) (that’s Mustard gas that was used by Germans in the WW1 near Ypres), but also epidemiology, how to fight infections in wounds, how to make bondages on various body parts, to make injections or even to make an enema. So, I am a broad profile specialist! I even know some girls from our faculty who really do work as nurses after graduation; it’s easier to make a living as a nurse, making injections, than as an historian.

During the medicine lessons that took place in a basement from where we had a beautiful view of Bolshoi theatre in between the bricks of the old Kitay Gorod’s\(^\text{281}\) wall, there were often some funny situations; I don’t even remember all of them. I remember well how during one of the lectures we had to sit for 45 minutes wearing a gas mask. Lida and I were sitting at the front row and listening to the lecturer when she for some reason decided to turn her head back and suddenly began choking with laughter. I couldn’t hold myself and also decided to see what was there: I turned and saw the room full of big-eyed little elephants! Another couple of minutes, and we all began turning our heads to each other and laughing loud. The lecture was almost cancelled!

\(^\text{280}\) Various poisonous gases.

\(^\text{281}\) Kitay-gorod, earlier also known as Great Posad is a business district in the centre of Moscow, Russia, encircled by mostly-reconstructed medieval walls.

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And when the time came for us to get our military cards, and we came to the districts’ military authority for them, one of our girls, Zoya from the Ural who reminded me of a hero of Marina Dyuzheva\(^\text{282}\) in “Pokrovsky’s Gates” (“I am so clumsy, so bony... I am all so self-contradictory!”) came late. She ran in, heavily breathing, and started to ask us who were the last in the queue.

- And you, Zimina, first of all have to go upstairs. Third door on the right. There they’ll give you footcloths and a pair of boots. What size do you have? Don’t forget to ask for a size bigger than you normally wear, otherwise they won’t fit in over those footcloths, - said Lida suddenly with an impermeable serious face. And before any of us could betray her by laughing, Zoya ran upstairs as a whirlwind. We burst out laughing. A minute later she came back down, deeply hurt.

- I really should pull your head off, Basina, for your jokes! I open that door, without knocking; there are 3 colonels sitting there, talking about something important, and I am asking them: “Can I try my footcloths on in here?”

She didn’t finish speaking; her words drowned in our laughter.

I am telling you; with Lida you’d never be bored! And what she was doing with her poor P.E. teacher...

She was in that special group, you see. And their teacher, Mikhail Sergueyevich, was a young Muscovite boy with tender like a peach rosy face who, as a real Muscovite, was terribly afraid of the provincial girls and because of that was trying to be especially strict with them. In our institute if you missed a P.E. lesson without proper reason, you’d have to come in your free time and make up for it. On one of such substitute lessons Lida almost drove him to tears.

- And now we are going to do length jumps. Who will jump further than me, will pass the test! - declared the teacher, for example. And from the crowd of slackers came Lida’s caustic whispering:

  - Nobody can jump further than Mikhail Sergueyevich!\(^\text{283}\)

  Poor fellow blushed, but pretended that he didn’t hear anything.

- And now let’s squat, grab ourselves with our hands under knees and walk a full circle in this position.

- Are we playing in Buchenwald, Mikhail Sergueyevich?

  He blushed even more, but attempted to strike back:

  - I think that for Buchenwald we are a bit too chunky, Basina.

  - But it wasn’t so easy.

  - Why, I think, Mikhail Sergueyevich, that’s exactly what those sadists looked like!

  Another half an hour of this, and Mikhail Sergueyevich gave up.

  - You know what, Basina... I think you worked enough for today.

You passed the test. You are free to go...

- No, no, Mikhail Sergueyevich, I missed 4 hours and I only worked for 2. I am staying!

  A silent scene.

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\(^{282}\) Marina Dyuzheva (b.1956) – popular Soviet actress.

\(^{283}\) Hinting on Gorbachev who had the same name and patronymic.
One of our teachers had a slight speech defect: lisping. It was a shy, quiet, inexperienced professor, and because of that it was quite noisy at his practical sessions. Once around March the 8th we drank a bottle of champagne during the break: one bottle for the whole group of 22 people, so it just made us very-very slightly tipsy. We hid empty bottle under the desk until the following break, this professor came - Vladislav Georgievich was his name, - and the lesson began. Vladislav Georgievich, attempting to speak loud in the noisy environment, said:

- Well, of coursh, we won’t be able to lishten to all your works during this term...
- And then somehow it suddenly became quiet. But Lida didn’t realize it in time, and everybody heard her quite a loud voice:
- And whosh works ish it that we won’t be able to lishten to?

On top of all of this a huge empty champagne bottle appeared from under the desk with horrendous noise and rolled down to the back of the room. It’s hard to say who blushed more: Lida or Vladislav Georgievich who was still trying very hard to act as if he didn’t notice anything.

The lectures on history of CPSU we didn’t really take seriously and hence almost didn’t listen to the lecturer, thinking that we could prepare for the exam just with books alone. And it was a pity. Because he was telling some things that weren’t in the book. For example, what’s the difference between Soviet economic assistance to the third world countries and the Western one.

Beside that, we had general history subjects: history of USSR, history of antic Greece and Rome, history of the Middle Ages and so on, - and special subjects: bibliography, additional historic disciplines, archival science etc. Already in my first year I irreversibly damaged my handwriting: thanks to one of our professor, Ivan Arkadyevich, who was reading lectures on native history before the Revolution with such a speed and gave us such an enormous amount of facts, names and dates to remember that you won’t find it in any schoolbooks, and to write it all down was only possible if you could write with the speed of a machine gun. Afterwards it was hard even for me to figure out what I wrote down: I had to re-write those notes once again quickly, before I forget what he was talking about. He could easily ask you during exam what was the name of Genghis Khan’s mother - and you’d really be in trouble, if you didn’t know!

Almost everybody loved our professor of ancient history, Nadezhda Petrovna. She could have become an actress: she practically played various scenes from history in front of our eyes, like on stage. Cesar, Spartacus and many other heroes long familiar to us from books, suddenly became alive during her lectures. A petite woman, with low artistic voice, she also had a group for those students who were interested in her subjects, after the lectures, and many came there even just in order to have another chance to listen to her. This group was organizing historical courts where various historic characters were accused of crimes and had

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284 International Women Day, widely celebrated in the USSR.
285 CPSU – Communist party of the Soviet Union.
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to defend themselves. Students took preparation of such trials very seriously: some took part of the defence attorney, some - of the prosecutor, some played the accused and the witnesses. In order to know their facts they read a lot of serious monographies on the subject in advance, in the institute’s library. For example, there was a trial of Oliver Cromwell where Irish farmers were witnesses for the prosecution. The trials were with proper historic costumes, and many students came to watch them as a general public. The trials sometimes lasted till late in the evening, but nobody rushed home: it was so fascinating and unpredictable! None could say in advance if the accused will be acquitted or convicted. By the way, Cromwell was convicted... Thanks to the Irish farmers and their testimony!

And how can anybody ask me after all of this why after such studies back at home it was not just so easy, but also so terribly boring for me to study in a Dutch university?

Yes, a certain amount of discipline was required from us. Yes, in the first year being present at all lectures was compulsory, and from time to time we got check-ups from the dean’s office: they called our names out during a lecture, and we had to show that we were present. So what? But at least, we got proper knowledge, with broad base that were built as a solid building, brick by brick, during 5 years. Not like in Holland studying where, with its absolutely arbitrary set (collection?) of subjects that a student was allowed to make himself (as long as the total number of points for them was sufficient) reminded me of an old joke:

“OK, I write down: “Rabbit”. Come here tomorrow at 8 PM, I am going to eat you. Any questions?”

“Yes. Am I allowed not to come?”

“Sure. Let me just take your name off the list…”

...And when Lida, Lyuba and me were sitting in the metro train, showing off our home work, reading old manuscripts for Palaeography practices, and people were looking into it over our shoulders, also trying to figure out at least some of it and being amazed at how smart we were, I was really in seventh heaven from happiness!

Already in the first year they began to prepare us for scientific research. I mentioned just one student group of interest, but we had many, almost for every subject. It was excellent practice for all who wanted to become researchers. But even without the groups, during the lectures, they taught us that every archivist is a researcher, a person of science, not simply a man or a woman who sits on a bundle of old papers. During the history practical sessions we had to produce out own thesis, read it out to fellow students, answering their questions afterwards. You could choose one of the offered themes for it from a list or to suggest your own theme. That is how we were learning the difference between what is historical source and what is literature and learnt how to interpret 286 Palaeography is the study of ancient writing. Included in the discipline is the practice of deciphering, reading, and dating historical manuscripts and the cultural context of writing, including the methods with which writing and books were produced, and the history of scriptoria.
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the sources. During sessions of a special subject - Source Studying, - they
taught us the criteria of how far you can trust a source (that it why later
on I had no hesitation even for a second that Blair’s report on Iraq’s WMD
was a fake!), during sessions of archeography - how to prepare historic
sources for publication. Later on I found out that in Western Europe
archeography is not being studied as a separate science, but is being seen
just as part of palaeography. Yes, there are far too many things here that
“are not being seen as separate subjects”: even chemistry and physics at
school are not being studied as separate full-bloodied subjects, but are
turned into some sort of pathetic mixture with rudiments of biology and
nature knowledge that is called with a proud word “science”! Afraid that
people might learn too much and become too smart...

In order to become a researcher one didn’t have to remain in
Moscow after graduation; you could just as well do it while working in
archives in any part of the country! Apart from the full-time way of
studying the institute also had part-time (evening) lectures and even
distance learning (where people who were working full time and studying
themselves, only came to institute to pass the exams, from all the corners
of the country), and also a rabfak - special preparation course for
workers, farmers and those who came out of army. A person could move
from part-time to full-time studies or vice versa. Several students joined
us in our second year that came to us from distance learning and even a
couple - from another faculty.

You could do so many things when you were a student! You could
join a sport training group and take part in competitions, and you won’t
need any sponsors for that (we didn’t even know what that word meant);
you could go camping in the Caucasus mountains in summer with a group
of students: there weren’t any wars or any terrorists there at the time, of
course...

During student years we also joined trade union - that very trade
union that, according to Western university books, “didn’t exist in the
USSR”. If some students had financial problems, they could apply for help
from a special “bank of mutual assistance”. If a student got a child, she
could take a year break from her studies, while keeping her place in the
hostel. In every group there was a leader who was selected by the dean’s
office and Komsomol leader and Trade Union representative who were
elected by students themselves. The leader was looking after absence
records, general orders and also was receiving the student grants for the
whole group every month and gave each of us his or her amount (we were
getting paid in cash).

The student grant, as I already mentioned, was 40 roubles; if you
passed all exams with “A”, then you was getting 50 roubles per months
until the next exams’ session. If you didn’t pass an exam, you could do it
over, but you won’t get paid any money for the whole term. For
Muscovites who lived at home with parents, it was not such a drama, and
many of us were also helped by parents in such situations, but if anybody
was really in trouble because of that, there were different ways of getting
financial help. The hostel was already paid for the whole year in advance,
so you’d just need money for transport (from 1,5 up to 5 roubles
maximum per month), for food (the most expensive 3 course dinner in our canteen didn’t cost more than 80 kopecks, and if you cooked for yourself in the hostel, it was even cheaper). We didn’t have a habit of buying new clothes every month simply because we were bored with the old ones; we bought new clothes and shoes when we needed it! Using libraries was free of charge, so that there wasn’t much else essentials you’d need money for. Because all our studies books we were simply borrowing in the library, we didn’t have to buy them (only if somebody wanted per se to have his own book so much). Of course, parents were helping financially to many of us, myself included. But if parents couldn’t help, those students who wanted, did work part-time: as street cleaners, cleaning chucks, like Nariman and his brother, or as a night guard in the museum. In any case, there was no need for any of us to get into debt or to sell ourselves in order to get education. Many, especially boys, went on summer holidays to work with stroyotryad - a group of students that was working in construction or agriculture, often far away in the country, under the leadership of one of the teachers. They could earn really good money in those 2 months, enough for almost half a year to live on. After our second year stroyotryad was compulsory for everybody for a month.

In “civilized” countries a student not only has to pay for his studies: he also has to buy his own study books every year, and they are awfully costly (universities do have libraries, but it is not meant to provide each student with study books, so they simply won’t keep there enough exemplars for everybody). For example, when I was studying in Holland, my grant (including the amount that I had to borrow from the state) was approximately 800 Dutch guilders per month, from which I had to pay 200 in rent, another 200 - for electricity and heating; money for transport were taken out of the grant automatically, no matter if I wanted it or not; and around 300 guilders were needed for food... While just the big Dutch-Russian dictionary alone cost several hundred! I had to work the whole summer full-time just in order to buy that book alone. Plus you couldn’t work simply as much as you would like to, the way it was in USSR: in Holland the state was vigilantly following the student, and if he earned over a certain amount, some money were taken off his grant. And these people are telling us that they are free!

I was eating, as many students, “on the go”: didn’t have much time for it. In general, I don’t like having a breakfast, I can’t get a piece into my throat early in the morning, especially if before exams. Before lunch break we usually had 2 lectures (2X45 minutes each), then a lunch for 45 minutes and then another 2 lectures or practical sessions (2x45 each). Later we had dinner in the hostel. During lunch breaks I either ate in the institute canteen (if the queue wasn’t too long), or in a sandwich café next door, or in a workers canteen 2 blocks away, or sometimes even in GUM287. Sometimes I simply bought for myself a couple of sugary buns in the bakery across the road and a pack of milk in the milk shop. In the evening we were usually frying potatoes or cooking some half-prepared meals. In our student kitchens smells and tastes from all the 15 republics

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287 Well-known State Department store, next to the Red Square in Moscow.
were blended together, and in another hostel where our foreign students lived, - from the whole world. I am not the best cook in the world; I simply didn’t have to cook for myself before I started living on my own, but here one could learn anything. By the time of graduation I already could not just fry potatoes, but even cook Ethiopian wot or Arab couscous.

When we were in the mood, we, girls, went after the lectures into “Shokoladnitsa”288 – a café in Pushkinskaya Street where we took full trays of various tasty things: jelly, ice cream, chocolate cakes and also a half chicken in sweet soy sauce. Especially I loved ice cream with sauce made from Aronia jam: it reminded me of a special ice cream café for children back in my own home town (during perestroika they replaced it with a beer pub). On my piece of chicken there was usually so much meat left that Lyuba was saying to me in a voice of professional nursery teacher: - Kalashnikova, stop torturing that poor bird! Eat properly!

...After exams mum often came to me, and we went together to celebrate it: into a café that looked more like a restaurant, in “Moskva” hotel, on the 15th floor - in that very same beautiful “Stalinist” building that is now unfortunately has been demolished... From the balcony there you had a really breathtaking view of Kremlin! And this café wasn’t for some “elite”: anybody could eat there. Of course, not every day, but no normal person eats in cafes and restaurants every day. There were almost no queues there, but they served you very slowly, so that you could go there only when you had plenty of time on your hands. During the day café was quiet and peaceful. We usually took some caviar, solyanka soup, meat with mushrooms and an ice cream each.

Every month after getting my grant I went straight for the book shops. To “Academkniga” in Gorky Street that was always, from early morning on till closure time, full with people so much that it couldn’t be compared with “sausage train”! There you could find all the newest publications of researchers, for me - in history and ethnology of African countries, - and their price was minimal. Apart from “Academkniga” there were also other bookshops: “Progress” near metro station “Park Kultury”, “Dom knigi” in Kalininslky Avenue, “Books of socialist countries” and many, many others. I was in there as a bock allowed into a vegetable plot! On Saturdays after lectures I was bringing home almost tonnes of books. And I was constantly reading something - in the metro, in the train. I simply could not imagine life without reading, not even for a single day.

And finally, the theatres... Usually I didn’t plan to go there in advance: it was hard to find tickets to a good theatre, much harder than that notorious sausage about which our “democrats” are now reminding us non-stop. It was far easier to buy a ticket accidentally, for the same night: Moscow was full of small kiosks where they were selling theatre and concert tickets, and on the way home I was often searching in their windows: maybe there was something worthy to see? That is how I have visited almost all Moscow’s theatres, even those that are very hard to get in, such as Satire Theatre and even on the performance of already ageing

288 “Chocolatière” – popular café in Moscow, with various sweet desert dishes on the menu.
classic of our stage Arkady Raikin. If there were 2 tickets for sale for the same performance I usually bought both and then was inviting somebody to come with me (I won’t ask them to pay me for the ticket, of course; and they weren’t that expensive).

It is such an indescribable pleasure - to watch a good theatre play! The only theatre that remained out of my reach was fashionable back then Taganka and, of course, Bolshoi where all foreign tourists went. But once Lida and I managed to get there: at least, in order to see the building. It was Saturday morning and it was a performance of Indian musicians dedicated to the Week of Indian Culture in Moscow. We were sitting somewhere very high up, right under the ceiling, but the theatre itself was genuinely gorgeous! Only it was a lot smaller inside than I had imagined. Traditional Indian music sounded plangent, and a row of girls were performing traditional Indian dances on the stage. Suddenly I heard a powerful snoring over the Indian rhythms: Lida who wasn’t used to getting up so early on Saturdays, was lulled by the sweet Eastern melodies... I was horrified: what a shame if somebody notices this! And then I looked and noticed that in our row at least 5 other fans of Indian art were snoring simultaneously...

Sometimes you could meet a famous actor or actress in Moscow’s streets: they didn’t drive around with supercars and bodyguards, but were using metro and buses like all normal people and even queued for birthday cakes. To stop them and to ask, for example, for an autograph, was possible, but was considered to be awfully impolite, and we usually just looked at them trying to pretend that we weren’t looking, and then were telling to families back at home about such encounter. Most of all I remember how I met Yuri Yakovlev when I was going for my entrance exam to do the post graduate studies. It was a good omen, judging by the result of that exam!

We were also going to concerts, sometimes to the cinema. There was only 1 TV in the hostel, in the function room, but I could perfectly live without it at all. When we were in our third year, 65th year of the foundation of USSR was celebrated, and Lida and me got into concert hall of the hotel “Russia” - that very one where “Boney M” were performing in 1978! I remember clearly how when they announced Trio Marenych from the Ukraine, Lida whispered loudly in Ukrainian, so that half of the public could hear her:

- Oh, it’s such a gorgeous guy, Valera Marenych!

Only those of you who have seen what Valera Marenych looks like, will fully appreciate all the humour of the situation...

I often took to various concerts or theatres our foreign students too: I became friends with many of them quite quickly. I was not just

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289 Arkady Isaakovich Raikin (1911-1987) was the most famous Soviet stand up comedian.
290 Yury Vasilyevich Yakovlev (b.1928) is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed Soviet actors.
291 2 sisters and a brother from the Western Ukraine known for singing Ukrainian folk songs (known as Ukrainian nationalists).
interested in finally meeting real people from other counties, but also feeling sorry for them a bit. Because our students kept some distance from them, as if they were from another planet and unknown to science. But I wanted so much for them to feel part of our collective (group)! And even more so I wanted to show them my country, from its best side, so that they would love it as much as I did, and later on would have good memories about it back in their own countries!

I brought Ethiopians to the circus. Sometimes I made blunders, but I also managed to do unbelievable things: for example, to bring my Tunisian friend Habiba to a concert of Jewish folk music in such a way that she wasn’t offended. I realized what I have done only when the first song already began: in horror I closed my eyes - “What have I done?” and thought “Maybe she won’t realize that they are Jews, because they are our Jews, not Israelis, and they speak Yiddish, not Hebrew”. But she recognized them immediately, of course. She turned to me and said loudly, with a charming accent and absolutely quietly:

- Are those Jews or what?

Luckily, it was a bit quiet in the Middle East at that time. But I still felt quite uncomfortable after that and decided to straighten my guilt by inviting her to a concert of my favourite Uzbek band, “Yalla”.

As soon as Habiba heard the first sounds of their music, she jumped up, her eyes began to glow, and she almost began to dance:

- These are ours! Arabs! They are Arabs, just like us!

Habiba, in her turn, also invited me to various interesting places which I unlikely would have visited without her. For example, a party of Yemeni students in Moscow when I tried couscous for the first time. Or a film demonstration in the cultural centre of the French embassy.

There weren’t many foreign students in our institute, in comparison with other Moscow’s institutions. Mostly they were Vietnamese, Mongolians and Bulgarians, with some Arabs in between. Black Africans for the first time came to us to study in the same year as me: those 2 Ethiopians. Later on, younger than us, there were some more students: a girl from Sudan, a couple of Cubans and even one young man from the DPRK.

The biggest foreign students group was Vietnamese. Vietnamese were always together, they fried stinking salty fish in the kitchen and boiled huge pans of rice, they also bought off all the fast-cooking pressure pans in our shops in order to bring them back home, and in their free time they were sewing jeans for sale. From time to time they got into trouble for this, because foreign students didn’t have the right to work, never mind to work privately. The sewing machines remained silent for a couple of days and then began to rattle again. I was amazed to see that Vietnamese boys were such great tailors! In my country it is exclusively women’s job. One of those boys was married to an Estonian girl from our institute. You see, what kind of exotic couple do actually exist in the world!

292 Yalla, the leading popular music group of the Central Asian republics, from Tashkent - the capital of Uzbekistan. Was very popular all over the USSR.
The student grant of our foreign students was 3 times higher than ours: 120 roubles. But they needed it more than we did, not getting help from home and needing to buy new clothes etc. Also they had a right to go abroad twice a year, with the permission of the dean’s office for foreign students – to any country, and many of them used this opportunity to go to the West where they had some friends or relatives. They brought back some Western things (often at the request of people working in the office that issued them that permission) and were selling them: speculated, using our Soviet terminology. And some of them made quite a lot of money that way. I won’t say that everybody was doing it; it won’t be truth, but there were enough of those who did. So, it wasn’t easy to find a real revolutionary among that crowd... Habiba used to say:

- You know, what they say in our countries? “If you want a student to become a revolutionary, send him to study in the West; if you don’t want to, send him to the Soviet Union!”

Most of all I befriended 2 of my year mates: Fatima from Morocco and a Tunisian, Habiba, whom I already mentioned. They looked like sisters, but their characters were very different. Fatima was very feminine, shy, quiet and Habiba was independent, sharp-tongued, almost a feminist. They were both wearing trousers and had short hair (no any head scarves), but Habiba was also smoking. In our second year when we had an upcoming exam with a professor who was an old lady, elder students warned us that she could not stand girls wearing trousers or too much make-up, and she would find the way to make you fail the exam if you do one of these 2 things. I don’t know if it went that far, or they just wanted to scare us, but we decided not to test our fate and came to that exam dressed almost like nuns. Except for Habiba. She came in her usual trousers, and when granny professor made a remark about it, she answered calmly:

- This is our national garb. The first woman in the world who was wearing trousers, was Scheherazade.

Granny liked her answer so much that she decided not to make a fuss about it.

Fatima spoke with a quiet, a bit cooing voice and she radiated fine and mysterious Eastern aroma. The same aroma was filling her room in the hostel. She had difficulties with the Russian language, and we communicated in a mixture of Russian and French. After lunch she asked me once:

- Can I say in Russian that I filled myself in, like a car?
- You can say “I refuelled”!

She also couldn’t get used to our climate and every winter was frequently sick. She found it very difficult to walk on icy footpaths in winter (it really does require to master certain skills!). In the second year I tried once to teach her and Habiba how to ski. Habiba liked it, but Fatima almost immediately fell into the snow and was afraid to try it again after that... Fatima was married; her husband, a communist, was studying to become a journalist, also in Moscow. Before that they studied in Romania for a while and then moved to us. She lived in a very different hostel, in her husband’s, near metro “Profsoyuznaya”, and I sometime
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went to visit them. There were so many different people from all around the globe in that hostel that I was even a bit envious. There were some really unusual couples there; for example, a husband from Ethiopia and a wife from Madagascar, with their little girl with whom they both spoke in Russian because that was their only mutual language. Russian as a language of international communication! Yes, that’s the way it was...

Fatima, Habiba and me became really close friends. They were often asking me for advice and sharing their problems with me, and I was correcting mistakes in their written Russian and also sharing – at least, with Fatima - my own little secrets. Sometime they even borrowed a bit of money from my mum: in order to be able to travel home on holidays. And then, already in Tunisia, Habiba was sewing clothes for sale the whole summer, in order to be able to pay it back...

By the 3\textsuperscript{rd}-4\textsuperscript{th} year I became so brave that I even took a couple of them with me home for the weekend: Habiba and a Mongolian girl Munhzul, even though foreigners were not allowed to travel outside Moscow without special permission, and we both might have had some problems. But we decided to take a chance. To Munhzul I said that she could pretend to be a Buryat girl and to Habiba - that she was from the Caucasus. The trips with each of them went well, they both liked our town. Mum made a great dinner for them. The only one who was scared was Petrovich: he has never seen any live foreigners in his life, and when Habiba came to us, he was hiding from her in the beginning. Later he looked into a hole in the curtain and finally decided to come out. He was even surprised:

- She was actually quite an ordinary girl! - he said to my mum after Habiba’s departure.

Here I come to the part of my story that is very unpleasant for me to think about even now, never mind to tell about it to anybody... I noticed that I tried to postpone talking about it for as long as I could, but this moment finally came.... The picture won’t be full without it, in order to understand what happened after.

“\textit{I will never forget my friend if we got to know each other in Moscow!}”\textsuperscript{293} are the words of a well-known Soviet song. And another, not less well known song, goes:

“\textit{What if friend happened to be not a friend, not an enemy, but just god knows what...}”\textsuperscript{294}

...A very first kiss in my life was very strange and happened only because I did not expect it to happen. I have never seen that man - not before and not after it.

That frosty winter day I was going home after the lectures, but still had plenty of time to go to VDNKH to that canteen that I loved since my trips to Moscow during my school years. By the way, it didn’t change even a bit in all this time.

\textsuperscript{293} “I will never forget my friend”, well-known song from the film “Svinarka I Patukh” (1944).

\textsuperscript{294} Vladimir Visotsky’s song from the film “Vertical”.

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I was standing in the metro carriage full with people when I saw that man. A tall, dark-skinned military. I often saw that people like him were going out of the metro exactly at VDNKH station.

I don’t know why, but I suddenly smiled at him. As any anti-Soviet source will confirm to you, it wasn’t a common thing for us to do. They say, because we had such a hard life. What nonsense! We still don’t do it now, even though the very same anti-Soviet sources are trying to convince the world that we are now finally “free”. Anti-Soviet types simply don’t know an old Russian proverb: “Laughter without a reason is a sign of stupidity”.

That day I just felt good. The weekend was coming. I just passed a difficult test. Was that enough reason for a smile or not?

I smiled at him and immediately felt uneasy. What am I doing, what for am I doing this?

He also began to smile, and by the time when we walked to the escalator, we already spoke to each other. The military man’s name was Gitachew, he was from Ethiopia. Russian fur hat looked a bit funny in combination with Ethiopian military badge, but the military himself was tall and good-looking. Talking and walking, we didn’t notice how we ended up in a small park. It was winter, it was dark, and there was nobody around. And there, under high spruces, he bended over to me and suddenly kissed me on the lips. Without a warning. My breathing stopped.

I didn’t expect this at all. I got scared and mumbled something about that I had to go home, that I was afraid to be late for my train...

He looked at me with understanding, with some secret sadness in his eyes, and asked me for a rendezvous, in the same place, a week later. I promised to come.

- No, I know that you won’t be coming, - he said even more sadly. So sadly that I tried to reassure him that I will.

A week later I did come at the required time into that park: because I wouldn’t like to lie to a person. But he didn’t show up himself.

Today, many years later, I still cannot find an answer myself to the question why I mistook Said Dawd for that long expected African revolutionary in my life. Probably because I was so naïve to think that a revolutionary country cannot send to study in the first socialist country in the world an ordinary petit bourgeois - son of a small shop owner not just by birth, but by his whole spirit. Or maybe because, unlike our other Ethiopian student, Tadesse, Said didn’t like to speak with slogans, didn’t like making fancy speeches in public. To me the way Tadesse constantly quoted Marx and Lenin, seemed very false. Probably because I judged him by our own Komsomol activists.

But most probably, simply because I have never met a real, through and through, petit bourgeois. Yes, we did have philistines, plenty of them, but a real shop owner... Our philistines at least tried to pretend that they weren’t like that!

At least, now I can imagine what sort of a person was Margaret Thatcher295...

295 Thatcher’s father owned a grocery store.
...They were sent to us to study by the same organization, but they were so different: Tadesse, boy from the capital, from a Christian Amharic family, a short activist with scar across his face who looked almost like a child, but acted like a solid man, and whom we often could not take seriously because of his naïve tricks and suppleness and Said, a provincial man from the town of Dessie in the Wollo province, a Muslim, tall, quiet, shy, with sharp handsome Semitic face features. I liked his modesty. I didn’t like upstarts.

Religious roots of our fellow students didn’t have any meaning for us. Religion for us was never part of our daily lives. It was something to such extent medieval that we could not even imagine that it can be any different in our days, no matter where. And when I saw rosary in Said’s hands for the first time, I seriously thought that it was some sort of jewellery.

Please don’t expect from me some heartbreaking stories that Said happened to be an Islamic fundamentalist. Because he wasn’t. I haven’t even seen him praying, not even once. He was simply Ethiopian version of the Wise Gudgeon.²⁹⁶

If he only knew what I imagined him to be, he’d probably laugh to pain in his sticking out beer belly. And not just he, most people in our institute would probably laugh too. But they didn’t know much about him and didn’t pay much attention to him, unlike to Tadesse who was at the front row in everything.

All Said’s things were tidy and clean – from his handwriting to the way his books were organized in the shelves. Naturally, with such tidiness and perseverance he was a good student. He was a big pedant. He never did anything risky. All noble madness actions were as alien to him as they were to Ippolit from “The Irony of Fate”.²⁹⁷ Only unlike him, lippolit wasn’t a scoundrel...

Our relationship began accidentally, even though I noticed him at the very first day. But he seemed to me to be so cold, so impregnable, so not interested in any girls... I didn’t dare even to say hello to him, even though my friend Fatima who was in the same group with him, had high opinion of him. Said was a classic case of a Wolf in Sheep’s clothing.

First one who noticed me wasn’t him, but Tadesse. To be exact, he noticed not me, but Lida (it was hard not to notice her!). She really made an impression on him. But because he didn’t dare to approach her himself, he was glad to the chance that I was around, with my knowledge of when was the Battle of Adwa²⁹⁸ and what was the name of the emperor Menelik’s²⁹⁹ wife, but my adoration of Miruts Yifter and so on...

²⁹⁶ Hero of a satiric fairy-tale by M. Saltykov-Shchedrin whose only goal in life is to survive. He only cares about himself, is afraid of everything and spends his life hiding in a den.
²⁹⁷ The Irony of Fate – very popular Soviet comedy film from 1975.
²⁹⁸ The Battle of Adwa was fought on 1 March 1896 between Ethiopia and Italy near the town of Adwa, Ethiopia. It was the climactic battle of the First Italo-Ethiopian War.
²⁹⁹ Emperor Menelik II (17 August 1844 – 12 December 1913) - famous...
I must pay him the credit: he had no intention of messing anybody around. He didn’t proclaim eternal love, but simply expressed his wishes in direct form, a bit like Minister-Administrator in Schwartz’s “Ordinary Miracle”.

That’s how the first in my life truly unpleasant encounter took place - truly unpleasant despite the fact that nothing actually happened, except for some words' exchange. Girls who were themselves in a similar situation (and I know that there were enough of those among the Soviet girls of my generation), I am sure, do remember the state of shock that you feel when you for the first time in your life received an indecent (according to our norms and values) proposal, even if it was done in a very polite form. That was the state of shock that I experienced, and the shock was so overwhelming that I couldn’t keep it and wrote down a couple of thoughts - of course, for myself. As in a fairy tale where the hero so deadly wants to share with somebody that tsar Trojan has donkey’s ears\textsuperscript{300} - even if he could just share it with a hole dug up in the ground!- so that the burden on him would ease… But it happened so that when I came home for the weekend, my granny was sorting out my bag and happened to see that piece of paper…

She didn’t say anything to me, but I noticed that she looked at me with contempt. At first I didn’t understand what happened. Later on mum told me, and when I fully realized what granny actually has read, for the first time in my life I felt how my heart literally sank into my stomach. Before that I thought that was only an expression, but it describes exactly what you felt in such moments.

To explain anything to granny, to try to convince her that nothing really happened between me and Tadesse, had no sense. For her the very fact that I put myself in such situation, was describing me in quite a negative light. As for Tadesse, she began to hate him without even seeing him once. And all his compatriots along with him.

From that time on I never kept a diary.

At that time, of course, I was raging at Tadesse. But now I think that it’s better to be an honest twerp than a liar. But in any case, at that stage my whole innocent being was burning with desire of revenge: to think that he even dared to think of such things! And I couldn’t find a better way for revenge than to smile a couple of times to his friend… To that very one, the cold and impregnable.

He was very surprised. He looked as if he didn’t believe his eyes. And next day he came t me and asked if I would go with him to the movies. We were still in our first year. It was April 1985. Gorby was already in power for a month.

I didn’t know yet that I was getting from a frying pan into the fire. Our whole country didn’t know that it was heading the same way…

Said was squeamish about Georgian or even Krasnodar tea\textsuperscript{301}, and I was searching for our best tea, “Bodrost”\textsuperscript{302}, for him in out shops. After

\textsuperscript{300} Serbian fairy-tale.
\textsuperscript{301} One of the best local tea in the USSR.
\textsuperscript{302} Ethiopian emperor of that time.
that he was spending the whole evenings picking out by hand Indian tea leaves out of the Soviet ones. You could smell foreign soap “Fa” from him a mile away: he bought it on his trips abroad twice a year, in London or in West Berlin. In all 5 years of our studies he didn’t go back home on holidays even once. There he also bought various stuff for his lion-style hair: special creams so that his hair wouldn’t be that hard. He hated poplars that were in bloom at the beginning of June: because their fluff was sticking in his hair. But even back then one could see that he didn’t have much time to enjoy having his hair: he began already getting bold. And he also suffered from gastritis. It was no wonder with such spicy food: Said taught me how to cook Ethiopian wot 303...

He was washing himself 3 times per day and despised his Mongolian flat mate because he “walked bare feet into the toilet”. Judging by his attitude, he despised my compatriots too, and was a bit afraid of them at the same time, considering them to be just as savage as that Mongolian. Said insisted from the very beginning that nobody should know about our meetings, and I mean, the most innocent meetings, such as going to the cinema together. Such super-secrecy was strange to me. We weren’t doing anything illegal.

- I just don’t want you to have any problems, - he said, - You don’t know what your KGB is capable of...

I should have asked him back them what exactly are they capable of, and how does he know it. We “knew” such things only from “Voice of America”, not from our own experience. In my whole life not a single KGB agent ever prosecuted me. Not even had a chat with me about it. But I felt uncomfortable to question Said: after all, he was older than me and looked so certain about it. He was already 27 and I was just only 18...

- Look for yourself, how racist are your people! - he said to me when we were wandering along the blooming apple tree alleys in VDNKH. And that was true: people, completely unfamiliar strangers, were giving us such hateful looks, and some of them even openly expressed their views in nasty remarks. My compatriots who were brought up with Soviet films “Circus” and “Maximka” and the ballet “Path of Thunder” 304! I didn’t expect anything like this from them. Officially racism didn’t exist in USSR.

Why? What did we do? Why do they think it’s their business? Who gave them the right to decide for me whom should I be seeing? Do we bother them? We weren’t kissing each other or anything; we weren’t even holding hands in the street!

When Said heard their remarks, he just put his head into his shoulders and blew his nostrils. And I only put my nose higher. But it was very hurtful, especially because our relation at that time was completely innocent and as I thought, were leading to something very serious.

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302 “Bodrost” (“Energy”) was a mixture of various Soviet and Indian tea leaves.
303 Wat is an Ethiopian stew or curry which may be prepared with chicken, beef, lamb, a variety of vegetables, and spice mixtures such as berbere and niter kibbeh.
304 Soviet anti-racist films and ballet (based on the well-known South African novel of the same name).
Soon I was completely confused. If he doesn’t want me to have any problems and is certain that I will have them if I continue to see a foreigner, then why is he seeing me at all? When I was asking him about his native country and life there, he just waged away with his hand in disgust:

- You just don’t understand! You won’t be able to live there!

OK, let’s imagine that he was right, and that I won’t be able to. Then what the hell he is messing me about?

I didn’t know that the real reason for this was quite simple: there wasn’t enough Ethiopian female students in Moscow for all the male ones. There were much less girls than guys. And none of our girls would pay any attention to him. Except for me.

I also paid attention to him not exactly in such sense as he imagined. But he as an adult for already a long time, a son of a shop owner from a semi-Feudal country, didn’t know and couldn’t understand that there could be any other meanings... Only he was a bit more patient than Tadesse...

Meeting in the streets soon became a real torture, because of the passers-by, and he offered me to meet in a hostel. Foreigners lived in a separate hostel at that time, as I already said, - it wasn’t even a proper purposely built hostel, but an ordinary block of flats, 5 floors’ “khrushchevka” very much resembling a house where my mum’s cousin aunty Zhenya lived back at home. Even the inner planning of the rooms was the same. In the beginning, though, he was afraid to bring me to his own hostel, not only because of the strict grannies -watchwomen whom he’d have to fool one way or another, but also because of the few Soviet fellow students who lived in the same building. Said made me so paranoid that I began to see KGB agents in every single one of them and to be afraid of them.

In the beginning we were meeting at his friends’ hostel, who for some reasons all happened to be musicians and studied in the Conservatory. Their hostel was not far from the Zoo: probably so that their exercising would disturb only animals. His friends, I must admit, were nice people. And our relations, even when we were left alone, for a long time yet did not go beyond the frames of decency. I was a bit worrying that he said to me already after a month of so that he loved me: in my opinion, love was (and still is!) something so huge, so important that I don’t easily throw such words in the air. But I thought that maybe his words were caused by insufficient knowledge of the nuances of the language. Maybe he just wanted to say that he liked me. That would probably be much closer to truth.

Gradually our meetings moved into his own territory. Said was sharing a room with a quiet Vietnamese guy from another faculty who

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305 Apartment building type typical for the Khrushchev’s years (late 1950s-early 1960s).
306 There was a watchwoman (sometimes man) at the door of the Soviet hostels checking documents of people who entered the building. The guests were allowed to stay till 11 PM.
Irina Malenko

spend all evenings sewing jeans on his sewing machine. When they wanted some privacy, they put a curtain through the middle of the room.

After a while I became an expert in sneaking into a hostel unnoticed by the watchwoman: almost as a ninja... I don’t want to describe in details how to do that; perhaps, I would betray those who are still using such methods?

But our relations still remained such that I wasn’t ashamed of myself. Even though it was just we both who knew this and I was even afraid to imagine what the Vietnamese must have thought.

- If anything happens... if you become pregnant or anything... that would be our baby! - tried to convince me Said. But I was inflexible.

...Soon the summer came - my very first student summer holidays. I passed all exams with “A” again. That summer International Festival of Youth and Students was taking place in Moscow, for the second time in our country after 1957. We, students, were allowed to stay in Moscow and even to work for the Festival: in hotels, registering the guests. I feel sorry even now that I didn’t take this opportunity. I’ll never have a second chance to see such event again! That was yet another lesson: you should never sacrifice anything of real importance for any man.

Instead of staying in Moscow for the Festival I went to Donetsk where Said spent a year learning the Russian language, before he came to Moscow, and where he still had many friends. I also had a friend there - my pen pal Galya to whom I honestly told the whole story. Galya didn’t condemn me: she was a newlywed herself, having married a guy from Western Ukraine called Andriy. They also lived in a hostel, but even after the marriage still in the different buildings (there wasn’t enough rooms for young families), and Galya said that I could stay with her, and then we’ll see. I told to my family back at home that I was going to Galya. And I wasn’t really lying. I just didn’t say all the rest.

Donetsk in the middle of the 1980s was astonishingly beautiful. Approaching the city by train you already could feel the smell of smouldering coal miles away. But in Donetsk city there was no coal smell, not even near the slagheaps, - because of all its fountains, greenery and blooming roses. The city was really sinking in the sea of roses, I have never seen them anywhere in such quantity and variety. Roses were well looked after, they were watered every day, and streets were fresh and aromatic, even in the biggest heat. Galya’s husband brought me up one of the slagheaps. We climbed up quite quickly. At the top of it, gasping for fresh air under the cloud of coal dust, I was able to fully appreciate the scale of the greenery (gardening) works in Donetsk.

Interesting, what does it look like today? Do the mineworkers have time now for roses, now that they die almost on a daily basis in the mines that became private which they are begging their owners not to close, despite the appalling lack of the safety measures there since those mines became private: because otherwise the miners won’t be able to provide for their families... And Galya, a girl from a working class family of Zhdanov’s metal workers, who graduated as computer specialist, doesn’t think now at all about Donetsk’ mineworkers: she and Andriy moved to Kiev, are both working not in their own speciality field, sometimes she has
no work at all, trying to raise 2 children... Every time when she is made redundant again or suddenly receives a wage cut without any explanation, complains of “not very nice treatment” by representatives of the “civilized” nations from Western companies - and then immediately begins to defend the “Orange revolution”... “She is like a hen who breaks her own eggs; the one that should be sent into a cooking pan!”307 - As Ugandan poet Okot p’Bitek would say of such people. I was grateful to her for a long time after this journey, for her hospitality, but now we are no longer in touch. Because of that. Well, one who lives with wolves, howls like wolves... If you marry a descendant of Bandera’s308 followers, you become like him too. Man and wife are the same Satan.309

Donetsk University astonished me. That would really be the place for me to study! I haven’t seen such numbers of foreign students even in the Patrice Lumumba Friendship of People’s University in Moscow. They had their own competitions, had their own music bands, they were living their student lives to the full. There were so many of them that locals even stopped paying any attention to them at all; they became part of life. Interesting where is now that girl from Afghanistan to whom Galya introduced me? Is she still alive?...

There were 4 hostels here, all 4 huge buildings, resembling our Moscow’s sky-scraper, they were situated not far from the “Shakhter” 310 stadium, near a big lake surrounded by typically Ukrainian weeping willows. The windows in those hostels could be opened just a tiny little bit: in order to prevent any possible accidents, the administration placed special metal frames on them that were limiting the range of opening. Galya lived in the hostel number 3, Andriy - in the number 2. That was also where Said was staying at his friends’. We could see each other just for a couple of hours every day, but that was enough to make me happy.

Andriy politely declined Galya’s offer to remain in the same room with us, even though she was asking him to (her bed was behind a wardrobe and a curtain).

- Give me a pillow, Galya, and I’ll go...
- But pillow has an appendix to it, - whispered Galya seductively, trying to pull him closer. I didn’t like to witness it. And didn’t understand such behaviour, to be honest.

Sometimes Andriy came to us for dinner and when Galya offered him a soup made out of concentrate from a paper bag, he said softly, with his whole heart:

- Galya, did I really get married in order to eat soups from concentrate?

307 From his famous poem “Song of Lawino” (1966), here translated from Russian translation back into English.
308 Stepan Bandera (1909-1959) – Ukrainian right wing nationalist with close links to Nazis whose followers brutally tortured and killed thousands of civilians in Western Ukraine.
309 Russian proverb.
310 Mineworker (also name of the popular soccer team from Donetsk).
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If KGB really had a desire to get us caught red-handed, as Said imagined to, it would have been so easy to do in Donetsk. But quite the opposite, looking back at it, I am amazed how I didn’t get caught even once during those 2 weeks at the entrance: I was using my student card to enter both hostels, instead of a special pass, because from the distance it resembled that pass a bit. If I was caught, god only knows what kind of problems I could have had. Once a porter lady called me:

- Young lady, come a bit closer, I don’t remember you...

My heart sank, but at that moment lift’s doors opened in front of me.

- Sorry, I am a bit in a hurry! - brutally lied I out of fear, jumped into the lift and pressed the button as hard as I could. Once on my floor, I ran into Galya’s room, locked myself in and spent there, probably, at least an hour shaking and expecting any moment a knock at the door… But nothing happened.

During the day Said and me wandered around the lake. I should have probably been happy, but I wasn’t. Why do we have to hide and how long is it going to continue?

- By the way, Gorbachev recently mentioned that it should be made easier for people for form families with partners from abroad, - I said, - And you are still intending to hide in the bushes until graduation.

He almost began to stamp feet.

- He is a politician! Can politicians ever be trusted?

He was right. They can’t. Especially not Gorbachev. But about this thing Gorby didn’t lie: today you are free to marry any American or European moron who isn’t required by their own women...

…My eyes began to open in relation to Said only a year later when I accidentally read a draft of his homework for Russian language lessons - a story about his own childhood. Here is a quote, I preserve the orthography and style of the original:

“School life was such nice one. You come home, you ask “what’s there to eat?” and you go out to play with friends… In the evening you repeat all children’s favourite question what’s there for dinner. Mum and dad take care of everything, you don’t have to worry about nothing… You don’t have to make any decisions yourself…”

Beside shop owner-dad who was constantly complaining that the new authorities “restrict his business” and housewife-mum (the one Said used to ask his favourite question about dinners), he also had 3 sisters and a brother who was getting free of charge medical degree in socialist Cuba. Well, no matter how long you feed a wolf, he still looks to a forest…

But it was already too late. I already felt sorry for him. And I imagined that this must have been love.

My generation was the last innocent generation in our country. Do not laugh, but we had girls in our hostel who were 17 or 18 (mainly from Central Asia) and still seriously believed that you could get pregnant from kissing. I ask you not to laugh because all the “technical” knowledge in that area that is being promoted among young people nowadays almost

311 Hint at ungratefulness of these people.

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since nursery school, not just doesn’t guarantee any happiness, but hacks into your soul. None of these young people will ever know how wonderful it is when there is an invisible mystery between a man and a woman. Pushkin’s heroes were thrilled by a view of a “narrow heel” of the object of their admiration. But for the generation that has chosen “Pepsi” nothing thrills anywhere anymore... And knowing “the technology of the process” doesn’t offer you protection from human meanness.

Of course, if you really wanted to behave like a pig, you always could. But not in public. Previously people had a choice till what time they could stay innocent. Now they have been deprived of the possibility to stay innocent for as long as they would like to: by constant row of copulations on TV screen, in the media and even in public places right in front of your face.

Do you remember how many pregnancies there were in the USSR among minors percentage-wise (in our class just one in 38 persons, and it happened already in the last months before leaving school)? And now compare it with how many such pregnancies are in today’s Britain where children at the age of 5 already are going to be taught by cards with pictures what male and female genitals look like and are called... The connection between these 2 things is so obvious that it is rather silly to deny it.

It’ impossible to imagine anything more disgusting than children being taught what penis looks like before they actually learn how to read and write properly!.. No wonder that after this British “wise-men” suggest such “means” in struggle against teenage pregnancy, as encouragement of interest of youth to oral sex and lowering of age at which you will learn what is a penis and a vagina - from 5 years old to 4!

Perhaps they should just force children to do it without fail, straight from the cradle: after all, they “will have to know it anyway”? It feels like those who are in power in such countries are either geeks or maniacs. There is already a political party of paedophiles in the Netherlands: though people are revolted by it (that goes too far even for the Dutch!), the authorities tell them that they can do nothing, because paedophiles have freedom of speech too...

And this society is being portrayed to us now as an example for imitation?..

The so-called “free” society in practice just deprives people of a conscious choice, by imposing all sorts of bestialities on them in all possible ways since early years. Perhaps it might be difficult to understand for some, but there were some things which I myself did not wish to know. And if someone would have begun back then to tell me about it - in any form, even in the form of fairy tales about bees and flowers, as the Irish priests do at their schools, - I would just close my ears and walk out of the door. Even if it were my relatives who would have tried to tell me. Fortunately, they did not try; possibly because of knowing my temper. Mum has only once told me that if I would ever have any problems, I can always ask her for help. By the way, I am not alone in

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312 Pushkin’s “Stone Guest” short poem.
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my views: my such “liberated” Dutch girlfriend Katarina (remember her remarks about Sonny’s backside during our wedding?) has told me that she also did not want to know anything about it when she was a child. That she was embarrassed, and it was unpleasant for her to discuss such things. But her advanced progressive Dutch parents still told her and her brother about it, almost by force. I saw this brother: he now goes on holidays together with his wife and two prostitutes whom he hires with his wife’s permission.... Long live sex education in childhood!

My motto in this area is “just drink tea”. Not before it and not after, but instead of it! I am of opinion that everything has its time in life. I was not ready for intimate relations even at the age of 19, I simply had no need in them and no interest for them.

But that poor creature Said was suffering. He toiled already a for year and did not give up the hope. And eventually my pity to him has overcome my own norms, dreams and ideals... I know that it sounds awfully naive, but I thought at that time that when a person sees how deep you trust him, after that he will not dare to hurt you. I did not know that a shopkeeper won’t even notice that you gave him the biggest gift: your trust.

On January, the 27th, 1986 I stayed at Said’s hostel for the night...

From that moment on nothing could save our relationship, even if he really had any true feelings to me. I felt myself like a criminal. This ran counter to all my principles. And when the next morning “Challenger” in far America has blown up during take-off, I was not surprised. It was an expression of anger from above, caused by my unworthy behaviour.

After that our relations quickly went into a pique. My sense of guilt did not give me peace. I tried to sort out our relations verbally and to explain him what I felt, but things became only worse. Said was of opinion that “people love each other in order to enjoy it”, and for me such statement sounded blasphemously: so, only to enjoy? And when there are some difficulties in life, you just have to run away from each other? Nice love...

A proverb says that love is blind... It was, probably, exactly that case.

I should have left him, but I could not: not only because I have never dumped anybody before, but also because I imagined that then he would stay alone in cold Moscow, face to face with all these racists... There will be nobody who could support him, there will be nobody who could buy him his tea “Bodrost” and carry for him bags full of Armenian apricots, despite risking “ to look like an old woman”...

There is no sense to retell in all details what happened after and how did all this finished. I am not a participant of some talk-show to try to turn myself inside out in front of the audience. Just try to use your imagination. Remember his promises for me and imagine all the stuff that usually happens to deceived girls. That should be enough.

Lida knows... When I moistened my broken finger in the bathroom, shedding floods of tears, she came in and was even frightened. I lost my patience and then told her everything, not how I am telling it to you now, but how you can tell only to your very close friend, completely. I knew
well that what I told her would not remain between us: Lida simply could not help herself; she had such a tongue that all what she heard, instantly became common knowledge. But it didn’t really matter to me already. At that stage I even wanted that all the people knew what a bastard he was, even if they will condemn me and will gossip about me till they drop. Lida was astonished:

- And he looked like such a quiet guy... What a snake! And when she faced him in the doorway of the institute next day, she indignantly pushed him aside with her elbow:
- Come on, get out of my way... You, Khottabych’s brother Omar Yusuf!  

Said didn’t understand anything at all, but got scared. In general, he was not the bravest.

But I already did not see it. I left everything and went home: late at night when there were no electric trains anymore, by a fast train. In the same compartment with me there was a soldier - a simple, nice Russian guy - who was going on discharge. He felt sorry for me and said that things will sort themselves out. I was touched by his kindness and care. But would he have been just as caring if he knew that I grieved over an African?...

...My relationship with Said - “romance and not romance, just only the title”  

- has lasted till September, 1986 though he had begun to see somebody else even before that. At last, he has found an Ethiopian girl. After that, for all 3 years which were left for us to study we have not said a word to each other. As a keepsake about Said I had a broken finger left and a heart burnt out, like a steppe after a fire, burnt out to such degree that he is the only person in my life, whom I have not forgiven even now. Not including Gorby, of course.

...A doctor, who put my finger in a plaster cast, was really amused for some reason by a thought that I will never be able to put a wedding ring on this finger: Said had gripped my hand with such force that the slice of a bone broke off and got stuck in a joint. There was no chance that it would heal completely, but nobody even attempted to get that piece of bone from my joint either, and the finger remained forever a little bit more thickly in a joint, and it really wasn’t possible anymore to put a ring on it.

Life has given me my first hard lesson then: you should never give up your principles and go against a voice of your own conscience just in order to please another person, as though you concerned about him.

...You know what was interesting? When some years later I walked around my native town and around Moscow with my black spouse - I mean Sonny, - not one single person even looked at us slantwise, though officially, racism since then has become more widespread.

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313 Evil genie from the famous Soviet fairy-tale “Old man Khottabych” (spotting hint at Saud’s Muslim origin).  
314 Song “Hey!” from the Soviet film “Shores”.
Maybe, the matter was really just in the fact that our people felt how Said actually treated me and saw that my relation with Sonny was absolutely different?

...Anyway, I don’t understand one thing even now. Why is it always necessary in love to use cunning, to coil, to entice, to try to harness another person, to pretend, to cause jealousy and so forth? Why are all these exhausting and silly games needed? Why is it impossible just to open your heart to the one you love? Why is it impossible just to be yourself from the very beginning, without resorting to all these dodges? Yes, during these years I have learnt the tricks - to some extent, but I can only apply them to somebody for whom I do not have real deep feelings, and in this case, why should I apply them at all?

I do not want to do any of this. It is unworthy a human being to apply any tricks in order to "tame" the person if you are attracted to him not just physically, but also feel deep respect for him. I would have been the most devoted friend to my adherent. I would have been such companion on whom one can rely till the end of his life. But I have not met such a person... To be more exact, I met him later on, but...

...Of course, my student’s life did not stop for all this time; it just ran its course. I am such a person that I won’t allow any personal problems to influence my studies results. “The main thing today is not personal matters, but results of a working day!” 315 Maybe, teachers felt (and maybe, someone even knew) that something happened with me: I remember sympathetic looks of some of them during the following exam session. But I did not require any indulgences because of the pity: I was a good student. Moreover, in order to distract myself from my sufferings, I have thrown myself fully into my studies. In studies, not in alcohol or in drugs as so many people do in this “free world”.

In my second student year (when my this first personal tragedy was taking place) there were a lot of new and interesting events. In accordance with tradition, the year has begun with monthly trip to a collective farm, for all of us. In Lenin’s Hills - near Moscow where Lenin once lived - to do the apples harvesting. We lived in approximately the same conditions in what my mum’s colleagues were living when I went to the collective farm with them. There only difference was that it wasn’t in summer, but already September, so it was not very pleasant to wash yourself outside with cold water. But it tempers you. My granddad showered himself every day in the yard with cold water, in any weather - and he was never sick after that...

We even had our own doctor with us just in case, whom Lida immediately tenderly nicknamed Pinya.

- That’s because he looks so much like Pinochet! - She explained.

In the second year we had some newcomers: guys who came back from the army, girls who came to us from the evening and the distance learning (departments?) branches. They quickly joined our collective. One of these guys - according to his own statement, a Don Cossack, though he was from Kaluga - kept hassling Lida, slighting her with Anti-Semitic jokes.

315 Soviet pop-song “My address is the Soviet Union”.

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- Basina, confess, you are Jewish, aren’t you? - He annoyed her. He had rolling French «р». Lida heroically kept silent, but one day it became too much for her:

- Bortnikov, do all the Cossacks speak with rolling “r”?  

Another time, when he addressed her not with sneers, but about something serious, she suddenly strode him back:

- Bortnikov, you better be careful We, Jews, are hot-tempered people!

Some students were also expelled from our course: basically, it were such people whom we did not even see properly throughout the school year. During our stay in the collective farm, to my pleasure, the most indecent of our floor neighbours were finished as femmes fatales: a Cossack girl from Krasnodar and a Tatar from Bugulma (the one who thought that I have such a face as if I was ready to sacrifice myself; why did it bother her personally, wasn’t clear) who in the previous year were having noisy parties in their room, with participation of a Georgian Vakhtang. Both of them had become pregnant (I do not know how did they managed: all our collective-farm life was in a broad daylight, with no privacy whatsoever), got married, and it was amusing to observe, how sharply they turned into such innocent lambs and model wives - meek and mild. Maybe, they will even bring up their children in strict morals!

I quickly got a job in a kitchen together with Lyuba and some other girls: cooking, cleaning and washing the dishes. The job had some positive and some negative sides. Positive was that we didn’t have to be out in the cold. Negative was that we had to get up long before others and went to bed as last. It’s not so easy for four people to feed almost 100 persons in two shifts 3 times a day and to wash all the dishes after them. Though it was the cook who was preparing the meal, we only helped her: piled onions, potatoes and so forth. We washed the dishes with soda which corroded hands. But it was a nice work. It was just bad that Lida, unlike Lyuba, soon went back to Moscow: with the permission of the administration. Her mum-geologist was celebrating her 50th birthday, for that she arrived to Moscow for two weeks, and Lida was allowed to spend this time there provided that she would be working somewhere in the city until we return to our study. Lida got a job as a kvass seller in a kiosk: usually it is summer work, and kvass is a summer drink, but they still sell it in September. In her new place Lida as usually didn’t waste any time: she fought with late season wasps, got acquainted with militiamen, let local drunkards to use her kiosk as a drinking den, etc.). But I really missed her very much...

Foreign students were not sent to work in a collective farm, they stayed in Moscow and had Russian lessons for this month, and therefore I breathed a little bit more freely. My relation with Said was already a burden. Though I, of course, missed him at that time and regretted that I wasted time so far away from him.

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316 Rolling “r” used to be typical for the Yiddish accent in Russian (in the old days).
In the end of the second year we had practice in office-work: in a Komsomol district committee, and then there was a work for a month in a stroyotryad - construction team. I, Lida and Lyuba, got a job in a greengrocery (fruit shop?) near the metro station "Novoslobodskaya". This is how the destiny brought me into the absolutely unknown to me world of those who later on became grave-diggers of my country: Komsomol activists and shopkeepers. And to tell you the truth, they had more in common with each other, than differences.

Lida fell in love once again in the district committee. In my opinion, it was auto-suggestion. Her only true love, Nariman, has just left her, and she desperately wanted to forget him. The power of her auto-suggestion was so strong that the first secretary of the district committee, a black-eyed Ukrainian fellow called Vlas became a subject of her persuasive imagination for some years and even became a hero of her self-composed brilliantly written rock opera (our entire student population followed process of writing of this opera!) When inspiration visits Lida, she is capable to show her talent in all its beauty.

They were cheerful young guys (and girls), those workers of the district committee: idlers capable of saying a lot of beautiful words. Actually, they were just as I imagined them to be. But have never seen with my own eyes yet how the system of “you do this for me, and I’ll do that for you” functioned, between them and the shopkeepers: managers of depots and warehouses and directors of shops. They were not shy of us. Once I walked into Vlas’s office when he was speaking on the phone:

- Yes, my birthday is on the 5th... Well, two sticks of smoked sausage, some black caviar... Maybe also some balyk317... And I’ll get you some tickets for the Italians318...

He didn’t even blink when he saw me.

Intelligence service, in my person, of course, immediately informed Lida when her new passion had his birthday. Poor girl ran all around Moscow, in search for white carnations: someone has told her that men should be given bouquets only of those flowers.

- Oh, thanks! - said Vlas absent-mindedly, when she handed her white carnations to him; he didn’t even find it strange that she knew when his birthday was. His thoughts have been too much occupied by caviar.

- By the way, you and I are fellow countrymen, - timidly said Lida.
- I am from the Ukraine too.

That woke him up.

- Really? And where exactly from?
- From Zhitomir region. And you?
- And I am from Voroshilovgrad.
- Oh, - said Lida derisively: as usually when tête-à-tête with a subject of her dreams, she couldn’t help it. - You call that Ukraine?
- Vlas was offended.

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317 Sort of smoked fish.
318 Italian pop-singers were very popular in the USSR in the late 1980s.
- It’s not Ukraine where you came from! It’s almost Poland! Galan was killed there!\(^{319}\)

Of course, it was the most convincing argument in favour of the fact that no, it was not Ukraine.

Lida couldn’t win the heart of this ox-eyed boy. But she learned his home address and phone number at the information desk...

What did they do during the work, I mean, in that district committee? Well, for example, they organized on Easter’s eve... an operation "Anti Easter" (I do not joke; I laughed myself sick when I saw this "classified document" on Vlas’s desk!), consisting of their own walks in threesomes around a church during the Easter night, in order to scare off the youth of Komsomol age if they happen to be there. Well, and they also wrote reports and held meetings. And they accepted schoolchildren into the ranks of Komsomol.

It was because of such people that I did not want to join the party. After that we worked for a month in a fruit shop. And by the way, we were paid quite well.

It was absolutely another world. First of all, I have never heard before such broad choice of swearwords. And everybody there swore: up to the director, and the main thing was that they did not swear at all; for them it was just a way of speaking. Swearing in the USSR of the mid 80s was a professional language of shopkeepers and party officials: the same as “argot” is the language of gangsters that later on became the language of "businessmen"...

Of course, they did not swear in front of the customers: just as the party officials did not swear in front of strangers. But my ears wilted already at the very first day «behind the scene»: during packing of vegetables in the utility room...

We worked 12 hours shifts for three days (from 8 o’ clock in the morning till 8 o’clock in the evening, with an hour for lunch), then we had 2 days off. I told them immediately that I preferred to stay on packing: I am getting nervous, when I have to weigh something, and there is a long queue waiting. But Lida went to sell fruits and vegetables, even in an open-air bazaar. We quickly learnt the secrets of the trade: how to short-change, how to short-weight (it was especially easy with water-melons: they should be thrown on the scales with a swing, and then they should be sharply taken off from the scales, so that the arrow didn’t stop to vacillate. It was possible also to press unnoticeable a cup of the scales at the bottom. Some products could be soaked, in order to make them heavier, in some they poured soil.) During the packing we were taught, how we should hide a rotten potato in the good ones: in the middle of the package, not on the top, but also not at the bottom. We saw how goods that didn’t not appear on the counters, were brought into the shop, and then the director rang round her friends from other shops, and they made almost barter trade between each other (almost - because for products and things which they interchanged, they still paid to each other, but it

\(^{319}\) Yaroslav Galan (1902-1949) – Ukrainian communist writer who was killed after the WWII by the anti-Soviet forces.
Irina Malenko was the state price, just a trifle.). We who temporary became some of their own were allowed to buy this fruit and vegetables too, also for the state price. It was then that I dragged full bags of tasty Armenian apricots to Said...

There were three loaders in the shop, and Lida and Lyuba at once distributed them who would be paired with whom of us, just for fun. I did not object, because a loader attributed- the drunkard Seva - was married to one of the saleswomen working in the shop and, thank God, did not pay any attention to me. However, the other two loaders were drunkards too. And even all the women - saleswomen - in this shop drank as well. One of the loaders tried once to pinch my side: approximately the same way as Yeltsin did with that woman in presidium. But I silently gave him such look that he moved away from me and never even looked at me any more. In Soviet time it all depended on how you behaved yourself. The boors were not allowed to go unfolded.

Lunch for us was prepared by a granny was officially registered as a cleaner in the shop. It was identical every day, plain and simple, but very tasty and nourishing meal: soup and the second course. After eating we went to a yard - an ordinary cosy Moscow yard where grandmothers sat with prams, and a local tomcat chased a Maltese dog that dared to bark at his pussycat and kittens. We were swinging there on children's swing. Loaders, having had the lunch, played a game of cards. In general, the atmosphere in the shop was semi-criminal. But the customers did not see it; all of this was left behind the doors.

So, these are the sort of people who are “doing “business” in Russia nowadays. People, who are themselves not capable of make anything useful, but they know well, how to short-weight and to short-change...

...In September we were given not only our grants for the summer, as usually, but also the salary for that month in the shop. And to my joy, I bought in "Akademkniga" the enormously thick Basil Davidson's book, "Africans", which before that I was admiring for half a year...

While still in full swing of my love affair with Said, I decided to learn the Amharic language. When we split up, despite of all bitterness in my soul, I didn't give up my plans. To hell, who is he that I should give up my plans because of that? It is a very interesting country where, I am sure, there are many fine people!

During these one and a half years I have read so many research monographs about Ethiopia that I already knew about it even such things that Said him probably had no idea of: that's how seriously I was interested in it. At that time it was possible to learn only four main European languages on courses of foreign languages in Moscow; even Swedish was taught only in one place, and in order to sing for this course, you needed to produce a statement that you needed to learn it for some official purposes, not just for fun. One of my course mates, in love with an Estonian guy who respected Sweden very much, decided, like me, to begin mastering a language, connected with a subject of her feelings. We

In the USSR playing cards in public was considered to be inappropriate.
had to feign the certificate for her that she needed it “for her diploma thesis about the Soviet-Swedish relations”. Lida managed to fake it in style. Nobody has ever found out.

Naturally, there weren’t any and there weren’t expected to be any courses of the Amharic language in our capital, there were not even the textbooks: there were only a few dictionaries and some phrase books intended not people like me, but for the Ethiopian students learning Russian. But I did not surrender. I wrote a letter to the author of the Russian-Amharic dictionary, having found out his address at the information desk. And after a while he answered me and gave me his home telephone number. Oh God, how was my heart beating when I phoned him for the first time! I had such a feeling that my whole destiny was about to be decided: despite the described above sad story, I have not aborted my plans to connect my future with the Ethiopian revolution. I did not want that the knowledge I acquired during this time would be wasted: I wished to use it as a base to my future serious research work, connected with this country.

After telephone conversation we met at this professor’s work (he taught Amharic to students - to those few lucky men, Komsomol activists and Muscovites of whom I was so jealous in the final class of my secondary school.) The professor was an elderly, intellectual man, a war veteran, an embodiment of the Soviet intelligentsia. I felt that I revered him. After all, he was not obliged to help me! And he also was respectful to me - especially when I have shown him my knowledge of Ethiopian history.

- It is so great, that there are such girls, as you! - He told me, - We will think something up. I will talk to some of my former pupils: maybe, someone will agree to give you private lessons.

At parting he has inscribed for me his dictionary: «To dear Zhenya for long memory, with a wish of success in learning Amharic language. As Ethiopians say…! - and there he has written something in absolutely unfamiliar to me Amharic’ script (letters?).

- Ke metem metem memmar ykeddem, - he read it. In a free translation it meant something like “no pains, no gains”.

In two weeks, to my delight, he found a teacher for me! Of course, to be honest, it would have been too expensive for me without my mum’s help. But mum thought positively about my aspiration to learn, even in spite of the fact that she has already been ordained in story of my sad first love.

I was learning Amharic for almost 2 years, 2 lessons per week for 2 hours each. Mum says that money, which we spent on these lessons, would suffice in buy a colour TV.

My teacher had an exotic name: Nikita Arnoldovich. He worked with the Ethiopians: as a translator in the High School of Trade unions; he visited Ethiopia several times and once Guad[321] Mengistu even shook his hand! After we spoke on the phone for the first time, I had no idea what he looked like or even how old he was. He had a soft, cheerful voice, and I imagined a certain similarity between him and the professor, only he

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321 Comrade (Amharic).
must have been at least 15 years younger. I remembered well how we met for the first time: Nikita Arnoldovich told me that he would pick me up at my institute after his work, and then we would go to his home.

It was October, it was almost dark outside. I stood in a hall of the institute near the public bulletin board which I learned almost by heart by the time my new teacher came in.

- Zhenya Kalashnikova? Is it you? - I heard behind my back. I turned back and almost fainted from unexpectedness. Instead of a short, middle-aged a bit sleazy downer-translator as I imagined him, in front of me stood an absolutely charming, a bit awkward, tall, easily blushing fair-haired young man with warm, grey as steel eyes and the same warmth-radiating smile. He was hardly more senior than me. He was so attractive that I had to remind myself that I liked only Africans guys...

Nikita Arnoldovich was not only attractive, but also very brainy. It’s about such people men say “smart as paint”. For the first time in my life I met a person almost the same age with me (he was just five years older) who, apparently, was more well-read than myself! Very soon I started to admire him secretly and waited for the next class with great impatience though Amharic was not an easy language for learning.

The problem was not only in that Amharic alphabet has more than 200 signs (each sign designates a syllable: ka, ku, ke and so on, and the alphabet, thus, is not absolutely similar to ours not only in its writing system). And not even in the fact that there are some sounds in it which do not exist in Russian: "explosive" k, p, t, ts and so forth. The structure of language is absolutely different from the usual European ones, and I needed some time to get myself adjusted to the necessary wave for its perception. The learning of Amharic language reminded me of studying mathematics: there was a strict internal system in construction of phrases. They are formed up of bricks: it reminds of solving of a mathematical task, step by step, - by adding various prefixes and suffixes to words and if you don’t learn strictly the rules of such "block building", than you are wasting your time learning Amharic. We didn’t have any textbooks, as I’ve already mentioned above. But Nikita Arnoldovich worked out the lessons himself, explained grammar to me, and brought real Ethiopian newspapers and books: he was prepared to the lessons thoroughly, despite of being busy at work, and earned his fees more than fairly.

Nikita Arnoldovich lived on the other end of Moscow, near the metro station "Domodedovskaya"; he lived together with his parents and the elder sister. However, I seldom saw them, if at all. We studied in his room: two hours without any pauses. I looked forward to the end of our lesson - not because I didn’t like it, but because before leaving his home I could talk with him for 10-15 minutes about Ethiopia, about books, about interesting things. He was the only one of my acquaintances who had similar interests with me, and soon I already carried to him packs of new books which I bought, in order to show and share with him things which I read. Yes, I was living the whole week in anticipation of these 10-15 minutes!
Irina Malenko

Up to this day I have one bad habit which I can’t overcome. When I like someone - I mean I like someone’s personality, - I start to load him (or her) with gifts. They are usually books. And as most Russians, I have no sense of limit… (We all are people of the extremes who do not feel when it is time to stop: or the whole country are indispensable atheists, or suddenly all people without exceptions are expected to study the Bible and to hit the floor in churches with their foreheads…) And by doing this I often spoil those whom I like...

But I was so pleased when I managed to surprise him with books which he did not see before! For example, by a Russian-Hungarian phrase book for our soldiers, printed in Hungary in 1945, which my grandfather brought from the war, or with the Cossack’s General Peter Krasnov memoirs about Ethiopia (that very man who had been hung after the war for cooperation with fascists!), which I accidentally managed to buy in a second-hand shop near the monument of the first printer Ivan Fedorov…

If we didn’t have to hasten anywhere, we could discuss these books for hours!

Once he offered to walk with me to the metro station because he was going the same way. It was in winter, it was slippery, and while leaving the entrance, I slipped and nearly fell. Within the last second he managed to grab me by my elbow - and did not release my elbow after that till the metro station. And I kept this moment in my mind for much longer and much more strongly, than one and a half years of going out with Said...

Lida bantered over me and my trips to Nikita Arnoldovich two times a week and advised me «to get to know him closer»: such a catch! But I never looked at him that way. I admired him too strongly for that purpose, not mentioning that I already have had my portion of “romanticism” and at that stage I couldn’t even look at any men of any nationality. I am just afraid that Nikita Arnoldovich did not understand me correctly and even suspected that something more serous was hiding behind my admiration: because when I once suggested to show him my native town - and I really wanted to do it, because it was so interesting there, so different than in Moscow! - He got really scared. The Muscovites had some kind of a complex: it seemed to them that all provincial girls certainly wished to marry them...

Once on a sunny spring day Lida told me:
- That’s it! That’s enough! You dined my ears. I want to look at your Arnoldych with my own eyes.

I would like to hear her opinion about him and, knowing Lida’s character, I was prepared for a cheerful adventure. But how can I make it? We can’t just hide behind his door!

Soon I heard during a lesson how Nikita Arnoldovich arranged by phone to go together with his friend to a swimming pool on Thursday. On his desk I found out about his subscription for the pool on Baumanovka and later the same evening I informed Lida about coming possibility…

There was a fine weather, almost summer-like, on Thursday. I and Lida skipped the last lesson and went by foot from the institute through the whole centre to Baumanovka. Never before Moscow seemed me so
beautiful, as in that evening. Over Yauza the red sunset flared, shining at the windows of the factory “Manometer”. It was very quietly, not a branch moved on the trees that were turning green from only recently opened leaves. We had a lot of time, and we managed to bypass all Lefortovo, with its ancient buildings. I tried to imagine, where the Kukui village was there once.

We quickly found the pool and have arranged an ambush, as guerrillas. We did not know, from what side Nikita Arnoldovich would come, but assumed that from the metro station. Having sat down in a small park in front of the pool, we occupied a strategically important point from where we could see the entrance door and a path to it. Lida providently brought with her some newspapers: to cover our faces if he would notice that he was observed.

He was on the path at the appointed time. “But the intelligence reported precisely…” I quickly covered my face with the newspaper, and Lida stood up from a bench and slowly made a circle around him. And it would all be OK, if it wasn’t for a draft that, twice unexpected in such a quiet evening, suddenly pulled the newspaper from my hands… Having heard a rustle, Nikita Arnoldovich lifted his head and… dropped his jaw.

I looked in other direction and pretended that I waited for someone, feeling on myself his amazed look. And I feverishly thought, how I should behave myself next time during the lesson and what I should do… In the meantime Lida, who finished her big “lap of honour” returned, to me.

- Nedja maragly oglandyr! - She said with approval, showing me a thumb. I nearly failed under the bench.

All the way back to the hostel we laughed as mad.

During the next lesson both I and Nikita Arnoldovich did not give any sign that something happened. But I saw, how he slightly grinned; not with contempt but as if it flattered him that there was such absolutely unexpected attention for his person…

The lessons were continuing. For two years Nikita Arnoldovich perfected my knowledge in Amharic to such extent that when I finally really needed it during my practice - at the Institute of Africa, a shrine of our domestic African studies! - I could already translate hand-written texts without any dictionary. Especially because he did not teach me how to use the dictionary. In Amharic it is very difficult: you need to search neither for a word, nor for the letter it starts with, but for this word’s root…

All this time we called each other “You” in a polite form. After one and a half year of our acquaintance I thought that the duration of our

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322 River in Moscow.
323 Place in Moscow where foreign community lived in the XVII-XVIII centuries.
324 From the Soviet song “Three Tank Drivers”/
325 Such a good-looking fellow! (azerb.)
326 In Russian language there is a difference between formal and informal “you”, similar to French’s “vous” and “tu”.

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acquaintance and a small age difference would permit us to address each other less formally. And I took the first step to it.

- Nikita Arnoldovich, you can name me just "you". After all we know each other for a long time.

Nikita Arnoldovich was confused, but he told me that I could also name him just "you", and that we can start using this new form of addressing from the following lesson. Probably, he needed some time to get used to it. But when I came to him next time, he still called me "You"!

A habit is the second nature...

I was upset. What is this all about? After all, I do not bite!

Nikita Arnoldovich looked somehow strange that evening. Something in him was absolutely unfamiliar to me, he was not himself. His face was red, and there was an excessively cheerful shining in his eyes.

- I thought we agreed that we will call each other just "you"... - I cautiously reminded him. And then an absolutely unexpected thing for me occurred. He suddenly started to be rude.

- "You"? Well, who do you think you are?...

My eyes were popping out and before I had time to think what happened, tears scattered like a fountain from my eyes.

I never told about it to anyone, I did not admit even to myself, but all my life I diligently avoided our local men because of fear of them. Thus I never dated any of them as a form of preventive defense. I did not consider them to be idlers, alcoholic, beaters of wives and owners of other sins in which they are accused by our women who got out of the country. No. I just was really afraid to hear any rough word from their lips. When people are rude to you in another language or even in Russian, but for a person this language is not a native one, it is not perceived by me so painfully. And it is easier to take down a peg such person, than the one who completely realizes what he actually says.

Seeing my tears, Nikita Arnoldovich must have lost his mind completely, and I heard from the lips of this intelligent boy from the capital:

- Well, the more you’ll cry, the less you’ll have left to pee...

There is no need to explain to any Soviet person of my generation to what extent this was rude.

Tears dried up at once from indignation. Nikita Arnoldovich ceased to be a high ideal of an intellectual. I even recollected how he discussed with his mum in a corridor how he could get new sneakers.

- Well, let’s continue our dialogue on "You", - I said. - Let’s continue the lesson. After all, I assume, 20 roubles for new sneakers would do you no harm?!

There was a mute scene. But apparently, he really needed those 20 roubles...

I angrily looked again at Nikita Arnoldovich again and suddenly realized with horror that he was drunk. Poor guy, probably, took a little bit in before my arrival for bravery, thinking that it would help him to overcome his shyness and to start calling me "you". But as he never drank, the effect of the alcohol was absolutely unexpected even for him...
It was ridiculous. That’s what they are like, our unpredictable local men...

But at least we began addressing each other with "you". During the following lesson he hardly squeezed out a word and did not look at me. It was even more ridiculous. And I considered him to be a grown-up person!

When Lida learnt the address of her dark-browed Komsomol official Vlas in the passport office, I out of curiosity decided to find out in the same place, when Nikita Arnoldovich had his birthday. The result struck me on the spot. He had his birthday in the same day with Said: from all 365 days in a year... It seemed that there was a fate in my life.

And now it seems to me quite often that there is. As if someone from above turned my life into an adventure play similar to soap operas - without asking me, if I wanted that or not. I can even imagine, as unknown to me, some spectators watch this play, with the laughter mixed with tears... “My goodness, how it is twirled”!

My lessons with Nikita Arnoldovich lasted till the middle of my fourth year when he told me that in general, he gave me all knowledge that he had, and he had nothing more to teach me. I considered it as a compliment. I thought that I would miss very much our intellectual communication, but my life without Nikita Arnoldovich appeared to be not as empty as I thought it would. And moreover, my long-awaited dream came true - I have arranged a place for practice in the Institute of Africa!!

...Traces of Nikita Arnoldovich were lost after that commotion in which our country got, and I just recently found him. Now he lives and works.... in South Korea!

...During this period my life was filled to the limit. Six evenings from six evenings during the working week I spent out of a hostel: two - with Nikita Arnoldovich, two - on English courses and one - at sessions of the Union of Soviet Friendship Societies with Foreign Peoples in the Friendship House on Kalininsky Avenue. On Saturday after the lectures, as usually, I went home. I was very glad to have such filled schedule: I had no time to take a breath, never mind to suffer because of some imbecile being.

I do not remember exactly, how I found the USSR- the Union of the Soviet societies of friendship with the people of foreign countries - it seems, from Vlas’s Komsomol officials. And having found about it, I cheered up: it would be great to become a member of one of such societies! But it was also impossible: there was only a collective membership in it. Why it was possible to be on friendly terms with the people of foreign countries only collectively, for ever remained a mystery for me. Perhaps, Komsomol’s official 1980s, like Vlas, considered, that there wouldn’t be enough people who wished to join these societies on an individual basis? I think that they underestimated our people...

Nevertheless, I managed to attach myself to the African branch of the USSR, and I weekly went on its sessions: on Wednesdays. There they discussed various aspects of the Soviet-African relations. With the beginning of perestroika foreign students started to ask, whether it would be possible for them also to be engaged in private labour activities. Many people were already engaged into it, as the Vietnamese; others were
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engaged in some business activity, but it was hardly possible to name it “labour” activity - as some of my African acquaintances who brought almost containers full of things for the sale from one country to another... It would be better if these “businessmen” studied properly or if they at least would have asked themselves first whether it was allowed for foreign students to work in their favourite “civilized” countries. “Do you know, what the Soviet Union suggested to us?” - Indignantly spoke once said. - “They found a gold deposit on our territory and suggested us help with its extraction on the basis of 30 (to USSR) on 70 (to Ethiopia). Can you imagine such robbery?”

And can he imagine, at least in general, what percentage the Western corporations do take in such cases?.. In summer after the third year I asked for the permission to work in archives of the USSF in order to write a thesis about the Soviet-Ethiopian relations. I did everything according the rules, with the required letter from the institute. And I wasn’t refused. But I was put in such conditions that I physically could not use this archive. I do not know what kind of secrets there were kept, but the archive management told to me that I could work there only if I would work for them as a courier for the whole summer - to carry mail. To be more exact, the driver would drive me around Moscow, and I would only give the letters and packages to various establishments. I had to agree.

But I held on to this place just for two days I understood that I would not get to any archive: there was so much mail was that we finished its conveyance only by the end of the working day!... What research can we speak about?! It was like a fairy tale where the priest employing a woman to work describes to her the never-ending list of duties, which she should do during the day, adding after each sentence: “You’ll finish this and then you can have a sleep and a rest!” Besides, the driver who drove me, was unhappy And it was understandable: earlier he did my work on a part-time basis, and then he was suddenly told that he was not supposed to do it...He drove me all the day long around the city and cursed: not at me, but at his bosses:

- They keep this cosy place for their children! For autumn, in case if someone will not get a place in an institute...

Then I visited “the White House” with the mail of the USSF. It was that very “White House” where “democrat” Yeltsin would shoot the Russian Parliament some years later. If somebody would have told to us about it that time, we would have thought that this person was crazy! At that time nobody called this place “White House”, unless derisively (the regional committees in our region were also named the “White House” with the same inflection). There was no fencing around it that came after the execution in 1993; there were no guards, except for one old woman at the door, the same as in our hostel: you could come in as you want. The first law of bourgeois democracy: the quantity of fences and security guards in the country is in direct proportion to the degree of the glorified bourgeois press of freedom in it...

In a word, a week later I understood what they were up to, gave up these unrealizable plans and even the earned money which I didn’t go to
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collect, and went to Lida to Zhitomir. She called me to visit her for a long time.

That year we went home for summer holidays very late, and for couple of weeks after our summer exams we still went to sunbathe to a local pond in the mornings, taking with us fried toasts for lunch: either to Tsaritsino or to Kolomenskoe.\footnote{Suburbs of Moscow.} I discovered Moscow for myself from unexpected side. I looked with melancholy at luminous windows in the evenings: people lived there, indeed, they had home, without any watchmen, and worked where they wanted. After all, in Moscow it was possible to become anybody you wished!

Shortly before that we celebrated Lida’s birthday. For this occasion Lyuba decided to bake a pie with boiled condensed milk, she put a can of condensed milk to cook in boiling water in the kitchen and... forgot about it. An hour later we heard a powerful explosion. The windows trembled. In a fright we all run out to the kitchen: to look what happened - and saw, how the sticky, sweet condensed milk was falling in drops from the kitchen’s ceiling... After that we had to be content with the “Prague” cake\footnote{Popular sort of chocolate cake in the USSR.} bought in a shop.

Lida’s birthday convinced me that miracles actually do happen. Late at night she went to the metro station, to see off her schoolmate Svetka who celebrated Lida’s birthday together with us. There was a heavy rain. And - what do you think? - in the street Lida met Vlas who lived nearby. Vlas was drunk and cheerful; he was relaxed and completely different to that correct Komsomol leader whom he was as a sober man. When he learned that it was Lida's birthday he kissed her from the heart, having forgotten even about Galan’s murder. Lida was on top of the world. She did not even dare to dream about such gift!

Inspired, she went home and told to me before travelling back home to the Ukraine:
- Stop doing all that nonsense in Moscow and come to us! You know how great it is over there!

Chernobyl accident occurred a year before that. Neither she, nor I worried about it. Even though Zhitomir region was in the contamination zone. And her countrymen did not worry either: they still picked mushrooms in the forest and berries and fruit from their own gardens. Almost with children’ pleasure they told me their new local jokes: “Zaporozhets”\footnote{The smallest Soviet-made car.} is not a car; a resident of Kiev is not a man”, “All Europe curse our peaceful Soviet atom” - and so forth.

The Western Ukraine is an amazingly beautiful land. I read so many books about it, about guerrilla struggle here with fascists, about Oleksa Dovbysh\footnote{Oleksa Dovbush (1700 - 1745) was a famous \textit{Ukrainian} outlaw, leader of \textit{oprvyshky}, who became a \textit{folk hero}, often compared to \textit{Robin Hood}.} the local Janosik\footnote{Juraj Jánošík (1688-1713) was a famous \textit{Slovak} outlaw.} Nikolai Ivanovich Kuznetsov\footnote{Nikolai Ivanovich Kuznetsov was one of the greatest heroes in my life! I managed to visit his grave in Lvov.} was one of the greatest heroes in my life! I managed to visit his grave in Lvov.
We were often warned that in Western Ukraine they treat Russians badly, they do not reply if you start talking in Russian. But I never came across it personally. I was in Lvov and in Zhitomir. Yes, here it was possible to hear the Ukrainian language more often, than in the East of the republic, but it did not bother me. It did not bother Lida’s parents either, though, unlike her, they couldn’t speak Ukrainian. With many neighbors they spoke in Russian, and the neighbours answered them in the Ukrainian language, and it did not bother anybody. Where all this time fascist henchmen from OUN\textsuperscript{333} were hiding at that time, I do not know…

Lida’s relatives lived in a small working settlement near Zhitomir. The local nature, with its woods and hillocks, fascinated me. The rhythm of life in settlement was slow, the geological expedition stopped here for a long time. Lida told that recently they even had an African trainee: a student from Kiev who took practice somewhere in local woods, and how he scared to death some local old men, the mushroom pickers, who never saw black men in real life before.

Lida’s daddy - with whom her mother got acquainted after he was lost during a sand storm in the Turkmen desert of Kara-Kum - was very calm and silent and smoked a lot. Her mother was a polarity to him, and, having talked to her for 5 minutes, you absolutely understood, whom their daughter was taking after: the same wit, the same thick glasses. If somebody said with a sad face: “There is no happiness in life, Ulyana Grigoryevna!”\textsuperscript{334}, she exploded: “Yeah, I will never forget my mother!”\textsuperscript{335} Ulyana Grigoryevna hated slang. Lida also had a brother called Sasha; he was 7 years younger than she. He was also witty and looked like Dima losifov playing Buratino.\textsuperscript{336}

Lida brought me to Zhitomir - a town which for some reason brought in me associations with a thin wattle lace. Especially I was impressed by the old town and a park with huge ravines.

- Let’s bet, that you will not guess, how that shop is called? - she checked up my knowledge of the Ukrainian language. I considered myself an expert on Ukrainian (because I easily understood it, and my mum for some reason did not), but I really did not know. “Gudziki”\textsuperscript{337} has been written on the shop...

In some days all Lida’s family went for a seaside holiday on the Black sea, in Tuapse. They just took me with them.

\textsuperscript{332} Nikolai Ivanovich Kuznetsov (July 27, 1911 – March 9, 1944) was a legendary Soviet intelligence agent and partisan who operated in Nazi-occupied Ukraine during World War II.

\textsuperscript{333} The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (created in 1929) - had close links with the German Nazis; in their fight against the Soviet power OUN members brutally slaughtered thousands of people in Western Ukraine, including women and children. Is enjoying a revival in the modern Ukraine.

\textsuperscript{334} An expression frequently used in the tattoos of ex-convicts.

\textsuperscript{335} Another such expression.

\textsuperscript{336} Soviet children’s movie “Adventures of Buratino” (1975).

\textsuperscript{337} Buttons (Ukr.), in Russian “pugovitsy”.

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...Ukraine, Ukraine, what happened to you? ... “Oh, field, field who sowed you with dead bones?”

I remember how the beautiful, proud Ukrainian land, which did not sell the children abroad out of poverty, - from Kiev to Poltava and further - was spread before us - and pain comes to my heart... None of our republics does touch my soul as much, as this one. Those who says that we “prosper” now: may you and your relatives prosper like this too!

...Before we reached Tuapse we stopped for some days in Krasnodar where Lida’s aunt on mother’s side lived: she was absolutely different, refined and a little bit nervous beauty, dreaming how to marry her useless son. I immediately got into category of potential daughters-in-law and Aunt Natasha took special care of me. Krasnodar was nice: hot, spacious, with real, not like our Bortnikov from Kaluga, Cossacks in the streets where it was difficult to find a good shade in such heat. And then it was Tuapse... We went there by an electric train through the mountains. Somewhere there I had a pen pal, who seriously asserted that she was a witch and lived in another dimension, but I was afraid to search for her. Besides we did not have a time: we settled down in a boarding house "Spring" and rejoiced the life. Sasha splashed around in the sea, their daddy slept off on a beach, mum got acquainted with all the neighbours, and Lida desperately coquetted with two Adygs... guys at once...

I looked at them, and I had such a feeling, that I knew all of them for my whole life, including the Adygs. I did not want to leave that place...

On the fifth day we went on excursion to Kiselyov's rock.
- Do you remember in what film you saw this place? - the guide asked us proudly. We did not remember.
- In “The Diamond Arm”\(^\text{340}\), - she prompted, - When the deceased Papanov was fishing with late Mironov\(^\text{341}\)...

We exchanged glances. We thought that we misheard it. Papanov died shortly before our departure, but Mironov?.. He was only a bit older than 40!
- With “late Mironov”? When did he manage to die?
- Oh, and you, girls, didn’t know? A couple of days ago, - she told us sympathetically.

We were deeply shaken. We did not know then that such deaths: untimely, ridiculous deaths of talented people - in our country soon will happen more and more frequently, and no new talents would take their places anymore... Their places would be occupied by complete zeroes.

Last time I visited Ukraine in autumn during my fourth year.

\(^{338}\) Pushkin’s poem “Ruslan and Ludmila”.

\(^{339}\) One of the ethnic groups in the Caucasus.

\(^{340}\) Very famous Soviet comedy film from the 1960s.

\(^{341}\) Anatoly Papanov (1922-1987) and Andrei Mironov (1940-1987) – famous Soviet actors. Papanov had died just nine days before the death of his long-time friend and co-star Andrei Mironov.
...One cold October day Lida woke up in a bad mood. That is, she quite often woke up in a bad mood: Lida was one of those who suffer from “morning moods”, and it is better simply not to talk to her till about 11 o’clock. For a long time it was difficult for me to get used to it: though I myself am an “owl”, instead of “lark”, I wake up if it is necessary at once, and it does not influence my mood in any way. And I was thinking for a long time that Lida took an offence for something every morning, when it was impossible to get a word out of usually such a talkative girl.

But that morning her mood was even worse than usual. She was “ripping and tearing”. However, she did it silently - it also happens sometime - but on her facial expression it was visible that it was better not to come nearer to her. At 11 o’clock, when she usually definitively wakes up, Lida suddenly said me:

- Will you go with me?
- Where are you going?
- Where? To Voroshilovgrad, the hometown of the hero...
- Oh... And when?
- Maybe even this week. We have only two lectures on Wednesday. Now we can go to the ticket desk and buy the tickets. Well, will you go?
- And where will we spend the night?
- At the station....

And I agreed. When else will I get there? To travel like a “camper” across the Soviet Union was not always comfortable, but it was always safe and interesting.

Because of the schedule of the trains (and we did not wish to sleep at the station more than one night) we chose a really difficult way to reach Voroshilovgrad: from Moscow’s Kursk train station by the Tbilisi train till the station of Krasny Liman in the Donetsk region, whence, according to the map, it was very close to Voroshilovgrad: it means, that there should be some local transport. Then we should spend the rest of a day in the town; spend the night there at the station and then the next day we would go back to Moscow by the evening train.

We could buy tickets without any problem: after all, it was not in the heat of the summer, but in cool October. Problems began when we were already on our journey: such as that Lida shouldn’t be allowed to approach the Tbilisi train on a gunshot. And of course, we didn’t even reach Tula yet, but she already got acquainted with a Georgian passenger...

...For some reason when I do speak in a train with a fellow traveler - a Georgian, he does not try to take me with him to Tbilisi and does not attempt to pull me down in the middle of the night from the top shelf. I must say, Lida has a talent for such things. Below, under us an elderly woman slept in our compartment. She probably was so tired after running around in Moscow that she did not hear at all how in the middle of night I beat off the attack of the hot Genantsvale. He pulled Lida by the hand downwards, and I - from the top shelf next to hers - pulled her by the

342 First big train station to the South of Moscow.
343 Gentleman (Georgian).
other hand back, upwards. The friendship has won. Genatsvalle apologized, but told us he will still definitely take Lida away with him to Tbilisi. And that he dreamt all his life about such a dove.

- Well, here you go, and you still complain that you are old, and that nobody would ask your hand in marriage! - I said to Lida who still tried to take breath after this unexpected flash of Caucasian passion.

- No, Kalashnikova, thank you... You know, he has such a name... Mamuka! My mother would ridicule me to death.

Mamuka appeared to be a man of his word. In the morning he woke up at 6 o’clock and began to prepare for a second attempt. Therefore when long-awaited Krasny Liman train station appeared behind our window, I began to shout with all the might:

- Ah Lida, look! There they are, you see them? They are waiting for us! And Vasya also came...

In a gallop we jumped out of the train and rushed to a group of collective farmers in the distant end of the platform, praying silently, that the train would go under way somewhat quicker, and that Mamuka would not noticed that “Vasys” do not pay any attention to us. Such a desperate brave fellow would not hesitate to leave the train behind, if he thought that he had a hope!

The train got under way; we turned and went to the ticket office.

- Lady, when does the nearest train to Voroshilovgrad depart? – asked Lida.

- To Voroshilovgrad? And from us there are no trains to Voroshilovgrad at all.

- Not at all?

- Yep. And there were never any.

- And what do we have to do now: we already have return tickets for tomorrow to Moscow from there?

The cashier looked at us as if we were crazy.

- Try the bus station. Perhaps some buses go there.

At the bus station we were hit by a new disappointment: there were no direct buses to Voroshilovgrad from there. They explained to us that it was possible get there, with a bus change: first from Krasny Liman to Gorlovka, and in Gorlovka to change for a bus to Voroshilovgrad. With the word “Gorlovka” Lida’s face suddenly became dreamy.

- Oh, how wonderful! Does the bus to Gorlovka go through Artemovsk?244

- It will go, certainly.

Apparently, in Artemovsk Basin’s family also lived some time ago, and Lida even went to school there, to the first class. Since then she did not happen to be in this part of the country, and the bus route has stirred up in her a sea of nostalgic memoirs. Lida showed me from the bus window her school, the street on which they lived back then: I have never seen her so emotional yet.

Thus, a modification of our plans did not upset us that much. The main thing was that we would be in Voroshilovgrad before tomorrow! And

244 Artemovsk is a city in the Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine.
the tickets for the bus cost such small amount (kopecks) that it is not necessary even to mention it. All the daylong we spent in buses, crossing half of the Voroshilovgrad region and nearly all Donetsk regions. We admired the spacious steppe, accurate small towns of mineworkers. Never had we felt so free, as birds, as in those days!

When we at last reached Voroshilovgrad, it already became dark. The bus station was closing for the night, and we decided to go at once down to the railway station for sleeping. We knew nobody in the city did not have a map with us. People have explained to us how to reach the train station, and we have gone onto unfamiliar wide streets. The trolley buses passed us by, shining from within, with people inside who were all going home. When you happen to be in an absolutely other city, at first it always seems to you for some reason that here everything is totally different than back at home, that life there is somehow special, while actually, of course, life there was little different from ours. Except that October was much warmer, than in Moscow. There was even still some foliage on trees, even though already yellow...

And nevertheless it was insufficiently warm for a proper sleep on a station bench. We took with us a blanket and slept, of course, in all clothes, but there was a constant breeze that blew from somewhere under that blanket, and we were constantly waking up from cold. At the train station we were not alone. It was full of local residents who were late for last diesel engine. Having learnt where we came from, they were surprised: “Look at them, from Moscow! And what have you forgotten here?” When Lida spoke to them about “the native city of the hero”, they automatically thought that we were talking about Voroshilov\(^\text{345}\), and nodded with understanding...

How could we sleep, when all around us wanted to have a chat! And more than anybody wanted to talk to us an old man in a Cossack peak-cap from the next bench. He was talking so much that has not noticed how at the same time a station cat was pulling a piece of sausage out of his string-bag under the bench.... Moscow at that time was run already with might and main by perestroika people, streets became scary at night ever since Mikhail Sergeevich\(^\text{346}\) and his gang “educated” us that “erotica is an art”, - and here people still lived their normal, quiet, Soviet life... It was a birthday cake of a city! And that is how that place remained with me forever in my memory. And nowadays... Can you even imagine spending a night at a train station anywhere in our country now, without any fears? There you go, thank you so much for “freedom”, dear Mikhail Sergeevich!...

\(^{345}\) Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov, popularly known as Klim Voroshilov (1881–1969) was a Soviet military commander and statesman. His native city of Lugansk was named Voroshilovgrad after him between 1938 - 1958 and between 1970 - 1990. Now it is called Lugansk again.

\(^{346}\) Gorbachev: his perestroika – dated “sexual revolution” in the USSR has led to huge rise of rape and sexual harassment of women, virtually unknown in the 1950s-1970s. Humiliation and degradation of women in the modern capitalist Russia became virtually a norm.
In the morning we got up shaking from weariness. We had breakfast in some workers canteen, have a little bit woken up and have gone for a walk in the city. Lida found teachers college in which her hero studied. All daylong we wandered on broad and wide streets and in the park, and in the evening, all tired, we climbed up into our Moscow train and fell asleep even before the train has got under way - into the deepest of the sleeps...

When we returned, it appeared that my mum has been looking for me. She even has phoned into the hostel which happened extremely seldom.

- Darling, where did you vanish? I am here entertaining your pen pal for the third day, and you are not even in Moscow!
- What pen pal?
- That Pedro from Peru who studies in Tbilisi. You see, he came back from Sweden and decided to stop in our town on his way back to Tbilisi. Yesterday I went with him to the market, and he taught me there how to dance lambada.... And this morning he asked me with a severe face what I am thinking of the politics of the United States in Latin America. “One step, and you would drop the honour of the uniform!”

And it seems to me that he is in no hurry to leave us...

I grabbed my head and rushed off home. Thankfully, the weekend was coming.

I got acquainted with Pedro through a third country - through GDR’s magazine «Fur Dich» (or «Neues Leben», I do not remember precisely already) where addresses of both of us have been published: both of us wished to correspond with East Germans and started to write to each other... Pedro Diaz was an interesting person, and my mum has had time to find it out in practice even before me. He studied in Tbilisi for electric engineer and possessed inquisitive mind and frank language. He was short in height, but very serious and even severe (by the look of him) Inca. When he and mum came to the market in my native city, all Azeri market sellers took him for one of their own and cheerfully moved on to him. But then Pedro turned to them with his proud South American Indian profile, and the Azeri stopped on the move, having realized that this was something quite different...

A radio played loud, to the whole market, a concert “By your demands”. And at that moment they began to play something Latin American. Pedro’s eyes began to sparkle.

- Nadya, now I am going to teach you how to dance our marvellous Latin American dance lambada! - he proclaimed.
- And what if somebody from work will sees me? - My mum began to panic. But Pedro was relentless.
- You will see, you are going to like it! It’s not so difficult!

Mum closed her eyes, and they began to spin around in a dance, accompanied by enthusiastic sights of the Azeri. Mum was a full head taller than him.

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347 Quote from the Soviet comedy film “Big Break” (1973) where a policeman was forced to answer teacher’s questions in a secondary school.
- Yes, yes... That’s it... Not bad, - concluded Pedro, turning her around extensively, - Hips, it’s hips that you have to move, Nadezhda, not knees. Here, here...here you go! Well done!

And then they drank tea with a piece of a cake at our place, and Pedro was asking her:

- And what is your opinion about position of a woman under socialism, Nadezhda?

- It is good, - mum said. - Of course, it is not ideal, but it is incomparably better than position of women in other countries. What about you? What do you think, Pedro? In your country, in Peru are there many women-engineers, like myself?

- I agree with you, - Pedro nodded, - If we steadfastly look at the Latin American continent today, it is obvious that, except for Cuba, in none of our countries women do occupy in large quantities such visible positions in the social and economic life. But is it difficult to combine working with housekeeping? Do you think so?

And they continued their discussion long after midnight...

Pedro has stayed with us for almost a week.

- It’s nice at your place, girls! I will be back to you again! - he told me and mum before his departure. And he did come back. Even not alone, but with his Georgian young wife...

Favourite phrase of Pedro was “we, Latin Americans...”. He was very much proud of his continent, and he had developed a strong feeling of the Latin American unity. Questions that he was asking, were capable to bring down or to throw into confusion an average teacher of Marxism-Leninism, but they were not at all tricky because of some anti-sovietism, quite the opposite. Pedro was genuinely interested in these questions, they really occupied his mind. For many of our students they sounded artificial, but it was because these students were saying such words only at meetings. And those questions would even annoy many teachers, but it was because they did not know what to answer, as never reflected on these questions themselves... It must have been hard to live like this for our Latin American comrade. But he did not despond and continued to ask his questions.

That’s what all the tragedy of my generation was: that for us Marxism was just something out of a boring book. And for Pedro it was not, because he knew capitalism not from some perverted imagination of the perestroika guys. Life itself has taught him what “market economy”... is But those toothed who didn’t know real tests of life and loved to fool about, those who had lacked only birds milk in their lives, easily and thoughtlessly pulled behind the sounds of a pipe of ours Hameln rat catcher of Cossack origin. That’s how a rupture between generations came about.

In the late 1980-s-early 1990s a mutation took place in our people. A transition of quantitative changes into qualitative (how it has occurred is a separate subject for a serious scientific research). These “mutant Ninja Turtles” hatched from their eggs, piously believing that all of us should live under their laws, along with rats from their native sewage. Just read what these mutants write about life under socialism; just look
what sort of films do they make about it. Every title of those films is a self-descriptive epithet: "Swines", “Gangster’s Petersburg” ... You read it or look at it and think: “My God, I must have been living in another country than these poor creatures, all this time!”

Modern mutants do not understand, are integrally incapable to understand what was the essence of life of those people who lived in the an epoch of Brezhnev; even if they also lived in the same society, but mutated later on. It seems, how can a person so simply forget what life was really like, with all its pluses and minuses? But no, they just fully block in their memory all the pluses and in response to all arguments: about a free education and medical care, about accessible holidays to everybody, about confidence in tomorrow, about low criminality, about privileges for mothers and children - they just cry out as scalded (burnt) by turpentine: “There was no red caviar in the shops!”, “There was no multi-party system!”, “Miserable sovoks!”

Mutation has interrupted the continuity of generations in Russia. I have sensed it, when for the first time I met the post-Soviet people and understood that they speak Russian as strangers. The problem is not just in their vocabulary. They have a different tempo of speech, a different intonation, an empty-headed look: sometimes it feels as if they do not even understand what they are burping out. And it is not because I am “sovok”, and they are “liberated from the dictatorship of proletariat”. My grandfather was from the same generation as Brezhnev. He was born before revolution, he even saw Tsar Nikolas at already reasonably conscious age. He grew up very much the way he was brought up by his pre-Soviet parents, and not just by a Soviet school (he still went to a pre-revolutionary grammar school for a couple of years). The past was a natural part of him, during all his life, and it was transferred from him to its children, and then to me. And consequently I knew what it was like. I sensed it. When I see some old Russian family photos of the beginning of the 20th century, they do not seem to me to be something exotic. It is as if I remember these people; I remember these chairs, these glasses and teapots. When I saw for the first time the old chronicle of 1920s on TV, it too did not seem to me to be some far away time. My grandfather had the same gestures, the same hair style, the same clothes, and the same look. Well, and war was just yesterday. When I went to school, only 30 years have passed since our victory. My parents are from the same generation as Shurik and Nina from “The Kidnapping Caucasian Style”.

For me our past is a part of me. Many modern Russians are completely separated from our roots. Just recollect once again what kind of films they make about the past, what sort of books they write about it. It is a view of a stranger, of somebody indifferent who not only doesn’t understand anything in that time, but doesn’t even aspire to understand.

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348 The Russian bastardized word "sovok" is now used for the representatives of the generation that were born and lived for a more or less significant part of their lives during the Soviet period. Some people now use this word as a term of derision towards the USSR epoch and to the people that this period has produced.

Look at their negligence: not only to interior details, but even to the characters of people from our past as they picture them. They forge these characters using themselves as an example: from Anna Karenina's tragedy they make “a soap opera”. Many fine movie directors of the Soviet period have successfully proved with their new films that they are not capable to create any half-decent films without Soviet "censorship". Because they do not posses inner culture. One such director who used to make fantastic films, probably, secretly dreamt all the Soviet years to show to the public his fat naked bum. His dream came true, and good films have vanished. Who said, it is unbearable to watch just the new version of “Quiet Flows the Don” because non-Russian actors could not adept themselves to a Cossack soul? All of these “new versions” are unbearable: the new “Captain's daughter” where Masha Mironova is seducing Grinev on a mow, “At dawns it’s quiet here ...” where unshaven Vaskov, dressed just in underwear, leaves house at night to send the antiaircraft gunners off to the front line... Lyubov Orlova was a woman of absolutely different generation than me. But she is so much closer to me, more my own and more interesting to me than “cops” from “Gangster's Petersburg”...

"Those who are responsible for us, should understand long time ago:

We are just small children, we want to go out!" - sang a foolish hero of the film "Adventures of Electronic". It was one of our most favourite films when we have reached “teenage-hooligan age”. And these lines from the song that sounded in it, alas, do reflect the general attitude of my generation towards life - even when we already became adults.

We were used to be “the centre of the universe”. There were numerous ice-creams, merry-go-rounds and sweets, all for us. And we didn’t just think that the whole life will be same carefree- we and demanded it for ourselves as a birth right.

We were the first generation in the full of turmoil history of our country who in infancy literally had "cheeks visible from the back": such strong, white-pinkish robust babies and toddlers we were, to the delight of our parents, people of the first post-war generations who still remembered vaguely what was the feeling of hunger. Yes, we can't be compared with present kids: thin, pale and feeding themselves on «what god sent». We not only grew up without worries, but were also the first generation in the history our country that didn’t lack anything materially. But we did not appreciate at all the sacrifices of our grandmothers and grandfathers for the sake of our happy childhood. From cradle we got used to consider all of this to be something that was due to us by itself. We got used to consider ourselves to be exceptional, even if sometimes we did not realize it. "Dima, get up, please give your seat to granny!" "

350 Soviet film of this name was made in 1957, the remake with foreign actors – in 2006.
351 Classic XIX century Russian novel by A.S. Pushkin.
352 Lyubov Orlova, (1902 - 1975) was the first recognized star of Soviet cinema, famous theatre actress and a gifted singer.
am not Dima, *I am Little Dima!*” – uttered with insult a chubby boy of around 7 years in a tram. Some of us were even seriously surprised to the fact that new children continued to be born after us: how anyone can be younger than me? What for do they still need children, if, after all, I was already born?

But how could it have been differently? Our grandfathers and grandmothers (and to the less extend, our parents) who have suffered so much in their own lives, who have been through wars, blockades, hunger and other difficulties of construction of an absolutely new type of society in the history of mankind, not to mention that this was taking place in an extremely hostile environment to our country from all directions, got used to tightening their belts and never even asked themselves: "Why does this all have to happen to me?" or “why me”?: they simply accepted everything, simply took upon their shoulders everything sent by their hard, but heroic destiny, but desperately wished to relieve us of all hardships that they have been through themselves. They thought that by doing so they’d make us happy. But instead they raised up “pigs” from small ungrateful “piglets”, precise according to poetry of Mayakovski.\(^353\)

Yes, we were happy, but we did not appreciate it. Because we did not know that life could be absolutely different: as it was for millions of our coevals abroad.

- When parents didn’t allow me to do something, I reconciled to it. When they did not allow something to my younger brother, he asked: "Mummy, please, please, maybe I still can do it?” When we didn’t allow you something, you just said: "But I need it!", - my own mum tells me.

We were the generation growing up with words: "*But I need it!*" And nobody even stipulate u for that. They were touched by looking at us. We were not Korchagins\(^354\) sacrificing our health and giving our last efforts to there where it was needed for the Motherland. Instead, when we happened to be on a collective farm doing strawberry weeding, on the third day we were phoning home in panic: "Mummy, take me away from here! Here there is no hot water and the dirt is knee-deep! And my hands and feet are all sore ..."And mummies did come and took us back home. And then we grew up into coddled little Komsomol members who wasted and spent everything that was created by our parents and their parents: after all, we so categorically got used to consider all of it to be ours, though we didn’t move a finger in order to create anything.

Of course, not all of us became Abramovichs and Khodorkovsky\(^355\). Only a small minority. But unfortunately, it wasn’t because a considerable part of our generation did not want to become like them. It’s just that the majority of those over-aged children (immature ones) who thought of themselves in terms of "we are just little kiddies, we like going out" has not understood that that’s exactly what capitalism is all about: "one gets

\(^{353}\) Reference to Mayakovski’s children’s poem “What Is Good and What Is Bad”.

\(^{354}\) Soviet hero of the novel “How The Steel Was Tempered” by N. Ostrovsky (1936). Pavel Korchagin is a quintessential positive hero of socialist realism.

\(^{355}\) “New Russian” “oligarchs”.
It was the hearts of our generation that “demanded changes” and laughed at Nina Andreyeva. It was we, Bananan boys, who spent our meaningless lives on “challenging the society” of those who really worked and was busy with real tasks. It was us, the generation of Serezha Syroezhkin, who grew up into infantile idlers who loved listening to fairy tales about “your money is working for you” - so that you don’t have to work yourself, as millions of investors of the infamous joint-stock company “MMM” seriously believed.

The majority of us, probably even overwhelming majority, did not understand what we actually have done in our carefree spoilt rebelliousness even when it was announced for the first time that our country will cease to exist from January, 1st of the coming year. A feeling of cheerful curiosity floated in the air: and what will happen next? And the most wonderful expectations... As if nobody taught us what it is - bourgeois democracy. As if it was still necessary to explain in details to anybody well familiar with the basics of Marxism, what “market economy” means in practice. But we were too used not to believe in anything to those “boring old men” at whom we so cynically sneered. The majority of us seriously believed that with a failure of the August coup and with Yeltsin’s triumph, with Gorbachev’s resignation and destruction of “an authoritative system” in Eastern Europe we would just “cease to feed those users”, and further all life will go, as they say in a fairy tale: “and they all lived happily ever after”.

How was it possible to be so horrendously naïve, after all our fine, free of charge education? Were we like that really only because nobody ever gave us a proper hiding - that is, nobody before Gorbachev and Yeltsin? If somebody would have told us back then what our country would become like in ten years time, we would have spat at him as a liar: “No, it cannot possibly be! Academician Sakharov will not allow it!”

356 Mayakovski’ s verses: “One gets a bagel, another – a hole from a bagel; this is what is called “a democratic republic!”
357 Reference to Viktor Tsoi’s song “Our hearts demand changes”.
358 Nina Aleksandrovna Andreyeva (born 1938 in Leningrad), was a chemistry lecturer at the Leningrad Technological Institute. She joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1966. Author of the famous letter “I cannot forsake my principles” where she implied that Mikhail Gorbachev and his closest supporters were not real communists.
361 MMM was a Russian company that perpetrated one of the world's largest Ponzi schemes of all time, in the 1990s. By different estimates from 5 to 40 million people lost up to $ 10 billion. The exact figures are not known even to the founders.
362 Propaganda of perestroika time made many people believe that European socialist states, as well as developing states of socialist orientation and even Soviet republics within the USSR were “a burden” to Russia and that the Russian people would flourish” without them.
363 Reference to an old Soviet joke: 2 workers discuss rising prices. “Have you heard, the milk price is going up by 2 kopecks?” “Oh, that’s bad!” “And the meat...
Muscovite lady shouted at my mum in a bus in 1986 when their conversation came to Gorbachev. “They just have to hang him before it’s too late!” - my mum declared. “Lady, how can you say such a thing! You should be ashamed!” - The Muscovite whom my mum recollects to this day, was indignant. “You will still recollect my words in ten years or so”, - mum told her then...

It would be silly to blame for today’s situation the generations that have spoiled us. They did it with good intentions. They did it because they knew the value of life. They were mistaken and today they pay a high price for raising us, “democratic” goofs - off and freeloaders of perestroika. “Masters not to create, but to destroy…” - it was about us what Nekrasov wrote. “Go away, you, grandma!” - Roughly shout young women of my generation from behind the counter to a small hunched old woman with medals of the veteran of work on her rag-like coat who could have been their great-grandmother, and is visibly ashamed that she has to survive by begging by the entrance of their fake “supermarket”. They don’t seem to understand that they will also become such grandmas themselves, and much faster than they think. And that then their own children and grandchildren will address them following their example: just like a little boy from Leo Tolstoy’s story who was observing for some time how his parents treated his granddad, and then made a wooden plate to feed his own parents from, behind the fireplace in the future, when they’ll get old...

The generation of Onegin and Petchorin365 in imperial Russia was called “unwanted people”. It’s interesting, how will they name my generation, whose best most productive years fell onto years that remind me Alexander Blok’s words - “we are the children of Russia’s terrible years”? In current semi-colonial-capitalist Russia practically all of us are “unwanted people”. Except for those who help the West to plunder it. Without forgetting about beloved themselves and their own bank accounts abroad, of course. They consider themselves to be “heroes of our time”. What a pathetic novel it would be, with such “heroes”! What a low feelings, what a full absence of thoughts! You won’t need neither Pushkin nor Lermontov here, but Gogol or, even better, Saltykov-Shchedrin366.

What is left for all of us to do, for those who not just couldn’t but actually never wanted to join into the ranks of Abramovichs and Khodorkovskys? For those who has other purposes in life? Who lives up to this day with other ideals?

Only one thing: to raise a new generation, our children and grandchildren, to be different than we were. To devote to this generation not simply our material means, but all soul, all energy, for they are our

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364 From Nekrasov’s poem “Railroad”
365 “Unwanted people” was famous Russian literary critic Belinsky’s term for heroes of “Yevgueni Onegin” by Pushkin and “Hero of our time” by Lermontov.
366 Gogol and Saltykov-Shchedrin are famous for their satire.
only hope. To tell them more about what kind of heroes their great-
grandfathers and the great-grandmothers really were. **Do not hesitate to say to them that other life is possible!** That their school textbooks of history, written on Soros’s grants, do shamelessly lie. Do show to your children and grandchildren films about fearless Kamo367, about elusive avengers368 and about the five girls-antiaircraft gunners who gave their lives in 1942 protecting our native land369. Read them Sergey Mikhalkov370’s verses “My friend, listen to my story about our Motherland, about us... And not all children had back then (before Revolution) a writing-book and an abc-book ...” However, unlike you in your childhood, they already know that one from life, not just poems...

...We have not noticed perestroika straight away. For the first couple of years people simply waved away as autumn flies, various importunate campaigns of the immoderately zealous new secretary general who had received a nickname “the mineral water secretary” because of his failed anti-alcohol campaigns. Who, except for a narrow circle of historians still remembers now, that before perestroika there was “the acceleration” and cutting down of vineyards all over the country? “A new broom always sweeps clean!” - people said. He’ll fool around with his silly games and eventually will calm down. People did not know yet that this was more of a case of a dirty toilet brush, not a clean broom...

One day there was a campaign for sobriety. The next day there was a campaign against bureaucracy, with promise to reduce number of bureaucrats sharply (ha!). The following day it was the turn of bringing 1920s into the fashion («returning to Lenin’s roots», all these various tactical Shatrov’s371 theatre plays like «Further! Further! Further!»., with which intelligentsia was running around as a chicken with a hand-made feed bag372), when models of Slava Zaytsev373 were dressing up in Red Army overcoats with Budyonny374 hats and books of Trotsky and Bukharin

367 Kamo, real name Semen Ter-Petrossian (1882 – 1922) was a Georgian revolutionary of Armenian descent, and an early companion to Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. From 1903–1912, Kamo, a master of disguise, carried out a number of militant operations on behalf of the Bolshevik party.

368 The Elusive Avengers is an extremely popular Soviet adventures film (1966). It has two sequels, The New Adventures of the Elusive Avengers (1968) and The Crown of the Russian Empire, or Once Again the Elusive Avengers (1971)

369 Reference to “At Dawn It’s Quiet Here”, film (1972).

370 Sergey Mikhalkov (1913 – 2009) was a well-known Soviet author of children’s books and satirical fables who also wrote the lyrics of the USSR’s national anthem.

371 Mikhail Shatrov was a Soviet play writer known for several plays and films about the Revolution. His late 1980s plays were fiercely critical of Stalin (because of Gorbachev’s line towards the latter).

372 Russian expression meaning being totally obsessed about something.

373 Famous Soviet couturier.

374 Red Army soldier’s hats during the Civil war, named after Semyon Budyonny (1883-1973), a Soviet cavalryman, military commander, politician and a close ally of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.
were republished in big numbers. There was nothing new; you could also read these books before that, in Lenin Library in Moscow, if you really wanted it so much. But people were grabbing them from the counters as hot buns, without even looking (and often without reading later on: after all, they were in fashion!)

There was only one prophetical phrase in “Further! Further! Further!” It was “Why did I not die in infancy”. Now I quite often think exactly like that... Though it would have been better if the originators of sufferings of millions people on all continents would have died in their infancy. Those ones who have untied hands of thieves and "civilized" gangsters from transnational corporations.

The people began to become interested in the new secretary general because after so many years of a fairly monotonous life some sort of movement has begun. But they soon lost their interest in him, having got to the core of this empty chatterbox. Only enthusiastic as a newborn calf intelligentsia still did not get to his core and continued to carry him on hands. When the word “perestroika” (reorganization or reconstruction) was uttered for the first time, the people scoffed:

- So, are we going to accelerate first, and to get reconstructed later, or the other way around?

Actually, perestroika began with paid toilets and beauty contests. That is quite logical if one thinks about it: after all, from now on everything, from human beauty to human excrements, was turned into goods for trade...

And it also began from errors in encyclopaedias which, to my horror, nobody corrected anymore...

In Soviet Union there was an army of proof-readers, and no book was issued without careful check of reliability of the facts and presence of typing errors (then they even were pasting a special leaflet with amendments of typing errors in each book), but in the second half of the 1980s suddenly there was a new encyclopaedic dictionary about Africa, in which even such a beginner in this field as myself, have found more than ten errors. I admit I was in a state of shock. After all, this wasn’t even just a simple book, it was almost encyclopaedia! People will refer to it. An encyclopaedia should be exact, as in a drugstore! With my best intentions I have made a list of the mistakes that I had noticed, and sent it to publishing house.

Then, still in Soviet time, there was a law regarding replying to letters of citizens according to which any letter received from citizens by any organization, including publishing houses, had to be answered within a certain timeframe (I think, a month). And you’d be in trouble if you just attempted to ignore it! I received my answer in time, as it was required. But what for an answer it was! It was an impudent letter in which they didn’t even thank me for my help. Its tone was reduced to “yes, there are some errors, and so what?” Nobody was even going to correct them. Who cares that under a painting of Afewerk Tekle375 “Beauty” it’s written that it’s “Soldier”!

375 Afewerk Tekle (b. 1932) is one of Ethiopia’s most celebrated artists,
It was a harbinger of the fact that very soon the whole country would be occupied by the people who are engaged in things they have no knowledge of. By cooks stitching boots instead of baking pastry. By drama actors skating, by TV presenters trading in self-made plum sauce, by daughters of governors becoming TV presenters and sonnies of secretaries of the Communist Party committee of universities who would be declared to be distinguished novelists, in between their business dealing (and these are just most harmless examples!). By dilettantes, whose slogan in life is “you won’t burst from dirt and you won’t revive from cleanness!”

As to the toilets, I have been revolted to the depth of soul that one had suddenly to pay for using hem: and not because I was money-minded (though one visit of the given institution began at once to cost as much, as a whole loaf of bread!). What, if a person, for example, does not have money near at hand, does he then have to pee on some street corner? And in general, why one has pay for a natural relief of his needs of nature? Perhaps, we should also be charged for breathing air? As to the cleanliness maintenance, firstly, we already paid taxes for this purpose. Secondly, who said that a paid toilet is going to be clean? And I appeared to be right: they didn’t stay clean for long... Soon these paid toilets looked exactly the way those free of charge had looked, but the charging money for entrance continued. I declared to the paid toilets a resolute boycott and essentially avoided them (luckily I knew, where in Moscow there were the free ones, and then it was possible to come into various offices and use them freely: because during “communististic dictatorship” there was no need for any armed security guards in each building and there were no terrorists with bombs, wandering around the city...)

As to the beauty contests, suddenly various Mashas Kalininas and prostitutes servicing foreigners were declared to be “heroes of our time”. Those who were selling themselves to foreigners for a pair of stockings were supposed to be understood and pitied: after all, it were the same “bad communists”, like Stalin, Yegor Kuzmich Ligachyov and Nina Andreyeva who have not provided them with sufficient amount of stockings! That is how the Komsomol apparatchiks began their artillery preparation for a psychological attack on growing up generation of the Soviet girls whom they already then intended to deliver to the brothels of Europe (and forthcoming domestic ones)... Nobody remembered anymore how during war there were cases when our women, having overslept with fascists- not for stockings, for food, in order to feed their hungry children! - Committed suicide afterwards, not being able to live with what they have done. And we were supposed to feel sorry for these modern***, suffering from shortage of imported stockings?? And do I have to remind you how a striptease had been declared to be “an integral part of world

particularly known for his paintings on African and Christian themes.

377 Yegor Kuzmich Ligachev (born 1920) is a Russian politician who was a high-ranking official in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Originally a protege of Mikhail Gorbachev, Ligachev became a challenger to his leadership.
Irina Malenko

culture” and how they began to brainwash us that those who have not experienced an orgasm, had lived all their lives in vain?..

...In the beginning of the 1970s when my mum was in Moscow one day on a business trip from her factory, a woman has approached her in the street and has offered her to work as a mannequin\textsuperscript{378} in Moscow’s Fashion house.

- Who do you think I am, comrades? - Mum was indignant, - I have a profession, and you are suggesting to me to become a clothes hanger!

She refused. And to this day she never regretted about it. It was a different thing to play voluntarily, in her free time, in a commercial trailer for the factory production! After all it had a direct connection to the subject of her professional pride. At home we have up to this day her photos, on which she as a real actress, together with a male colleague from the design department, pretend to be an enamoured couple collecting maple leaves in an autumn wood, next to a scooter produced by their factory...

In the Soviet time there was a fine TV show “Come on, girls!”, in which nice Soviet girls competed in professional skills, as well as in cookery, various domestic tasks and a compulsory ball dance. I remember the faces of these girls, lighted from inside by their intellect, their dignity and inner beauty: it was pleasant to look at them. But today teenage girls are being taught that in order to be a beauty, you don’t need anything except for a big bust almost falling out of a brassiere, shaking hips, as a mare in the field and as a bonus, some childish babble on a subject of “universal human values”. I am not a feminist in the Western sense of the word, but a beauty contest is very much like a slave market. You really expect the judges to open the competitors’ mouth: to look at the state of their teeth...

Never mind beauty contests... People in the West - even those who considers themselves to be left-wing, - in their overwhelming majority do not understand, why the majority of our people did not like that clever and such fashionable Raisa Maksimovna Gorbachev\textsuperscript{379}, explaining it all by our “congenital wildness”. And it’s impossible to explain to them that in our culture we are used to appreciate people on their own merits to the society, not because of with whom they share their bed and whose surname they carry, and that the Western concept of a First Lady - woman who is considered to be somehow outstanding only because of to whom she is married - is deeply insulting for a Soviet modern, intellectually developed, independent, clever woman for whom all ways in life were opened. It is no less offensive for us, than burqa and head scarves are for the Western public- because a First Lady symbolizes the very same thing that these clothing items symbolize to the Western Europeans: dependence of a woman from a man and an impossibility for her to express herself fully in her society in any other way, except for being an appendix to another person.

\textsuperscript{378} Model (Fr.). In the USSR this French word was used for it at the time.
\textsuperscript{379} Raisa Gorbacheva (1932-1999) – Mikhail Gorbachev’s wife.
...Now, with my life experience, I look back at that time and see just a mass madness. When I recollect, how the writer Yulian Semenov (that very one who already in the 1980s was believing that “McDonald’d’s” is a luxurious restaurant where they serve you a real coffee!) seriously assured his readers that if we just start paying for medical treatment to our physicians, they will immediately, as if with a stroke of a magic wand, begin to treat their patients better and to look after them... How people stood in a queue at night (!) in order to get to Ilya Glazunov’s exhibition, to see his one and only “unprecedentedly courageous” painting (yeah, right, “courageous”- that’s after a new campaign of “destalinization” began!), his “Russia the Eternal”... How people forgot about work and the whole collectives in working hours sat in front of the TV like Bandar logs from the “Jungle Book”381 in front of the boa Kaa, listening to the deputies practicing in eloquence... How people were ready to kill in order to get the new issue of Korotich’s “Ogonyok”382 (where is he nowadays, that Korotich?...) It is all so shameful. After all, we were already adult people! But still had psychology of a small scale conman, Vasily Alibabaevich: “Everybody ran, so I ran too!”383... When in our institute «for the first time ever» there was a public lecture about «Stalin reprisals» (now I don’t even remember anymore, who was reading it!), I and Lida too have ran to get there: because they promised to us that there will be “something amazing”. To be honest, we didn’t manage to get in: the room was jam packed by so many people that we could not even enter the door. People were hanging down from the stairs, almost from up to the ceiling... Well, just exactly like Bandar logs!384 And who remembers now, how we read in the perestroika media that “Black sea is about to blow up because of presence of hydrogen sulphide in it” and were seriously afraid of this to happen, or what hysteria, what psychosis were created around a film of Abuladze “Repentance”?385 When some Italian newspaper wrote that Yeltsin was an alcoholic, we all were indignant together at such a bald lie. After all, he personally came to work a couple of times by trolley bus (or by metro) and even came himself to 2 or 3 shops!...

...As far as I can remember, some people in our country were always engaged into some “Individual labour activity”386, as perestroika

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380 Ilya Glazunov -contemporary Russian artist (b.1930). His paintings have mostly historic or religious themes.
381 Monkeys from Rudyard Kipling’s “Jungle Book”.
382 Vitaly Korotich (b. 1936) is a Soviet, Ukrainian and Russian writer and journalist. The Ogonyok magazine, at the time when Korotich was at its head, was regarded as a "megaphone" for the perestroika and glasnost policies. Korotich now resides in the US.
384 See p. 426.
385 “Repentance” (1984) is a Georgian film directed by Tengiz Abuladze. The movie was made in 1984, but its release was banned in the Soviet Union until late 1980s for its semi-allegorical critique of Stalinism.
386 Perestroika-time term for private business.
men named it. I remember from my childhood the predecessors of modern businessmen: drunkards trading in self-made sugar candies in electric trains. Before getting into the train, they usually slipped on a white apron of not the best cleanness: in order to gain some trust to their goods, made god knows where by god knows whom and god knows from what. They brought their «cockerels on sticks»\(^\text{387}\) around the trains, praising their sweets by drunken voices. However, I never saw anybody buying it. The state and all produced by the state were trusted and valued by the people then to such an extent that if there was a choice between the state and a private trader, the majority of people would prefer the first. And they had plenty of choice in sugar candies.

When the so-called co-operative societies began to spread like mushrooms and ceased to be simply additional work in your free time, as they were originally intended, but became for many their main trade; when these people were buying up all the cheap state-set priced raw materials for their production which then they offered to the people extremely expensive, and because of this practice shops began to suffer from chronic shortages, unprecedented neither under Brezhnev, nor under Andropov, nor either under Chernenko\(^\text{388}\); when a beautiful new word was added to the great and mighty Russian language: “a racketeer”; when sportsmen of martial arts in increasing frequency became gangsters; when ration system was introduced in the country: first on soap, and then on vodka, - even for a blind it should have already become clear that our newly appointed Susanin\(^\text{389}\) was leading us to some wrong destination. But intelligentsia still accused in all of this Stalin and Ligachyov\(^\text{390}\) instead. And we continued to rejoice our lives, danced in the streets during newly introduced holidays, like the City Day, devouring co-operative shish kebabs not baked properly that could quite possibly give you a salmonella poisoning, and sang Viktor Tsoi's songs about aluminum cucumbers... That was exactly what was required from us.

Perestroika in a separately taken institute - ours- began with appointment of a new rector: an impressive, getting grey-haired handsome man in a foreign raincoat. He seldom appeared within the walls of the institute, and each such occurrence was such a big event that all female students gathered there: to admire him.

- He looks so much like a young Reagan! - sighed Lida, not even knowing his political preferences yet.

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\(^\text{387}\) Sugar candies usually had that shape.


\(^\text{389}\) Ivan Susanin (died 1613) was a Russian folk hero and martyr of the early 17th century's Time of Troubles. He led Polish invaders deep into a forest, away from the whereabouts of the Tsar Mikhail Romanov, and was killed by them. Here his name is used sarcastically: somebody who deliberately leads you up the wrong way.

\(^\text{390}\) See page 424.
The old rector was really already very old. There were some rumours that he was on very friendly terms with Gromyko. After “a wind of changes” I saw him in the institute only once. Nobody greeted him, all ran away from him as if he was leprous: though he was simply pushed to retire, not fired for any offences. When I said “Hello!” to this old man and also opened a door for him, he was nearly in tears. I felt such sorry for him.

First months since the appointment of “young Reagan” passed without major events. Probably, in this time he was consulting predecessors of modern PR managers how to lift his popularity among students: sharply, “cheap but solid”. In the light of what we know now about those times and about what those people are capable of, I will not be surprised, if the events which have occurred around New year, were a planned provocation.

First two years, as I already said, the majority of our students have lived in Sokolniki, and the minority, including myself, - in another institute’s hostel, near Rechnoi Vokzal metro Station. When we started the third year, our institute decided not to rent that floor in somebody else’s hostel anymore: because the construction of our own hostel was coming to an end, and there was no sense to do it only for some months. All of us have moved to Sokolniki where I ended up in another room, not together with Lida and Lyuba, but “at 15 sisters”: that’s how was called informally my new habitat. “Sisters”, of course, were not 15 - no room would fit in that many people! - only 6. From Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia and Armenia... I was lucky: the girls in this room were quiet, of normal behaviour, in addition, they already knew each other for a long time. They treated me kindly. In a room there was a long settled order. It has been accurately divided into “corners” - by means of wardrobes. Nobody here was disturbing others from study, nobody made a noisy uproar at night. The only noise reaching us in the evenings was from a corridor when a group of our Chechen students proceeded from one side of the building into another and back, exchanging words loudly. We didn’t treat them any different than the rest of the students, but they did keep themselves to themselves.

All of this even gave to this hostel a certain charm. Anyway, we only had a couple of months to suffer, so one could live with standing in a queue in order to boil your kettle in the kitchen. Nobody knew exactly when the new hostel will be ready, but naturally, we all very much waited for this moment.

With melancholy we recollected our quiet inhabited blocks on Rechnoy Vokzal, having forgotten even about cockroaches in the toilet and about light bulbs constantly stolen by someone there: we already developed a technology of a survival among the cockroaches in the dark. The door in a dark bathroom should be opened sharply, jerky and then you’d have to wait till cockroaches fall down from the ceiling, and only after that you could use it. Besides, it were not some bad communists whose fault it was that we’ve got cockroaches: it was our own fault - we did not keep up the place tidy, we stuck refuse chutes full with rubbish... It was exactly “bad communists” who periodically did for us free of charge...
Irina Malenko

disinfection, extermination of insects and deracination. Ask, for example, the inhabitants of apartments on the posh French Riviera, how much are their service charges for such things...

...Ah, how funny it was, when enamoured Lida had poured out on Nariman a whole bucket of water from the 7th floors.... When we sat on the radiator near the lift, having covered our heads in an old Russian way with head scarves and singing folk songs! How does the self-made sunflower-seed oil smell: aroma around the whole corridor! - the one that our Zaporozhye neighbour brought from home! How I and Verochka from Ust Kamenogorsk went to see the Australian ballet, how I went with Muscovite Anya Bobrova to the Operetta theatre, and with Zhenya from Yalta - to the concerts of Toto Cutugno391... How we made our own skating rink in winter in front of the hostel and went skating there. And how we didn’t want to say goodbye to a place with which all these memories have been connected it... But we did not have much choice.

But in a new hostel, we were told, we would live in threes and even in twos per room. We even went to look at this building, still under construction, in the summer, and some cheerful builders have joyfully let us inside: to look at our future habitation. We walked inside on wooden planks: there were no steps at the entrance yet. The new hostel was divided into 2-roomed apartments - a big room was meant for 3 persons, a small one - for 2, plus each apartment had a separate bathroom and a toilet. It was a palace!

...Scandal has broken out, when just before the New Year’s holidays we unexpectedly heard on the radio that we, apparently, have already received our New Year’s gift, in the form of house warming! Apparently, we even already moved in! That was enough to get raging.

It remained unknown who spread this information and how did it get to the radio news. As well as who was behind a small student’s revolt which burst out the same evening within the walls of our old hostel in Sokolniki. But it was obviously not spontaneous: it smell too strongly of not familiar to us back then yet future “coloured revolutions”. Strange that no TV crews have arrived!

But I do remember well, who shouted most loudly. Perhaps, we should ask tem today more in detail about the technology of organization of such actions?

Someone phoned the members of institute’s Communist Party committee, trade-union committee and so on, they all arrived to us straight away: to calm the passions. But students were in rage, like Fantomas392. Our not so tactful dean added oil to the fire with his classical “...but when I was serving in the army, our conditions were...”. His words have sunk in indignant chorus of voices.

- We are not in the army!
- Down with them!

391 Salvatore “Toto” Cutugno (b. 1943) is an Italian pop singer-songwriter and musician.
392 Reference to the French film “Fantômas se déchaîne” (1965) (“Fantomas is raging”).
Irina Malenko

- Give us our new hostel!

And there he came to the foreground, our movie-like handsome man, our Reagan manufactured in Ural. To complete his image of a knight rescuing poor students only a hot fighting horse was lacking. It was replaced with his personal “Volvo” car at the front door.

Within five minutes he calmed us down, gave us his word of honour, keeping his hand at his heart, that this was a disgrace which he would personally take under control; that he’ll sort this all out; that we will move in the nearest possible future, and that those responsible will be punished.

That’s what all this tragicomedy has been started for: to get rid of the “undesired” ones and to replace them with his “own guys”. Well, and to lift his popularity, of course. This was happening approximately simultaneously to Yeltsin’s legendary trips on public transport and his checks of shops. Times were restless: we, students, (as well as the majority of the population of the country) felt as if woken up from hibernation, without having had time to understand what was really going on, took newly appeared “perestroika men’s words for granted, worried when Yeltsin was fired and got into a hospital: unconditionally trusting all rumours and gossips. And that they were just impudently making psychological experiences on us, in consciousness manipulations. And, alas, every time it worked: those «if everybody says so, it must be truth» and already mentioned by me “everybody ran, so I ran too”.

...Our dean was dismissed the next day though he personally had no relation to the radio-lie. And he didn’t work on the construction of the new building either! And students were ready to carry their newly appeared hero on hands. People looked at him with admiration, upon him they rested their most improbable hopes (like cancellation of a state examination in foreign languages!), his name passed by word of mouth...

We began to show off our institute before others. Our modest future profession suddenly became improbably fashionable. If earlier when our students were preparing for the next demonstration on Red Square, Lida felt she had to lie to our companions in accurate brand new suits who were alternating our rows, that the abbreviation of our institutes name means «institute of nuclear researches», now you didn’t have to explain anything to anybody: it became well-known...

With self-confidence of a young generation we thought that we knew the answers to all questions. It was then that from a bad quality tapes of the tape recorders began to sound:

“I have forgotten everything what they taught us for so many years,

Won’t I find answer to everything myself?”

And, of course, immortal Tsoi’s words:

“Our hearts are demanding changes...”

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393 From the Soviet film “Gentlemen of Fortune” (1971).
394 Words from a disco song by pop group “Mirage”.

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We didn’t know how we wanted to live: for that we had Yavlinsky with his "500 days” and »Perestroika Manifesto«. We only knew how we didn’t want to live.

That’s when my future degree thesis mentor for some time became “Reagan’s” right hand. Michael Yevseevich was from a exotic small Caucasian mountains ethnic group: short, with a black beard, resembling a rabbi, he had intelligent black eyes and a sharp manner of conversation. He kept students in good discipline. When during one of the first lessons he mentioned Solzhenitsyn in connection with something (then it was a novelty!), naming him by his patronymic, our brave Kaluga Cossack Bortnikov couldn’t resist it:

- So, he is Isaevich, isn’t he?
  Michael Yevseevich strictly looked at him:
  - Yes, Isaevich. And what are you trying to say?...
  And gallant Bortnikov got mixed up and squeaked:
  - Me? No, I didn’t mean anything...

If it was not a lesson, but a hockey match, they’d probably whistled at him.

Michael Yevseevich had a good sense of humor. I remember how someone from our group was reading at his seminar an absolutely boring report. So boring that all of us were falling asleep, literally. And at the front desk Lida was telling to Anechka Bobrova, a nice, homely Moscow girl about her deep, as ocean of love for Nariman:

- ...And he stood there, at a refuse chute, looking at me, and his eyes were like two wet plums...

And then suddenly she felt that two more wet plums were looking at her: it was Michael Yevseevich with a grieving face, having put a palm under his chin, with great interest listened to her story, without paying the slightest attention to the report...

He told to us a lot of interesting stories. For example that Rina Zelyonaya did not accept the existence of the Belarusian language: she persistently considered it to be a deformed Russian. But the matter was not in stories, but in the fact that he was able to teach interestingly one of the most boring, though also necessary, subjects in our profession. And I, having listened to him, very soon decided that I wish to write my thesis under his mentorship...

Perestroika infection has not bypassed me as well. Though I understood faster than others the real price of the “marked” Teddy Bear, I too, as well as my classmates, - oh monstrous nonsense! - worried about Yeltsin’s destiny when he was sick in a hospital and laughed along with others when he declared the sovereignty of Russia: “Here you go, Misha, take a bite!” That is, for that time the form for me has appeared

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395 Hint at the Jewish origin of Solznenisyn.
396 Ekaterina Vasiliyevna Zelyonaya (1902-1991), better known as Rina Zelenaya, was a Soviet actress and singer. She became popular on account of her ability to imitate the speech of children.
397 Gorbachev’s first name – Mikhail – is also Bear’s name in Russian fairy-tales.
to be more important than the substance. That’s how disgusting to me at that stage was already this “comrade” who turned into a “mister” within a couple of years. I didn’t even want to go to demonstrations in the Red Square, because I did not want to see him... No, thanks! “I have such possibility, but I have no desire”.

My first encounter with a new Russian occurred not in a market, but at an examination in Marxist-Leninist philosophy at our institute. My question was about the New Man. I answered. I was asked what else did read on this subject, in addition. I named the book of our teacher whom the examiners only just managed to get rid of. “It’s not that literature, young lady!” - They have impudently grinned to my face. Their thoughts were far: they obviously with pleasure mentally re-winded before themselves how they humiliated and insulted this “not reconstructed” person.

I suddenly felt that in front of me there was something new. A cynicism which is been seen as a good quality. No matter that they have not written any books at all themselves: neither on this subject, nor on others. These people were certain that they have an ultimate authority to decide what’s right. A mix of cynicism with aplomb, obviously, must have entered the list of “universal human values”...

I never was “new Russian” myself. In all my body there is not a single new Russian bone. My organism pushes away any new Russian thing as an alien tissue. That’s how it was then and that’s how it remains to this day. And I am proud of it. I am not an amoeba to mutate.

...We have moved to a new hostel in February. There was a general euphoria. Our country around us in the meantime, at first slowly, but soon all faster and faster, was plunging into still cheerful chaos.

- “My mum is anarchy, my daddy is a glass of a port!” - shouted tape-recorded Vitya Tsoy's voice from the windows of our new hostel. We now have freedom!

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398 Quote from the film “Kidnapping Caucasian Style” (1966).
Chapter 7. When bombs fall

“Monica was good, but Tony is better!”
(From Yugoslavian black humour, 1999)

I was certain that Lida would want to share a room with Lyuba: they were inseparable, as in a children’s poem by Agnia Barto:

“Me and Tamara walk in couple, me and Tamara are school hospital attendants…” - and so I nearly agreed to share a room with Habiba, but then suddenly and unexpectedly Lida offered me to become her roommate. I was surprised, flattered and could not refuse her. Lyuba seemed slightly offended and even refused to share the same apartment with us. However, it did not affect her friendship with Lida.

We moved into in a small room in an apartment on the seventh floor. In the same apartment with us, in the big room, there lived a girl from the Ural called Larissa who had got transferred to our department from the correspondence department of our University (she was six years older than I) and two ghost tenants from Moscow suburbs, whom she had persuaded the authorities to check in at the hostel though in fact they lived at home. So Larissa was settled there with comfort. I was shocked by her smoking. Before coming to Moscow I had never seen smoking women in my life. But even in Moscow at that time very few did it: mainly some obese girls, trying to lose weight, or some high official’s daughters. Larissa was from the first category. When she opened her mouth, such a stench came out of it as if you were in front of a fairy-tale dragon who was throwing up a smoke at you. There was never any personal liking between us, though we tolerated each other because of Lida, whom both of us admired. Larissa’s crave was to get married, and all the year round she kept asking to her room for lunch a male leader of another student group from our faculty. He ate with pleasure (Larissa cooked very tasty food and also could make clothes and knit very well), then thanked her and invariably left...

The life at the new hostel went cheerfully on, although we managed to make it dirty extremely quickly. In some eighteen months cockroaches appeared in our new “palace”. In the kitchen the duty schedule was put up on the wall: which room should clean the cooker and the sinks and when, but somehow we ceased to observe it, even in spite of the presence on every floor of “a head” who was supposed to see to it that we attend to our duties. The time of “command economy” was over! We slighted the maintenance of order - instead of the “boring” kitchen we rather went to Arbat - at that time still a unique capitalist street in

399 Monica Lewinsky and Tony Blair.
400 Agnia Barto (1906-1981) was a Soviet Jewish poet and children’s writer.
401 One of Barto’s well-known children’s verses.
Moscow - where self-educated artists for ten roubles (a quarter of our monthly grant) drew your portrait in 20 minutes. Lida and I forked up for it for her next birthday. Even though the portraits did not even remotely resemble the originals, we hung them out with pride over our beds. Skirts with "rivets", stone-washed fabric, checked trousers... Let people see that we keep abreast of the time!

It was then that a band with the un-Soviet name "Lyube" from the Moscow suburb, Lyubertsy, became popular.

"I don't like science,  
I don't really know why.  
Mummy, make me a pair of checked trousers,  
And I'll walk in them on the streets.

Make me a pair of trousers  
As fashionable as possible,  
With the checks on them  
As big as possible.

Checks, checks, checks,  
Like wagons in the metro,  
Checks, checks, checks,  
You're like chocolate sweets.

I walk very carefully,  
Trying to surprise the whole world.  
One could even play chess on my trousers.  
And when the checks are out of fashion,  
I'll put on steamboat's chimneys, yes, yes!

And now compare this silly verse with, for example, my favourite Soviet song by Pakhmutova and Dobronravov:

"Our concern is plain,  
Our concern is one:  
That only our dear land should live,  
And there are no other worries for us.  
Snow and wind, stars' night flight,  
My heart calls me into alarming distance.

Even if one trouble after another  
May be in store for both of us,  
Only death alone  
Can take my friendship with you.  
Snow and wind, stars' night flight,  
My heart calls me into alarming distance.

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402 A well-known Soviet and Russian pop-group. The name is “un-Soviet” because it takes its origin in a slang word.  
403 “Song about Restless Youth”.
As long as I am able to walk,  
As long as I am able to see,  
As long as I am able to breathe,  
I'll walk forward,  
Snow and wind, stars' night flight,  
My heart calls me into alarming distance.

And just as everybody in this life,  
One day you'll meet your love  
She will walk with you bravely,  
Just as yourself, through all storms  
Snow and wind, stars' night flight,  
My heart calls me into alarming distance.

Do not think that all songs have been sung,  
That all storms have thundered,  
Get ready for a great goal,  
And the glory will find you.  
Snow and wind, stars' night flight,  
My heart calls me into alarming distance”.

Compare the intellectual and especially spiritual level of these two songs, and you might understand that it was neither Stalin’s nor Nina Andreyeva's fault what happened to our country. Our whole generation - with the encouragement of the "perestroika activists"- behaved like “Jumpy Dragonflies” from Ivan Krylov’s fable “The Dragonfly and the Ant”, in which all summer the Dragonfly sang, played music, and visited with her friends, making light at the Ant’s hard work collecting food and building a shelter. It is clear that back then we had forgotten the end of this famous fable:

"Jumpy Dragonfly  
Was singing the whole summer;  
But before she knew it,  
Winter came...  
(...)  
"I had other things to do, dear!  
In our soft grasses there were  
So many songs and so much fun,  
That we went utterly dizzy."

"Oh, so you..." "I sang the whole summer  
With abandonment".

"You sang the whole summer?  
Well, that’s a worthy occupation.  
Now it’s time for a dance!"

For principles of socialism to work in practice not only relevant orders from the above are needed. At the grassroots level, we ourselves

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404 Ivan Andreyevich Krylov (1769 – 1844) is Russia's best known fabulist.
Irina Malenko

should not be spiritual spongers. At the very least we should clean after ourselves · without disclaimers that we are but ordinary people and that the party committee's workers are doing or not doing their job elsewhere. In order to live like a human being one has to behave like a human being in the first place. Without citing weather conditions as an excuse.

...While we, students, were “keeping abreast of the time”, along with various strange creatures, such as “heavy metal fans” and “lyubers” (inhabitants of Lyubertsy who were engaged in bodybuilding), who got from the media a beautiful name of “informals” (which automatically led to the conclusion that Komsomol and party members were sheer “formals”), the cooker in our kitchen became all rusty and covered with a thick layer of burnt milk: in the heat of perestroika discussions we were constantly forgetting about it while it was boiling... From time to time old boring “formals” visited the hostel: our teachers who were trying to prevent us at least from blocking the sinks in the kitchen. When in anger they were running along the corridors, knocking on all the doors, we all lurked inside pretending that there was nobody home. Ha, look what they demand from us! To clean the cooker! We are not in 1937!

Sometimes they did check-ups of rooms. They came into our room one day while I was out.

- Please, come in, Sergei Danilovich! - Lida greeted them in a friendly manner. - I have nothing extremist here, only some pictures of Africans on the walls...

There was a huge administrative map of Africa hanging over my bed, with the portraits of the Ethiopian runner Miruts Yifter and of Mengistu Haile Mariam pinned on it. It became fashionable to be cynical and sarcastic those days. And none of us was as good at it as Lida...

Mikhail Yevseevich one day expressed this “new way of thinking” in his conversation with our CPSU History Professor, Nina Vyacheslavovna:

- This is all very well, Mikhail Yevseevitch, - she said. - And I completely agree with our Rector: he says very correct things. But he only keeps talking about how we shouldn't live, and if you look at it closely, he doesn't have a positive program himself, he doesn't know how we should live instead. He doesn't have such a program that people would be prepared to go on barricades for it...

- That's exactly the point, Nina Vyacheslavovna, - he replied with a bored face, - maybe it's time to forget about those barricades, eh? We've had enough of them.

I also remember very clearly how when he was reading my diploma thesis where, as it was a wont at that time, I used a Marxist methodology basis, he suddenly expressed a "rebellious" thought:

- You know what, Zhenya? I actually agree with idealists: history does not exist objectively. It is merely various subjective writings by different authors. That's all we know about it.

It's a pity that he never applied this discovery of his to the evaluation of the post-perestroika historiography of our Soviet history... And we were so silly back then that we even admired him for that: look how brave he is! He has such fresh thoughts!
When I was in my fourth year, there finally happened what I was dreaming of my entire conscious life: I was assigned for my student internship at the Institute of Africa of the USSR Academy of Sciences! On the one hand, it was a stroke of luck: I accidentally learnt from a researcher of the Institute of Asia and Africa that another researcher, of the Institute of Africa, was searching for an assistant at that time who could help her to translate into Russian some sociologic questionnaires collected by her in Ethiopia. On the other hand, a walking foot is aye getting (or, as the Russians say, water doesn't run under a lying stone), and if I hadn't so actively striven for my dream to come true, I would have never happened to be in the right place at the right time. The internship was long: three full months. Lida and Lyuba went for it to Lida's favourite Leningrad. During the good-bye dinner before their departure Lyuba sang her favourite "Half-moon Was Tinted Red"\textsuperscript{405}, and Lida was all shining with joy. She twice attempted to become a student of Drama Institute in Leningrad and she absolutely adored that city.

None of us knew at that time that this journey would become a turning point in her life: during the internship she would meet her future husband at one of the parties, a son of a well-known actor. Their relationship would develop at a lightning speed. The actor's son was a handsome fellow four years her senior, and he owned a room in a shared apartment in the city centre. When he proposed to Lida, it never really puzzled her why he lived in a shared apartment alone instead of living with his own parents, as most young men in our country do, or why he didn't serve in the army ("I was sick, I had meningitis"), or why such a good-looking young man had not yet had a girlfriend, or why he had proposed to her so quickly... She was on cloud nine with happiness: both because she had finally met a man who proposed to her nonetheless she, in her own opinion, was "so old" (she was 24 at the time), and because from now on she would be able to live in her favourite city. But she was reluctant to show him that she was glad, so she just answered peevishly:

- Yeah, right, *wait till I iron my laces*!

His face was very serious when he gave her an iron straight away...

His parents were very happy that he finally got married, which was also quite uncommon for Soviet parents. After the wedding (which I also had the honour to attend) it appeared that there were some problems with the newly wed's mental health. It turned out that he was using drugs and stealing things from home to sell them in order to get some money for his dose. Of course, Lida could not even have suspected anything like that: never in our life, including the five years of life at the hostel, had we seen a real junkie, not even once. But she found out all about him only after her graduation, when she moved to her husband permanently. And there was still a full year before that, a year that she was going to spend with us, away from him...

After becoming a married lady Lida was looking a bit down on us. Lyuba tried to cope with it, but finally gave up and soon got married herself - I wouldn't say to the first comer, but in any case, not for big

\textsuperscript{405} Well-known Russian folk song.
love. The main fear was to remain unmarried until graduation. Her husband, Alex, was a student of our Institute, only from another faculty. He was from Riga and even though he was Russian, he was a big Latvian patriot (until Latvian independence and until Russians from Latvia were legally ordained as "non-citizens", there was such category of people). So much so that he even wanted to plant a Latvian flag onto their wedding car. But Lyuba said that he would do it only over her dead body:

- You just try, and I’ll plant a Russian flag on the other side of it!

The Baltics was considered a very comfortable and desirable place for being sent to work after graduation. But it was hard to get a place there: they had plenty of educated locals. Lyuba and her husband tried to settle in his native land after their graduation, but then all sorts of troubles began with the National Fronts and their ilk. She insisted that they should move to her parents and has never regretted it. She, a graduated historian-archivist, today works as a teacher at a nursery school where her mum is director. And the former Latvian nationalist Alex (who really speaks Latvian fluently, by the way!) nowadays sells make-up in the Russian country-side. Of his former compatriots he speaks with scorn:

- Latvians honestly believe that they are the centre of Europe, nay, of the earth itself!

His parents had emigrated to Germany. As they say, fate plays games with a man, and the man plays his trumpet...

By the way, many girls married in the same way: just because their other friends had already got married. Even my intelligent mother made that mistake at her time. But for me what they call "peers pressure" had never existed, from childhood on. I was in no hurry: I remembered well Little Tamara's favourite saying: "Never rush in getting married, beware falling down afterwards". And when a Kazakh applicant for entry from Preparatory Faculty, Marat by name, asked me when I was going to get married, I answered:

- Wait till I graduate, go to post-graduate studies, and then we'll see. Probably when I am twenty-seven, not before that.
- Twenty-seven? - He was horrified. - But you will be already so old then!

I just laughed.

The Preparatory faculty students, Marat from Karaganda and Petya from Kherson, began visiting Lida quite often just before her departure for Leningrad. Petya' biggest dream was to emigrate to America.

- That's where people know how to live! - he often exclaimed with such a look as if he had already eaten a bushel of salt with Americans. Lida found it awfully irritating.

- Petya, stop talking through your hat! You have never been abroad!
- Can you imagine, I was! - he said with the pride a soldier who had survived among the "capitalist sharks". - I was in Mongolia during my army service!

Strange notion: why would the fact that it was nice to serve in the Soviet army in Mongolia necessarily mean that life in America was a paradise? We never found out.
Irina Malenko

And Petya would put his dream into practice a few years later, coming on holidays to America with a friend, then bolting with all their money and documents... Six months later Petya came back to Moscow, quite battered both physically and emotionally. And never spoke of America again...

But for now... While Lida and Lyuba were away, I lived in the room alone. And my internship began. Well, I was actually supposed to work in archives. But my new boss and I agreed from the start that she would write whatever was needed in my intern’s report, and in reality I would be doing to above-mentioned translations.

There were quite a few of those questionnaires: around 500. I also didn’t have a dictionary, but even if I did, to use an Amharic dictionary is quite a different thing from using an English or a French one. And at the beginning I was really worried: would I manage it? The matter was not only with the dictionary: I also had to be able to read various handwritings in Amharic, because the questionnaires were filled in manually.

At first I took a couple of these questionnaires for trial. To my genuine surprise, I discovered that I understood virtually everything even without a dictionary! Nikita Arnoldovich did not eat his bread for nothing: he wasn’t like Dutch professors who teach students languages which they do not speak themselves. Possibly, the fact that most answers were of the same type, also played its role, but the task appeared to be indeed well within my abilities. If I came across any words or expressions I was unfamiliar with, I wrote them down and checked their meaning later on with Nikita Arnoldovich. But such words and expressions weren’t many.

Eleonora Alexeevna’s research was dedicated to finding out how young Ethiopians understood Marxist ideas. “What do you know about Marx?”, “What do you know about the October Revolution?” and so on. She had travelled to Ethiopia herself (oh, lucky woman!) and given those questionnaires at various schools to school-leavers - and not only in the country’s capital. Judging by the answers, young Ethiopians were positive about Marxism. And why wouldn’t they be: had it not been for the Revolution of 1974, most of them wouldn’t be able to attend schools and wouldn’t know how to read and write. Very seldom I came across such answers as “I don’t know anything and I don’t want to know anything!” - probably, those were future local dissidents. But the very fact that they existed refutes the horror tales that today’s pro-American Ethiopian regime tells about Mengistu’s “red terror” : if he really had been such a “blood-thirsty dictator”, which of those schoolchildren would have dared to write such things?

Eleonora Alexeeva did not know a single word in Amharic. Her first speciality was Nigeria, but later she switched to Ethiopia and Somalia. She told me many amusing details about Africa, among others, how clean toilets were in the Nigerian countryside, despite all the heat and flies. Or now uncomfortably your skirt stuck to your legs when you sat on a leather sofa in Nigeria. Very soon we became very close on the human level. There was something very motherly about Eleonora Alexeevna. Her daughter was just a couple of years younger than I, even though Eleonora Alexeevna herself was a bit older than my mum.
Eleonora Alexeevna was sympathetic with Africans. That also made her distinct, marked her off from some of her colleagues. After socializing with them I was unpleasantly surprised how many of them were really not fit for the job at that Institute, in the moral sense, and for whom the work there - the work that seemed really sacred to me! - was simply a sinecure. I already gave you the example of a big boss’ son who knew Portuguese. He despised Angolans and Mozambiquans deeply and invited me for a barbeque at his dacha, being deeply convinced that his Moscow domicile must be irresistible to the likes of me. Do I have to tell you how disgusting he was to me, and how deeply I began to hate people like him: those who worked at places unsuitable for them? I would have been doing his work even free of charge, voluntarily, unpaid!

The Institute was situated in an old mansion not far from the Mayakovskaya metro station. It was a very grand building. Around the corner from it were the Patriarch ponds so fondly described by the fashionable at that time writer, Bulgakov.406 Here you could sit on a bench in the tree shadow during your lunch break, but I rather preferred to spend it in the enclosed courtyard inside the Institute itself. There was no more cosy place in whole Moscow!

I was the first to come to the Institute and left it in the evenings almost last of all, and that was completely voluntarily. All days long I spent in the library, in its reading hall, over the questionnaires, without even stretching myself. The hall was huge, half empty, with unbelievably high ceilings. I only left it for 30 minutes at lunch time for the Institute canteen where from time to time there was a queue for some "deficit" (rare articles on sale). But I wasn't interested in the "deficit". I was much more interested in rare books from the Institute's library! If I had free time left, I read them in the same reading hall. At the time I was very interested in Alexander Bulatovich407's expedition to Ethiopia in the late 19th century. Eleonora Alexeevna also allowed me to do some work on the Institute's computer: something almost unheard of at that time. And seeing with your own eyes all our country's leading Africa specialists, having an opportunity to talk to them!.. Never and nowhere did I feel myself so much in the right place as there and precisely in those days.

One of such days when I was deep into my translations, somebody suddenly called me:

- Young lady, may I introduce myself to you?

I looked up. At the table next to mine there sat a very tall African smiling at me with a shy smile. He had an open and friendly face. I hesitated a bit: my spiritual condition still wasn't in order after the described above events with Said. For example, I was unable to listen to the Russian folk song "My darling, take me with you!"408 without tears.

406 Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov (1891 – 1940) was a Soviet Russian writer.
407 Alexander Ksaverievich Bulatovich (1870 – 1919) tonsured Father Antony, was a Russian military officer, explorer of Africa, writer, hieromonk and the leader of imiaslavie movement in Eastern Orthodox Christianity.
408 In this song a woman asks a man from another land to take her with him, but he declines.
Especially after I heard a duet of a Russian female and Malagasian male students singing it. Everybody laughed and I wanted to cry. When the song came to its last verse: "My dear, I’d gladly have taken you, but there, in a far-away land, but over there, I don’t need a stranger!" - I used to run out of the room so that nobody should see my tears.

- My name is Kweku. Kweku Sokpor, - he introduced himself, without waiting for my response. - I am from Ghana. I am studying in Donetsk, I will become economist. I’m in my last year. I’m looking here for materials for my thesis.

What else could I do? I also introduced myself.

The name "Kweku" meant that he was born on Wednesday. He also had a Christian name: Gabriel or simply Gaby. Kweku Sokpor was Ewe by ethnic origin and was born in that part of Ghana that was a German colony before the First World War. That is why he was Protestant by religion.

Kweku Sokpor was a very considerate gentleman. Almost every day he brought me flowers and never asked for anything in return. Gradually we started liking each other on a human level. I liked his style: slow and quiet. Some Ukrainian beauty had already managed to break his heart in Donetsk, and he often spoke of her. When Kweku got to know me a bit better, he began to look at me as at potential candidate for a spouse: not out of big love, but simply because, as I understand it now, he wanted to show to his relatives back at home that he found himself a European wife. Unfortunately, for some Africans that is a sort of status symbol.

He was tall, ideally built, even though it would have been stretching the point to call him "good looking". When a couple of months later Anechka Bobrova and I went to the cinema to watch the American film "King Kong" that our perestroika activists suddenly decided to treat us to (I still remembered how the very same film was laughed at in the mid 70s in the magazine "Soviet Screen"), I suddenly realized who my new acquaintance reminded me of. I know, it sounds racist, but it was really so. And that is why the tragic destiny of King Kong made me even more upset. He looked so human, and those American bastards treated the poor thing so badly!

To the honour of my compatriots, nobody, not even after this film, has ever called Kweku by that name on the streets. The harshest nickname that he heard, was "Hey you, freaking Michael Jackson!"

I decided that Kweku was a serious and reliable man. That was the impression that he made. Not every student would travel to another city a whole month just in order to find materials for his thesis in the local library. But I was slight mistaken there: his trip to Moscow had little to do with his studies, it was more related to his business interests... His attitude towards business was really serious! So serious that it was much more important to him than his studies.

When my practice came to its end, Kweku said that he would go to London soon for two weeks, then he would come back, graduate and apply for post-graduate studies. And asked me to wait for him...

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409 Ewe people, an ethnic group in Eastern part of Ghana, Benin and Togo.
He really went to London, but didn't come back after two weeks. I didn't know what to think and was very worried for him. Until he informed me through his friends that apparently, he wouldn't be able to come back because he had lost his passport in London...

I was upset and anxious how he would be able to graduate then. How could I think that this whole comedy was just a part of his well-thought plan: to get a British visa was easier for a student who was just about to graduate - they wouldn't suspect him so much of a desire to stay in Britain... "Having lost" his passport, Kweku spent in London almost a year - he managed to work somewhere illegally. He was a guy who knew how to open doors and managed to persuade Donetsk university to give him a year's academic leave. Everybody felt sorry for him, the victim of such unforeseen circumstances. And the next spring he came back with an almost full train carriage of various stuff that he had bought and quickly (he had again only a couple of weeks left before his graduation!) began to sell it all...

But I am again forestalling the events. That whole year I was running to the Central Telegraph in Gorky street in the centre of Moscow: that was the place where one could make a phone-call abroad. Kweku was staying at his compatriot's house in London; that compatriot had a Russian wife. At that time it was still something very rare. Sometimes I ran to the telegraph almost at night and warned the porter ladies at the hostel so that they would open the door for me when I come back, because at 00:30 they were locking up for the night. There was still nothing to be afraid of in the streets of Moscow at night back then.

My own internship was finished with distinction. I made such an impression on Eleonora Alexeevna with my work that she wrote a real poem of a reference letter about me. And when I asked her if I could try my luck at that Institute's post-graduate course after my own graduation, she was very enthusiastic about it. I was close to realizing my dream as never before...

My last student summer holidays passed very quickly. So quickly that I even wanted to make them a little bit longer. I realized that it would most probably be the last real holidays in my life, and it was a sad thing to think about.

There were many changes back at home while I was studying in Moscow. Already after my first year my mother finally got an apartment from her factory. Petrovich had an apartment in the same house, and mum spent more time there than in her own place. Our new apartment had one room, with the view to the South, with a balcony (that was another childhood dream of mine: to drink tea on the balcony!), and I almost immediately filled it up with books. It was not easy to get used to a life in an apartment block after living in your own house, but firstly, I didn’t spend much time there, and secondly, every weekend when I came to my town, I still went to visit my grandparents and Shurek as well.

When I was in my third year, Shurek finally got married. To be honest, it was a classical case of "clamping": by that time he had changed his job, finally moving to a work place in town, at a research institute, where he soon discovered that one of his new colleagues was almost our
neighbour. They began to go to work together. Further - more... And after they went to work at a collective farm in summer for a week, he already felt that he had to propose to her, as an honest gentleman. But he was still afraid to inform his granny about it. Shurek put it off until the wedding day itself. My mum and I already knew about his plan, but granny was still unaware of it. That morning Shurek pretended that he was getting ready for work and then suddenly asked her:

- Mother, what do you think if I would decide to get married?

Granny was surprised by such a question, but told him that he should know better: he was big enough to decide such things for himself. Shurek was 38: one year older that our grandfather when the latter got married.

- OK, - said Shurek with relief. - Then I am going to do it today.

Granny almost fainted...

A couple of months later my cousin Klava was born. Shurek was very proud of his new position as a father and head of the family. But his happiness was short-lived: it evaporated as his new wife started to show her true colours. She appeared to be quarrel-seeking peasant woman with whom he had nothing in common intellectually, and whose only dream was to sit at home doing nothing and giving orders to her husband. When the baby was born, she stopped working and never went back to work again. Soon she also stopped cooking and cleaning, and he had to do it himself, after work. Glafira lay in bed whole days watching soaps on TV and chewing something. Not anything, though, for she wouldn’t settle for anything less than delicatessen. Especially she loved smoked salmon.

Even her own daughter, when she grew, began to call her the "Russian Real Estate" (in the sense that Glafira never moved). And Shurek’s driver Arkady once noted with a serious face:

- Of course, Glafira Ivanovna is a woman that “came from manure”, but at least she always has her nails done.

But the main problem was not even her laziness and not that she so promptly became obese, it was her love of squabbles. It appeared she was deriving energy for herself from making others miserable. Whatever Shurek did, it was never good enough for her.

The same band I have already mentioned, "Lyube", well described Shurek’s married life in one of its songs:

"I pull out my accordion and go over the buttons with my fingers, oy-oy,

Life is so good that I barely manage to carry on, oy-oy,

The wife demands more and more - like crazy, oy-oy!

Good luck I have a permanent work, is everything OK then?

So it seems."

The marriage put an end to all his hobbies. No more going fishing or picking mushrooms in the woods. No more disco music. He was not allowed even to sit quietly and read some of his science fiction books. Glafira immediately began to yell at him:

- Look at you, sitting there! Better go buy some bread, you, bookworm!
The only thing in life that she was interested in, were gifts. So, that's how a first "new Russian" came into our happy and kind life - a model of a human being unsated and materially unsatisfied, just like the cadaver of Prof. Vybegallo\textsuperscript{410} from Strugatsky brothers' book \textit{Monday Comes on Saturday}.

I felt pity for Shurek. I felt as if I hadn't left for Moscow, but stayed next to him all that time, he wouldn't have got himself into such a mess. Probably, he was just feeling lonely: nobody to play badminton with, nobody to ride a bicycle with, nobody to listen to "Boney M" with and nobody to write short poems with. Looking at his family life, I once again made a conclusion that so far from making one happy, marriage destroys friendships and drives friends away. That's exactly what happened to my female friends too: as soon as they got married, they no longer had time for their friends.

My mum, with her typical sarcastic wit, made fun of his choice:

- Well, what was he thinking about? Of course, it's clear what... But it is just so obvious that she is a stupid, undeveloped peasant woman. "She is younger than I!" Maybe she is younger, but looking at her, you wouldn't say that. And now he will have to cook her meals every day for the rest of his life... And can you imagine how many really nice girls had had eyes for him! But the pig will always find some mud. Was it really worth it to stay bachelor for so long just to find such a treasure?

I fully agreed with her in big lines, but I knew that if you told Shurek those things, he would become angry and defensive. Not for the sake of Glafira, but for the sake of his own choice. That was what my mum still could not understand.

-He says the same things about her himself, but when I mention her, he rises up against me!

-Mum, - I finally said. - Things will not get better if you repeat it a dozen times a day, and he won't feel easier either. Remember your favourite song, "Don't Salt My Wound?"\textsuperscript{411} It's the same in his case. Don't torment the man in vain; it's already hard enough for him, he understands everything and doesn't need anybody to remind him of it...

But mum kept ranting on.

The summer I am talking about, she had broken up with Petrovich and was quite upset. They had been together for almost ten years, when she discovered that he was cheating on her. But when she confronted him about it, instead of apologizing, Petrovich began to accuse herself of all sorts of things. Deeply hurt, my mum packed her things that same evening and went back to our own apartment. Petrovich didn't expect that and even attempted to change her mind, but fruitlessly. The Rubicon was crossed for my mum. But she was still very upset and the whole summer tortured me with questions why it had happened and what hadn't been good enough for that bastard.

\textsuperscript{410} This was an artificially created man who had "constantly unsatisfied appetite".

\textsuperscript{411} Pop-song by Vyacheslav Dobrynin (late 1980s).
Mum, but you have just said it yourself: a pig will always find mud! Do not think about him, he's not worth it!...

Mum was upset, but I, to be honest, was quite content that there would be no more Petrovich in our lives. So content that it was a bit hard to hide it. Didn’t I tell her even back when I was a schoolgirl, that he wasn’t the right man for her?

To cheer Mum up I suggested going to the Krylatskoe velodrome to watch some cycling competitions - just two of us, as in the good old days... I have already told you how much track cycling meant to me in childhood. But in 1976 a young Romanian cyclist crashed to death on our town's velodrome, and they stopped having international competitions there. After that the velodrome got dilapidated, and the authorities were not eager to renovate it. They had already built a new, an indoor one, in Moscow, in Krylatskoe - for the Olympic Games...

I was 16 the last time I had been at Krylatskoe. I came there with my grandfather to watch the Spartakiad\textsuperscript{412} - the Sports Festival of the Peoples of the USSR and socialist countries - and root for one of our homeboys. And now, five years later, I was there again. Mum and I watched the races with big pleasure. It seemed as if her youth had returned to her: she laughed cheerfully, exchanged whispers with me, discussing the cyclists, applauded to the most remarkable victories... I was glad I brought her there.

We sat just near the finishing line. The competitions were coming to their end. In front of us a small group of cyclists who had already finished competing were sitting and chatting, when suddenly somebody called out at one of them:

- Volodya! Zelinsky! - and added sarcastically. - You have to do a doping test!

I could not believe my ears.

- Mum, mum, look at this boy! - I whispered. - I can't believe my eyes!

I watched him on the bench in front of me. He hadn’t changed a bit, was just a bit chunkier.

Volodya Zelinsky, the Tersk Cossack from Grozny, had participated in the Spartakiad I have spoken about, five years before, and at that time I hated him, because he had beaten a homeboy of mine. Childhood memories flooded my head. How he, skinny, tanned almost to black, with a handsome and angry face, had kicked our homeboy out of the semi-finals, to the rage of our town’s public. He was very talented - I

\textsuperscript{412} Spartakiad initially was the name of an international sports event that the Soviet Union attempted to use to both oppose and supplement the Olympics. The name, derived from the name of the slave rebel leader, Spartacus, was supposed to symbolize proletarian internationalism. In 1952 the Soviet Union decided to join the Olympic movement, and international Spartakiads ceased. However the term persisted for internal sports events in the Soviet Union of different levels, from local up to the Spartakiad of the Peoples of the USSR. The latter event was held twice in four years: Winter Spartakiad and Summer Spartakiad, with international participation.
Irina Malenko remembered how good he was at sprint, but I hadn't heard about him since. Where had he been all that time, what had been happening in his life?

I was deeply unsettled - I didn't know why.

I began to listen to the cyclist's conversation and understood that early in September they would all be coming to my home town, to our velodrome - despite the fact that it was dilapidated, some competitions were still held there. And in September they were going to have the country's championship for the Army's sportsmen, or, as they called it, a "weaponry race".

And suddenly I wanted so much to see him again; to watch him competing, to find out what had been happening to him through all those years, to get to know him better: after all, he was a part of my childhood!

And I said to Mum:

- Mum, let's go to that "weaponry race" in September! I can miss a couple of days at the Institute, nobody will even notice, if I just do it once in my life...

Mum looked at me with surprise: not because I suggested going to some unimportant competition, but because she could feel my excitement.

But I would never have admitted to anyone - including my own mum - to the kind of feeling that began to develop in me at that moment. Because they were against all the principles that I had worked out for myself.

A couple of weeks later September came. The days were still warm, but evenings and nights were already cold. September is my most hated month of all twelve, since school years. But that year I didn't even notice it. Dressed up in our very best clothes, mum and I arrived at our velodrome on the expected day...

Here everybody noticed us at once: because there were no other spectators at all. Not just the cyclists, but the coaches as well were trying to impress us. I brought with me my camera, to immortalize the sprinter Zelinsky on some photographs - not just a camera, but what we call "a photo gun", the one with a huge lens. I borrowed it from my mum's work for this occasion, and that caused a cheerful flutter among the cyclists. Zelinsky's coach - a fiery inhabitant of Odessa called Matvey Georgiyevich - liked my mum very much.

Soon the whole velodrome realized whom we were supporting. And then I suddenly saw Zelinsky I knew from the past: in his whole sport's glory. I saw how valiantly, how recklessly, how bravely he was beating one competitor after another - and was amazed, why he had never become the country's champion yet? Because he had such a rare sense of tactics, such speed!

...Later on we found out that the explanation was much simpler than we had thought: he just hadn't had such an ambition, apparently, until then. He was simply working on the track, like others work in the office: earning points for his team from year to year, quite content with the position of a good "middle range" cyclist. He was more interested in how to earn an apartment in Odessa by his performances than in medals
and champion titles. By now he had already got an apartment in Odessa and was happy enough. He was already 24 and was getting ready to end his career and hang the bike on the wall. If only he hadn’t met us.

He just never had his own fans before. We were the first. And that impressed him immensely.

Inspiration is a fantastic thing! I know it from my own experience. For the first time in his life, not counting the ambitious youth years, Zelinsky suddenly wanted to win and shine on the track. And he began to win - and how! His team mates could not recognize him. Even Matvey Georgiyevich watched him with big eyes as if he saw him for the first time in his life. His performance in this modest “weaponry race” was really worth the Olympic Games.

How could I leave all this and go to Moscow, without waiting for the finals! To my own horror, I heard my own voice saying:

- Mum, I’d like to get acquainted with him!

Such an opportunity presented itself on the last day when we brought our self-printed photographs with us.

- Hello to the media! - shouted Matvey Georgiyevich from below. - Do you have some photos for us too?

Mum waved that we do. And Matvey Georguievich asked the first best person who happened to be next to him (that happened to be Zelinsky):

- Volodya, go get the photos!

A minute later the newly-baked champion of the "weaponry race" who wasn’t yet used to his own status himself, shy and blushing, was sitting next to us on the spectators’ bench…

…We spoke only for about 15 minutes. But long after that I was smiling thinking of that conversation, while sitting in the train finally going to Moscow. I thought of how he and Matvey Georgiyevich were waving good-bye to us shouting in a typical Odessa way: “Look after yourselves!”

It was raining; the cyclists were going to leave our town the next day. And I already dreamt how in January I would go to the winter championship of the USSR in Krylatskoye…

In Moscow, to my surprise, they met me with dismay. I didn’t think somebody would even notice my absence of four days.

- Where have you been? - shouted Lida the moment she saw me. - They were looking for you all over the place! They are going to send you to Holland!

First I thought that it was her usual and irrevocable sense of humour. But Lida was telling the truth, apparently. I and three more students were (I was the oldest) really selected for being sent abroad on an exchange program: for the first time in the history of our Institute. For two months…

I was shocked by that news. I can’t even say I was glad. I never wanted to go to the West. I wasn’t interested in it. I didn’t feel any adulation for jeans and chewing gum or interest for buying Hi-Fi installations. I was more concerned about why they had decided to send me. Even though I was a very good student, there were many good
students, and I wasn't politically active, didn't hold any Komsomol positions and didn't make speeches at meetings. So, why me then?

Apparently, the explanation was very simple. Mikhail Yevseevich who had already become my research leader for the final thesis, as I mentioned, was in a very friendly relation with our "young Reagan". And he recommended me to him... I didn't realize yet that the criteria had changed. That probably exactly the fact that I wasn't a Komsomol activist was now playing in my favour. That if I were a real Komsomol activist, not a formal one, of course, nobody would have sent me there.

A total chaos began. Before the departure I had to collect a bunch of references, to go through a full medical check-up and instructions from the KGB on how to behave abroad.

It was quickly settled with references: our group Komsomol leader advised me just to write such letter myself and she would sign it for me. When I collected all the relevant papers, I ran to our Institute nurse:

- Please refer me to our Institute polyclinic. Me and other three students are going to Holland, you see...
- No, they are going to another country: to the Netherlands! - said the nurse in a definite tone.

The KGB instruction meeting wasn't as silly as I thought it would be. To be honest, it wasn't silly at all. There were no hysterics there, nobody tried to scare us. Altogether not like in Vysotsky's famous song.413 A very calm middle-aged man with an intelligent face in a very ordinary tone told us what was better not to do abroad and why and what sort of problems one might get into and what to do if it happened.

- It is better not to go anywhere alone and not to socialize with our emigrants. Sometime there can be provocations set up in a shop: they might put something into your bag and then make a row and call the police and say: a Soviet citizen has stolen something. Do not participate in local demonstrations, do not sign any appeals. That is all, really. Just use your own common sense, you are not children. If something looks suspicious to you, just stay away from it. And if you ever have any problems at all, please contact our Embassy or Consulate straight away.

So, the KGB isn't as scary as they paint it. Especially if they are always so painted by the same kind of people: exactly by those against whom they warned us...

I tried to remember what I knew about Holland/the Netherlands since childhood. Well, of course, apart from skates, tulips, artists (painters), Peter the Great and windmills, plus the first bourgeois revolution in the world, its shameful colonial past and its active participation in slave trade. I remembered the Soviet children's book about the siege of Leiden: "Kees, the Tulip's Admiral" and memoirs of Ard Schenk.

Before the trip I tried to read as many books as possible about the country I was going to see. It was quite a scary picture.

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413 "Instructions Before Departure Abroad".

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"The Netherlands is a NATO member. There are American cruise missiles based on its territory" - informed me the fact-book "Countries of the World".

I felt like being obliged to go into open space without a spacesuit. Vadim Nikolayevich! Mikhail Yevseevich! Why? What did I do to you? Are there no any decent countries in the world?

...By the way, that fact-book was very correct.

In spring of 1999 the NATO member the Netherlands participated very actively in the barbarian aggression against the people of Yugoslavia. And the blood of Yugoslavian children isn't just on hands of Clinton and Blair.

...When the bombardments of Yugoslavia began, in Ireland a new spring was just beginning. At that time I was working in Blackrock. Blackrock is also one of the Southern Dublin's suburbs, but a bit closer to the city centre than Dun Laoghaire. My new office was squeezed into a narrow space between the main road connecting it to the city centre and a branch of Dublin's over-ground metro - DART, with its noisy green trains, that were passing along the coast of the Irish sea, in the shape of a horse-shoe, along the Dublin Bay. From the windows of our office we could see its grey waves. Through the half-open window there came a salty smell of the seaweed, and above the office noisy seagulls flew.

It was one of the most cosy offices that I had ever worked at. Probably because it was so small, and we all knew each other. It wasn't an American company, and there we didn't have to pull out our whole being into a false smile all day, to force a facial 'split'. The company dealt in speech recognition software. Very fascinating stuff.

The chief manager came to the office rarely, from time to time - from England. The only concern of this man of an indefinable age in a nice suit and with a posh accent, tanned all the year round, was that Simon shouldn't overspend the budget and that there would be "enough bums in the seats", as he called his workforce. As for the local manager, Eamonn, he was more of a steward, really. Besides, he was a very down-to-earth fellow, with a typical Irish sense of humour.

- Eamonn, have you heard that your Taoiseach left his wife and is now going to take his mistress with him on all official journeys as the First Lady?

- Well, I have heard about it, yes. But he isn't going to take both of them, is he? So, it's not a big deal...

All other time we worked in peace, and because there weren't many calls yet (the new version of software was being tested), we had plenty of time for talking to each other.

- ...My dad was from the Arab Emirates, - told us Melina, while typing fast on her computer. - I only found out when I already went to school, and told it to my classmates. But they began to call me "a camel's daughter" and beat me up. You see how tanned I am, don't you? And then I had to start taking karate lessons...

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414 Taoiseach – Prime-Minister in Ireland (Irish).
I just smiled keeping silence, hiding a book in my desk. Everybody in the office was used to Melina’s fairytales. Maybe, some even believed her. But what kind of an Arab father could this typical Arian creature possibly have? There was nothing, absolutely nothing southern in her looks: just an ordinary German girl with glasses, probably an A-grade student. Maybe that was why she was making up all these stories: to make her ordinary life more exciting. After all, I had also imagined myself to be a Corsican sometimes. Only I was 11 at that time, and Melina was 23.

People in the office liked Melina. Maybe exactly because of her fibs: after all, the Irish themselves like telling stories.

-Zieg Heil415, Melina! - told her our boss Simon every morning tenderly, slowly walking to the office door with the key in his hand (we were already waiting for him outside, jumping up and down with cold). And every morning he burst out laughing when she got vexed:

- Sister, I am only joking! And you know it very well!

It beats me how some Anglo-Saxons love to crack jokes at Germans over fascism. That’s one of their favourite entertainments. They think that it is “hilarious”. Even though in practice all their jokes are limited to “Heil Hitler!” and “This is not your Nazi Germany for you!” Even though throughout their colonial history the English most likely have murdered a lot more civilians and even whole tribes across the globe than the Germans in the few years of the Nazi rule. Only Simon never really thought about it, because they don’t teach it in British schools. They don’t show them films about their own crimes in Africa or Asia, and even if they do, those crimes are usually glorified (as in a documentary about fighting Mau-Mau partisans in Kenya). In such films they usually give the floor to their own murderous veterans who shouldn’t even be talking to the camera: many of them should actually be rotting in prison. That’s a proper place for them, for their crimes, using their own British lexicon, “against humanity”. And from the speeches of everybody else they simply excise all the bits and pieces their imperial ears don’t like to hear.

But the Second World War is on the British TV almost every day. Not just around the Victory Day, like in the USSR. And of course, with praises for beloved themselves... That was too deep of a subject for Simon, though. He never thought of such things. He had an earring in one ear, played guitar in his free time in some rock band and was proud of his informal style of leadership. His mum was originally from Northern Ireland (she left for England for some reason she didn’t want to let anybody know; Simon seemed to be awfully afraid of the place, even though he had never been there). His dad was one of those Englishmen who settled in Wales - and now angrily demand from the Welshmen in a pub (whom they don’t know at all and who are not even talking to them!): “Speak English, please!”

As for Melina, she was originally from ex-GDR. She wasn’t much different from young people of the same age from the Western countries, except for those fibs of hers and for her more responsible attitude towards work: she never gave empty promises to clients, not even once,

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415 Nazi greeting.
as so many people in Ireland do. She adored the "Friends" TV soap (I usually turn the TV off straight away when I come across it by accident, because it makes me sick to see this false cheerfulness with the recorded laughter and the stupidity of its heroes) and she attempted to tell us every day who of its heroes slept with whom in the last series - even though the majority who did watch that program already knew it, and the minority who didn't, obviously, weren't interested in knowing it. I didn't interrupt her, I was thinking about my own things.

Fantasies carried Melina far away: one day she had an Arab dad, but her mummy didn't want to live in a harem, the next day they "were starving" in the GDR and "had to steal potatoes from the collective farm's field" (I actually was in the GDR in 1989, just before the Wall was destroyed, when, as she was trying to convince us, this "potato saga" was taking place, and I can assure you that I well remember quite full, in comparison with ours, shops in Berlin). So when Melina, looking at us with her big honest eyes, began to tell us how she and her mummy "were afraid that they would be shot for that", I couldn't hold it in anymore and burst out laughing. But others in the office really did believe all this.

Who? Well, for example, Mark. He believed absolutely everything that he read in tabloids. And he just loved to read it out loud to us, as if we were illiterate. His head was several times smaller than his behind, and because of that he reminded me of a Diplodocus. He believed in "Iraq's WMP" and in "the Soviet Empire" and probably in Martians, too.

- Russians sold missiles to Iran again! -he declared loudly from his desk while gobbling on a huge fat burger during lunch break. - And in Britain there are 400.000 illegal immigrants. In Ireland, probably, the same thing. Spongers!

There were just two foreigners in our office: Melina and myself. We weren’t illegal, let alone spongers. But every time he inevitably looked at us while reading that kind of stuff.

There was another huge man in our office - Martin. Tall, fat, with tiny eyes. When we just started working in this office, Martin introduced himself to all the girls. All of them were asked a number of standard questions, typical for such a situation: where did you graduate from, what are your plans for the future, etc.? When it was my turn, he didn't ask me anything about universities (even though I could tell him a thing or two about my diplomas!).

- And you are surely married here? - he asked.

- No, I am divorced in Holland. - I answered in the same tone. He didn't know what to say to that, as a robot that suddenly has a programming problem. And he left me in peace after that.

Martin was a strange bloke. Everything he said, was proper, "as it should be", nothing "politically incorrect". But there was something rather sick somewhere deep in him, almost pathological. For example, when he was describing to me - and it wasn't my choice of a subject! - what America could do to Russia, now that there was no parity between them any more. He tried to pose as a neutral outsider (even stressed that his favourite artist was Wassily Kandinsky416). But there was some sort of
animalistic joy deep in his eyes, similar to the morbid joy of an impotent who is hiding behind the bush while watching a rape. Can't do it himself, but imagining. Even though he won't get any of it himself. There is just such a type of people, who only feel strong when hiding behind the backs of others... For their orgasm it is enough to watch how somebody else does the raping.

He spoke German fluently (spent some years in Germany working at a factory for language practice) and spoke fairly good Dutch. But he was very critical of Holland. "They are all lechers there". In public he appeared full of his parents' strict Catholic upbringing, but how Melina laughed when one day, looking for some work-related document in his desk in his absence, she found a video tape with a Dutch porn movie!

- There's a saint for you! And you know what he told Mark yesterday in the hall?
- Well what was it? - I asked without much interest.
- That he has a secret box at home, under his bed, where he hides such movies from his parents. And that in one of them there was a Turk with such a huge... Girls, could our Martin be gay?
- Even if he is, he doesn't know it himself and will deny it to the bitter end in order not to upset his parents. You know what they are like.
- Our Irish colleague Victoria intervened in our conversation.
- And what are they like?
- Well, he went on holidays with a girlfriend once, and his parents insisted that they should book into different rooms!
- Martin? A girlfriend? I don't believe it! - exclaimed Melina. - He has told me about his brother, who is a doctor, that all girls are after him just because of his money, but his brother "isn't that stupid to get hooked up"... And Martin - I wouldn't be surprised if he has never yet...

At that point Martin walked into the office, and she broke off her sentence.

By the way it appeared Melina liked him. And he appeared to return her feeling. He often spoke to her in German, told her compliments in German, and once even gave her a bunch of roses. However, since the time she started telling us about her father the Arab, it seemed to me that Martin began to look on her with different eyes... The office was cleaned by an African charwoman who usually came in the last half hour of our working day. I noticed that when she wiped the table, Martin huddled in his chair, as if he was afraid of her.

- What is wrong with him? - I asked Victoria once.
- Well, you know, he honestly believes that all Africans have AIDS, and he is afraid of catching it...
- Is that so?!
- Yes, he thinks all African men are drug traffickers, and females are prostitutes, because they have nothing else to do.
- Where has he got such notions, I wonder? Does he really know many black people in person?

416 Wassily Wassilyevich Kandinsky was a Russian painter, and art theorist. He is credited with painting of the first purely abstract works.
- No, but at schools in Ireland we always collect money through the church “for the poor black children in far Africa”, and now that those “black children” are here among us, not everybody likes it, so...
- And haven’t you collected anything for the poor Russians through your church?
- No, of course not, Russians are Communists, and Communists, we were taught by our priest, are the devils incarnate. I’m so glad that you are free now...

In silence I walked away from her. Yes, we knew a bit more about Irish people. At least, those who were interested, could find plenty of veritable information about them. As I had found information about Africa in my school years. Back in Russia we even knew a guy with cerebral palsy, who was fluent in Irish and sang Irish songs beautifully! Here from the early childhood he would be simply placed in an asylum, named after some saint, and that was it... You needn’t think hard of examples: I saw them - the "civilized" - live, walking and sitting next to me every day! "Sieg Heil, Melina!", “bums in the seats” and “you are surely married here?”

...Frankly speaking, I did not really believe that the NATO would start bombing Yugoslavia to the very end. I do not know why. I just refused to believe that they would permit themselves to go that far and be sure they would get away with it. However, if you think rationally, it had been a very likely development.

When there was the civil war in Yugoslavia, I did not really followed its events, I had my personal life dramas, although, of course, not of that magnitude. Besides, my brain at that time was full of tolerance, so I tried, in the staple Western manner, "not to take sides". But how could I not take sides when you should only travel outside the “civilized world” and you realize that the West itself was far from being neutral in that conflict and from the incipience took sides, which it supported with words and with deeds? All the horrors that the Western media scared its citizens with at night, telling them about “bloodthirsty Serbs”, we were told at home, as well as the crimes of Croats and Muslims - and those crimes against civilians were also well documented. But the "neutral" and "objective" West kept silent about them for some reason... That is all for their objectivity. How was it possible for us not to take sides - not because of any religious proximity or historical connections, but solely because of the feeling of injustice and double standards?

...My first feeling when the NATO vultures launched their attack on what was left of Yugoslavia was great wrath. So great that it literally choked me not finding an outlet; you could discuss such things with colleagues at work in the USSR, but never be explicit about them here - you would be immediately cast out...

But the wrath did not cool down nor stop looking for outlet. Watching TV became physically impossible. I wanted to break the TV-set when I saw Madeleine Albright’s brazen face on the screen - she, who had once been given a shelter by the welcoming Yugoslavian soil! Not to mention the horny red-nosed Clinton and Blair, whose eyes seemed to flare with a furious fire at

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417 Madeleine Korbel Albright (b.1937) is the first woman to become a United States Secretary of State, held his post during the NATO aggression in Yugoslavia.
each bombing, which gave him the look of a drug addict after receiving his regular “fix”.

Western Philistines, such as Mark, for example, tend to believe the official media with such blind devotion that no ideological department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Central Committee could have ever dreamt of. We, the Soviet people, are not so blatantly naive in this respect, and not just because we have learned the art of reading between the lines, but because of the broad basis of our education, in which we were taught not only what could be useful for us in life, but also a systematic approach to things, the capacity to reason and draw inferences. And so it is impossible to hoax us with anything like the lie about 100,000 disappearing Kosovo Albanians, which the U.S. Defense Secretary Cohen screamed out hysterically from the screen.

The official lies about the bombs, protecting human rights, quickly began to stick in my craw. Just as American thrillers, the Western media was an insult for my intelligence. And I began to seek alternative sources of information...

So on the one hand, I discovered the Internet, not as a hobby for fun or a remedy from boredom, but as a place where you can meet like-minded people and find out what is really happening in the world... In the Internet Yugoslavs told us about how NATO was bombing hospitals and schools, killing grandparents on the markets and little girls in the bathroom of their own home. Moreover, not only told... When I first saw the pictures of the victims of the NATO bombings - not retouched by any Photoshop, I was physically sick...

After that the expression "protection of human rights" sounded to me like something incredibly dirty, almost an oath. Just as the terms "democracy" and "freedom". The West had spoiled all these wonderful words a long time before.

...Very often you realize the depth of what you read in childhood only as an adult. Looking at NATO in Yugoslavia, listening to the delusional, arrogant speech of Jamie Shea, I could not help remembering a small Soviet children's book written by Anatoly Moszkowski "Five in a Spaceship", the heroes of which, students from the Earth, were on a planet inhabited by robots. At first they did not know about that, on the contrary, they were thrilled by the extraordinary organization, efficiency, energy of the extraterrestrials, the cleanliness of their streets and the straightness of their roads, their smartness and constant cheerful smiles on their faces. However, there were no flowers on that planet, and the aliens could not understand, what flower were actually for. Were they for eating? Or were they used as a raw material? But our guys did not pay attention to it: the main thing was the grand civilization there!

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418 Jamie Patrick Shea (b.1953 in London) is Director of Policy Planning in the Private Office of the Secretary General at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. He received worldwide attention during the 1999 Kosovo War, when he served as the spokesperson for NATO.[1] There was criticism of his clinical style in describing the prosecution of the war especially reporting on "collateral damage" (Yugoslav citizens killed by NATO bombardment).
Later, when the only alive person who lived as a local resident was able to tell the earthlings, where they had actually landed, and who the people around them were, and most importantly - that the robots merely needed the spaceship to travel to other planets to make them their own, so the earthlings had to run away from the "hospitable" androids, and then that famous scene occurs in the book that immediately reminds me of Jamie Shea, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Madeleine Albright and their whole brotherhood. While catching our heroes the robots brutally beat one of them - the man who most admired the level of their civilization's development, and they never stop smiling and saying: "We love you!" And then the battered astronaut says his famous phrase: "I hate them! They beat me and swear they love me!" Well, just like NATO. One to one. You see, NATO and its expansion does not threaten Russia. And the war in Yugoslavia is being waged against President Milosevic, and not against the Yugoslav people. So say these androids in their error-riddled leaflets in the Serbian language, which they throw together with bombs as a "declaration of love"!

Fortunately it was easy to defeat the robots from the book, as they had a button on the back, by pressing which one could easily inactivate them. Only they themselves knew nothing about it. So it was not too difficult to deal with them. Oh, if only to deal with the team of Clinton and Blair had been as easy as that!

By the way, the idea that the NATO "heroes" had a non-human nature occurred not only to me. A Yugoslavian boy kept asking his mother: "Who is throwing bombs at us? Evil robots - like in the movie "Terminator"?" "No, - replied his mother. - Unfortunately, they are alive..."

Or take another instructive book, the masterpiece "Dunno on the Moon" by the children's writer Nikolay Nosov.419 To those who can’t imagine what life under capitalism is and find Lenin or Marx difficult to understand or boring to read I would recommend to read and reread this book. It's an encyclopedia of capitalist political, economic and daily life, written in plain language, understandable even to children. It has everything in it - from cute guys like Julio and Miga who bolt with shareholder’s money, like the bosses of the MMM JSC, to Doughnut, who made a fortune in a jiffy and went bust just as quickly because he did not understand the cruel nature of monopoly capitalist competition. From "shorties" who for money put their faces to the hit of the ball to the amusement of those who have it - to Kozlik, who was arrested for sniffing a bagel shop (in Ireland there has recently been a brawl over the fact that a young unemployed girl was imprisoned for six years for stealing a purse, and at the same time a prosperous architect who had got drunk and knocked to death a mother of two children when he was driving his car, was released just after a year of imprisonment at the personal request of Prime Minister Ahern...). From a "cheap" hotel, where everything, as it turned out, had to be paid for, to the police, who openly admitted that the famous gangster Pretty Boy could buy their department outright...

But the most interesting chapter in "Dunno on the Moon" is devoted to Silly Island. On that island they dump the poor wretches, who do not live according to the "norms of the society", including the poor, who do not have a roof over their head or shoes. On the island they are treated charitably: provided with food, drink, they don’t work, but entertain themselves (free movies, amusements, etc.). As a result, over time, the short people, from the island, find themselves turned into sheep! Later they are given the local rich for shagging... And there is no return to normal human life from that island.

Every day I watch people in the West and recall these stories. People brainwashed from infancy, forgetting how to think independently, believing that what they have read in newspapers is their own opinion, parroting texts from TV news and commercials... But it is all the more bitter to realize that the Western propaganda machine is trying to transform Russia into such Silly Island, aiming at making our young people similar to those poor things, who amused themselves mindlessly on Silly Island, the creatures who don’t know anything about their land, their native history - until they turn into a flock of sheep...

...Many years ago I myself was deluded like the astronaut from the first book, it was when I was sent on exchange to Holland - also known as the Netherlands - and in those two months never tired of admiring its organization and cleanliness. That time I did not recognize the robots. Later, when I visited that country again, in a very short while I discovered that what we were taught at schools, institutes and by the Soviet society in general, was neither empty words nor propaganda. Tedious as those lessons might seem to us, they did teach us the truth about the Western world.

For a long time I could not pass by the homeless. For a long time I could not understand why it was legal to pay people who are younger two or three times less for the same work, and why because of this those who are older have no opportunity to find a job at all. And I will never ever get used to the fact that for so many people the ultimate dream is to become as rich as Bill Gates, "to bathe in money and be idle", as they put it. There seems absolutely no way for me to accept this parasitic way of life. And I will never accept the idea that the skill to pump money out of other people at any cost is a sign of intelligence.

But the Dunnos of the New World Order would not understand it. How can you explain it to them? How would you explain to them that the war in Yugoslavia is measured not by the fact that "the missile, which costs half a million dollars, breaks the building, which costs 30.000, which means that we, the NATO members, are losing" (as an American friend of mine once said), but by the fact that the four-year-old Yugoslavian boy, George, in Cacak goes to bed in his cap, and when his mum asks him why he does it, he answers: "That’s to protect me from a bomb which can fall on my head!". It is measured by the tears of three-year-old Milica’s mother, whose daughter was killed on Easter Sunday while sitting at home on the potty-chair before going to sleep...

On the Internet I met Radmila, a Serbian doctor, who lived in Montenegro. Montenegro was bombed too, but not so much: the West hoped to bribe her in the near future to the breakaway from the union with Serbia. In

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420 Cacak – a city in Serbia.
Serbia, Radmila had parents and sister with her own family, and Podgorica was bombed pretty much too...

Our communication quickly became vital as air for both of us. I sat at home online almost all nights, as the NATO members were bombing mainly at nights, and Radmila was so scared... She said that my letters helped her survive. From the other end of the Internet now and then there came short, desperate notes:

"Well, it seems to begin... I can hear the hum of the bombers in the air... Here comes the alarm of the defense siren... One explosion, two, three... The windows are rattling. Mom, mommey, not now! I do not want to die! What will my parents do without me? They are already so old... But let them better drop a bomb here than on Cacak... Sne zhana’s son is still so young..."

And at this very time, full of self-importance as peacock on his dunghill, Clinton was elucidating from the screen that he was a friend of the Serbian people, and that the bombs were aimed only at the baddie President Milosevic...

There is something expressly mentally abnormal in the modern war: how can one imagine a correspondent of Nazi Germany broadcasting live from Moscow during its bombardment by the Germans? In my opinion, the fact that Western correspondents were allowed to be in Belgrade at the time, only legitimized the bombings, made them more acceptable in the eyes of the Western public, because those correspondents chose what to show and how to talk about it according to the tastes of their masters...

The impression was made that the war was an entertaining show like a football match. If I were the Yugoslavian president, I would have swept the whole caboodle out of my country with a broom on the first day of the bombing! Why is everyone sort of stupefied with fear over some mythical "world" (to read, Western) "public opinion", completely phoney, paid and created in some thoroughly engaged malevolent brain?

...Every night I returned to my computer, praying that Radmila wouldn’t be killed on that day and would reply to my letter. If there was nothing from her for an hour, I went out of my mind with worry. Probably those days I became a little crazy. I could not for the life of me conceive how people could go on living quietly, watching some TV serials, dallying at bars in the evenings, getting drunk on Guinness, when quite close to us, in Europe, bombs of your country’s friendly states kill children and pregnant women. Every time I saw my colleagues laughing and prattling as if nothing had happened, a picture of a woman mangled to death on a train bombed by NATO stood before my eyes. Even at weekends, when I was driving somewhere on a bus, I vividly imagined what people on the bus somewhere on the roads of Yugoslavia felt at the moment they were bombed, tears welled up in my eyes.

It is strange: wars have not stopped on our planet, and I knew about the suffering of people in other wars, but no war had made such an emotional and political impact on me, as this one... Is it really only because Serbs are our brothers? Or perhaps, unknown to myself, deep in my subconscious there was the telltale Euro-centrism, and a war looked more important and appalling, if it happened on my own continent...
No, no, I think this is not the case! And the case is that a sweet, smiling mask decorated with “universal human values” finally fell from the ugly face of the “world community”. To know about the predatory nature of imperialism from books is one thing, and to see it face to face without embellishment is another. Seeing once is better than reading or hearing twice. Unfortunately...

Before the events in Kosovo, I was almost indifferent to the United States. I hadn’t raved about it, but I hadn’t hated it so that I “couldn’t eat a morsel” either. It is not true that we were brought up in hatred for “the yanks”. I had no illusions about them, but my attitude towards them in the Soviet period corresponded to the principle “do not touch us, and we won’t touch you!”

Now I finally realized that they could not exist without “touching” - us and all the other countries. Like a tapeworm. And so my attitude towards them changed. I felt cold hate translating as “So that’s what you are like... Then we’ll make our conclusions...” - a feeling not unlike the one I had for Sonny when I had to fight him tooth and nail... Exactly. No hysterics or stamping the feet. It is of little help, just as all those demonstrations, which are only needed to appease our conscience: I did what I could, if someone can do better, let him do it... How about “stinging hearts of people with the word”?

In those days I realized two related things. First, no one can escape politics. No matter how disgusted you feel about it, if you do nothing, don’t intervene, live according to the “none of my business” principle, hide your head in the sand and let others - Clinton, Yeltsin or Blair - decide for you, you’ll reap the reward of it...

And secondly, I finally realized how true Lenin was when he said: "It is impossible to live in a society and be free from it". I felt it particularly acutely during the antiwar demonstrations, which I hoped would provide some outlet for my anger... When faced with the Dublin grandmothers, who were also against the bombing, but only because “now Milosevic would certainly ethnically cleanse all the poor Albanians”. Those old ladies were only worried about the fate of Albanian refugees: what would happen if NATO from the air did not make out, who was an Albanian, and who was not. Bombing people of other nationalities of Yugoslavia was quite acceptable for them. The old ladies could not be free from the thralls of their hypocritical society. Obviously, it is the same mentality that now commemorates just one nationality of all the people perished in the Nazi concentration camps...

At that demonstration, I first met the Irish Left. They were rowdy Trotskyites. Until then I had never faced Trotskyites.

...You can see them all at each demonstration. For any occasion. They always prepare appropriate posters; they are professionals with their texts and chorus. This is the only thing they do professionally and with pleasure, noisy demonstrations are their specialty. Their methods of recruiting others into their ranks vaguely remind of those of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and in fact for them any demonstration amounts to the call “join us!”

More than anything else they are ready to criticize the other Left for what they call lack of radicalism. That is to say, for the fact that so far from heroic cries on the streets the latter value small-scale boring “non-revolutionary” everyday business of daily assistance to local residents,
organizing them and fostering in them faith in their power to solve their own problems.

There was an impression that their main enemy are these other Left, rather than global capitalism, which, if you listen to them, is on its last legs, and the World Revolution is not far off, it will happen out of the blue one day, Terrible and Wonderful, as the Judgment Day. And the main weapon in struggle is noise, because to win against the odds in the struggle against the world capital can only be possible by blowing out the capitalist’s eardrums. Thus I met Teresa - a classic example of such a revolutionary who screams loudly in anticipation of a brighter future.

Teresa was sincerely and deeply convinced that her ideas were right - an idealist young girl with a short boyish hairstyle. At first she “clutched at me with both hands”, not only because of her passionate desire to recruit me in her ranks, but because of whence I come: Teresa had never met live Russian before. She immediately strewed me with citations from Trotsky and assured me that the main error of our country was that we had not waited for the world revolution. This light-eyed young girl, wrapped up in a Palestinian scarf and wearing army boots hadn’t experienced anything that our fathers and grandfathers had been through, so that my generation could study, be medically treated free of charge, should not since childhood scavenge or wash rich men's cars to make a living. She was indifferent to the really great achievements of the Soviet socialism, imperfect as it might be. To her it simply had not existed at all, there had only been “a bureaucratic dictatorship”, though most of those questions, for which her companions here struggle by means of bawling and squalling, had already been solved in our country. Perhaps it is exactly this that seems to them so negative? How dared we to solve these social problems with our work instead of waiting for their clamorous commands?

Being really nostalgic for the Marxist terminology (and here you will rarely hear from mere mortals about dictatorship of proletariat and internationalism!), I spent some time in their company on demonstrations. Until I was morally distraught by two things: the first one - the utter futility and senselessness of loud shouts alone (I quickly understood that for me it was not enough to let off steam against Bill Clinton and NATO in a ritual procession!). And an almost religious expectation of revolution which would come and rescue everyone, without a slightest desire to stir a finger to prepare this revolution. The second - the unwillingness of these young men to know what was actually the life like in my country, in the USSR. It just did not fit in the schemes in their heads. For them the USSR was an evil, commensurable with the world capitalism, if not worse, and they were ready to close their ears, when I told them, that the brother of my grandmother who had spent many long years on a tree felling in the Ural Mountains and eventually had settled there, losing his family (his wife had given him up when he became “the enemy of the people”), had never said a bad word about our country, about the Revolution or about other communists. There was not one jot of anti-Sovietism in him, nor a drop of bitterness, hatred for the “system” and self-pity, and he, already after being rehabilitated, continued to remain the same convinced Bolshevik-Leninist as he had been his entire life.

It was not what they wished to hear!..
Anyway, I was literally obsessed with the events on the Balkans. Even at work I could not think of anything else. Every minute I read through the Internet news. I translated what I managed to find out and sent it to friends and acquaintances. I knew such things about this war that eternally chewing Marks and “Friends”-watching Melinas could not even imagine. And to function among them became more and more difficult for me.

I remembered Mayakovsky’s words:
“One is a trifle,
one is a zero,
one, even very important,
will not raise a simple five-vershok log,
let alone a five-floor house”.

If I really did not want to put up with things as they stood, I had to find like-minded people. Though I burnt my fingers with the Trotskyites, I did not leave my plans to join in a congenial group.

And then I remembered the only Irish party whose name was familiar to me since the Soviet times... Sinn Fein!

The Irish radio and TV kept silent about it bashfully.
And if it was remembered, it was with a grimace as if it was a shameful Irish infectious illness, which should be hidden from everybody. To tell the truth, I do not understand, how it is possible to be ashamed of the people struggling for independence of their native land from an imperialist power. Perhaps the Red Partisans hiding in the forests and fighting fascists during the Great Patriotic War should also have first conducted a public opinion poll, especially abroad, if it was necessary to struggle against the Nazis or not?

And the struggle in Ireland is not simply for independence, it is for its reunion. The whole Europe had just greeted the reunion of Germany with a long standing ovation turning into salute. But the reunion of Ireland is for some reasons a mortal sin.

Perhaps, the difference is that Germany was reunited on a purely capitalist basis, and Sinn Fein proclaimed their purpose to build a socialist republic?.. If the Establishment - the loyal friends of NATO Terrorist States - was so afraid of them, then they must be worthy people! I knew that they were protesting against that war too. But I could not learn more about them from anyone. People in Dublin nearly fainted once they heard the name of that party. The overwhelming majority had never been in the North of Ireland and wasn’t going to travel there, not even under the threat of execution. To address Sinn Fein members directly was somewhat inconvenient for me. It was

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421 Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky (1893 –1930) was a Russian and Soviet poet and playwright, among the foremost representatives of early-20th century Russian Futurism, great supporter of the Russian Revolution.

422 Sinn Féin is a moderate left wing political party in Ireland. The name is Irish for "ourselves" or "we ourselves". The party proclaims reunification of Ireland “as a 32 counties socialist republic” as its goa. Originating in the Sinn Féin organisation founded in 1905 by Arthur Griffith, it took its current form in 1970 after a split within the party. The party has historically been associated with the Provisional IRA.
not because they were nationalists, and I wasn’t Irish. It was simply because they did not trust strangers; and rightly so! Here and there in the city centre it was possible to buy a Sinn Fein’s newspaper “An Phoblacht”, but almost undercover, too.

Eventually I guessed what was the easiest way to learn at least a little bit more about it. And in the very first issue I bought I looked for an ad about the Irish language course... That was a good idea... Moreover, I had dreamt to learn Irish already for some time. The best way to show respect for the native population on the part of new arrivals is to learn their language. Even if nobody forces you to do it, and even if only a minority of the population speaks it. On the appointed day I worried a lot: I had such a feeling that I was going at least to some clandestine meeting. Who knows, what they looked like and how they would meet me...

When I worry, I usually come earlier than appointed. And so it was this time. I got off the bus near the Guinness beer factory, when it was getting dark. In spite of the fact that it was early April, it was colder, than in winter; in Ireland that happens quite often. I found the address and stood before the closed door of semi-basement premises of one of the social high-rise buildings. Social houses in Dublin are an unattractive sight. Those who are not used to it, may even become frightened. But I was not accustomed to the fears of being alone on the streets since the wholesome Soviet times, and even ten years of life under capitalism could not change it. I pulled the door handle. It was locked. And it was almost 40 minutes before 8 o’clock... I could freeze out here!

But I could do nothing save go in circles around the door. I was walking there for about 10 minutes when a tall, stout, moustached man looking like a Cossack from Zaporozhye suddenly came up to me.

- Have you come for the Irish classes? - he had a strong Dublin working class accent. I only nodded. - Fionnula called that she would be late. She is always late. There’s been nobody to leave the children with.

I did not know who Fionnula was, and what children she had nobody to leave with, but, just in case, nodded obediently once again.

- She won’t get here before half past eight. So she sent me to warn the people. You will completely freeze out here. Let’s go to my place? I live round the corner here.

Once again I looked at him and at his arms covered with political tattoos - with some hesitation.

- Well, let’s go then... - I said timidly...

And in an hour I was already laughing loudly in the company of my new acquaintances: an eccentric elderly half-Italian, half-Irishman with a classical Irish name, Paddy, who in youth was probably drop-dead gorgeous; a pink-cheeked student from Galway whose name was Donal; the teacher Fionnula, who was a small, skinny woman chattering with the speed of a Maxim machine gun; her daughter Aine, a girl of 10 or so who fluently spoke Irish, but also, of course, English; Connor who was already familiar to me - that Irish of a Cossack appearance and a dark-haired bearded man with a Spanish look who did not wish to be presented to us.

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423 “Republic” (Irish); full name is AP/RN (“An Phoblacht/Republican News”)
Though it was not a real lesson. For this Fionnula was too chaotic. Someone has brought in a guitar, and people started singing enthusiastically. Then we found out that some of us already knew a little Irish, I was probably the only one who did not know a word.

To say that the Irish language was absolutely unlike the English is almost to say an insult. It doesn’t have to be like it! It is not similar to any of the languages that I know, and it is very beautiful to hearing. But the problem was that nobody had explained to me the rules of its spelling, and I mastered them gradually, the way a person becomes familiar with the bottom of an unfamiliar river, gradually immersing into it, slowly touching underwater rocks with one foot. All Irish to some extent study Irish at school - the only trouble is that it is taught there as the Church-Slavic in Russia. Nobody teaches to speak it, people read some boring pieces, like passages from the Bible; and this really kills children’s interest in it. The Italian, Paddy, once could speak Russian well and having got acquainted with me started to recollect Russian phrases, strenuously pronouncing them aloud. And the bearded incognito-man produced from his pocket a bunch of print-outs:

- Here are the copies of some notes that I made during our Irish lessons in prison...

Indeed, it was an odd Irish class! The main problem was that Fionnula, like my former spouse, was the type of a person who, despite her own knowledge of a subject, could not pass it on to others... So everyone spoke what they wanted, interrupted each other and nobody learned anything new. Except, of course, for each other.

The bearded man turned out to be an IRA fugitive who had run away from a British prison several years before, then had been at large and now was released conditionally: every week he was to come to a police station at his place of residence, for a check. Realizing that this way we would never learn anything, Paddy tried to take the lessons into his hands, and the next time he accepted the reins of government.

- I have an unorthodox method of training, - he warned us. - But it works well. We will... shout.

- How shall we shout? What shall we shout? And the main thing is, what for shall we shout?

- We’ll shout Irish words and expressions. I will teach you them, and we will repeat all of them in chorus. Every time louder and louder, faster and faster. Do not ask how, but you all will perfectly register then in your brains. We will shout it for a couple of months - and you’ll start talking Irish well.

Imagine how our following lesson went on... But Paddy was right: words and phrases were perfectly remembered after that. The only problem was that it was difficult to remember, what each of them exactly meant!

...To breathe at work became especially difficult for me, when Mark began his usual morning ritual of reading newspapers aloud. It seemed to me that my colleagues and I existed in some parallel worlds: the only thing in common was out common stay in the office.

For the first time in my life I purposefully boycotted McDonalds. When Melina gave me a new glossy issue of Cosmopolitan, thinking that it would please me, I, despite myself, looked at her as if she had fallen down from the Moon. My thoughts were far away, in Belgrade where on May 20 a NATO
“clever bomb” hit a maternity room in Dragisa Misovic hospital. At the time four women were having labours there. One was undergoing a Caesarean section. She was wounded, and her child eventually saw the light in a cellar to the sounds of falling bombs... Oh yeah, long live the human rights!

On April 23 NATO killed more than 20 workers of the Belgrade TV. On May 5 they destroyed a peaceful factory, the largest in Cacak, depriving 5,000 people of work as well as killing a 74-year-old old lady. I saw her photo: with an open mouth and surprised dead eyes. Everyone in the West knew about 87 Albanians who were killed by NATO in Korise... But what about 11-month's old Bojana Tosovic and her father killed in Kursumle on April the 12? About three-year-old Milica Rakic killed on April the 16? About 5-year-old Arla Ludzicin killed in Lipljan on April the 26? The list can be continued. On one of the splinters of a NATO bomb found in Kralevo, there was a writing by some immoderately competent servant of Urfin Juice forehead: “Do you still want to be Serbs now?”

And at this same time my colleagues were running around the office like hens with a fresh egg, with the idea of some “laminated list”...

When I had already resolutely decided to leave this work, Melina returned to office after the weekend with a red nose and in tears.

- What’s wrong with you, Melina? - we asked.
- Can you imagine, he, he... she began to sob.
- Who?
- Martin! He has invited me to his parents's house for the weekend, in Mayo, only to ask, whether my daddy was really an Arab or not...
- And so? - ...
- And his parents absolutely sincerely and benevolently told me: “You are such a lovely girl. How come that your mum has married an Arab?”... after that I left for the bus... And they did not even understand what they had said...
- Well, Melina, don’t you worry so much, you know what he is like...
- Maybe I haven’t! And then he tried to kiss me talking to me in German as if he was a Nazi of the times of war. You see, girls, he has so warmed to this role... He really thinks so! He spoke like Goebbels! Even with the same accent! He is crazy!
- Melina, between us, girls: is your daddy truly an Arab?
- And you too don’t believe me...
- No, we are not talking about it now. But we do not think that it is true.
- It is a lie of course... she admitted. - But if he cannot love me for who I say I am... And she began to sob again. - I will go to Australia! But at first I will revenge myself on him!
- Why to Australia?
- Because there are real guys there, not mother's darlings depending on parents, like the Irish!
- Hm-m-m...

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424 Evil hero of a well-known Soviet fairy tale “Urfin Juice and his wooden soldiers” by A. Volkov (1963). His servants were wooden soldiers that became alive thanks to magic.

425
But Melina had already decided everything for herself, and nobody could stop her.

Two weeks later Martin submitted his resignation. And he left for hospital at once. Melina was shining with joy.

- What have you done to him, dear? - Vicky asked, - How did you manage to do this?
- He is going to Germany, ha-ha-ha! Now there will be one racist less in Ireland! - Melina did not hide her joy. - I took all his electronic love letters which I had, printed them out and sent them to his mother. There he describes how conservative his parents are, and what he would like to do with me... And he asks me to allow him to wear some of my underwear. And I wrote to them about his hiding place with videos too.

Victoria and I silently exchanged glances.

- Zieg heil, Melina! Greetings, girls! Well, do not take an offence, my little sister! - Simon like a meteor rushed into the door without realizing that this time she had not taken offence. - Our bums as if agreed today. Mark put in his resignation as well...

- Well, you see, a new guy, a very rare expert, comes to work for us on Monday. We could not miss such an opportunity. Besides he is Polish and agrees to work for half the salary that others ask for. Mark and Martin could not stand it. “You employ all sorts here ...” - I am sorry, girls, but they really did say this. “You employ all sorts here! Soon there will be no white people left in the office at all!” And I have told them, that I would employ even a Nigerian instead of Mark, if he works for half the price rather than bear such conduct... To me there is no difference, a black bum or a white one is in the seat as long as there are fewer expenses for the company...

We have not seen Martin anymore. He really went to Germany. Melina considered it to be her personal victory, though Victoria and I were not 100 per cent sure about it. She was engaged in the process of getting an Australian working visa all her free time, complaining that English speakers get it easier.

- I wonder what he is like, this Pole? - Victoria asked when we gathered for lunch on Friday. Melina frowned contemptuously.
- I lived near the Polish border. Your Poles are all drunkards and swindlers. They stole so many cars in our town. They do not know what a deodorant is, and they seldom have a shower. And to spit on the ground in Eastern Europe is a kind of national sport. By the way, during the war when the Russians came, my grandmother was a teenager and she disguised as a man not to be raped...
- It is good that the war was 60 years ago, and not now. - I said without raising my voice.
- Why?
- Because nowadays even men’s clothes would not help your grandmother... - and I gave her a nice smile.

Simon rushed into the door again. He wasn’t walking, but flying.

- Girls, who is going with me to McDonalds? Mellina, heil Hitler...
- You know what’s the difference between Germans and you, Simon? They’ve already been dealt with, and you haven't been. Yet.

With these words I left the room.
I should have advised Melina not to talk so much to Australians about her Arabian daddy... After all, I got used to her, like to a younger sister.

As summer approached I put up with the thought that it would not be possible to bring Lisa to Ireland that summer. The lease contract with my landlord was prolonged, but it was drawn in such a way that now he could put me out at any moment, with a month notice. I perfectly understood that if I brought Lisa to Dublin once again, he would actually do it. I had to buy my own place. But how, where? In Dublin even a garden shed would be too expensive for me. I did not drive so I could not live in the country and come to Dublin for work every day. And what sense did it make to take Lisa here if there is no suitable medical treatment for her? But my job was here!

And to find it in other countries was not so easy... What should I do? To rely on what life would prompt was impossible, and there was no time, every day there was less chance of Lisa’s successful revalidation.

Someone at the office told me that there are good doctors in Britain, and that all Irish (who can afford it, of course!) go there when they have serious problems with health. But to live among the English, in my view, was similar to what my life was like in Holland... Out of the frying pan into the fire? Moreover, to the country which bombs other countries?

And what if... After all, officially Belfast is also officially a part of Britain... How about finding a job there?

Unfortunately, it was hard to find a job in Belfast, judging by the newspapers. Only representatives of some exotic specialities like “peace facilitator” for various NGO’s were required there. But this thought lingered in my head, especially after I started corresponding with one of large Belfast hospitals through the Internet and found out that there were reputed neurologists there. I will have to find out more about life there. “To find out about life there” I struck up correspondence on the Internet (again, again - I repent and know what you are going to say!) with a local resident called Geoffrey Kavanagh. I must admit that my knowledge of “Ulster” as it was called in the Soviet news broadcasts, was rather superficial. For example, I had no idea that in Northern Ireland the word “Ulster” is in use exclusively by Protestants/unionists. For Catholics - depending on their political views - it is either “the North of Ireland” (not Northern Ireland!), or even “the six counties” (six counties of Ulster out of nine - three others are in the Irish Republic or in “the South”).

Sometimes it is just called “the North” for short. But if you do not know, who are you talking to and do not wish to fall into a trap (and here they may even beat you up for such things!), then just use the official “Northern Ireland”. Foreigners can also call it this. Symbols have a huge meaning in Northern Ireland. Colours, flags, inscriptions on walls, names... Sorry for the comparison: just as a doggie learns by the smell of street corners, where whose territory is, the Northerners learn it for themselves from trifles which mean nothing to a stranger. But I learned all of this later...

I had no understanding of how to define by the name of a person if they are Catholic or Protestant. Now I do it with 99 percent accuracy. “It is elementary, Watson!”, as Sherlock Holmes used to say (by the way, Watson most certainly wasn’t a Catholic)!
And in the case of Geoffrey it was difficult to define his descent, because his name was Protestant, and his family name was Catholic. It turned out, that he was Catholic. He told me about it himself. We met each other on one of the websites - perhaps Yahoo - in a section for just friendly correspondence. I had learned from my own experience that the Irish were glib talkers, now I realized they were also eloquent writers. Geoffrey’s letters of were full of somewhat childish enthusiasm, which we in Russia call puppy’s joy. He was a Northerner by birth. “An Ulsterman, I am proud to be, from Antrim’s glens I come” as the song goes. Not just a Northerner, but a Catholic. Not just a Catholic, but one from Antrim. From one of the Catholic regions that were “under siege”.

...Troubles began the year Geoffrey was born. He did not know any other life: permanent war, explosions, headings of newspapers with names of new victims... He did not believe that all this would sometime come to an end. He really did not. The strongest memory of his childhood was a summer day when he and his mum were coming back home by a mountain footpath to their village - a small, picturesque, peaceful village on the sea coast where the Catholic population was slightly larger than the Protestants, but the fishermen did not care about religions of each other, and Geoffrey had a bosom friend called Craig who was a Protestant...

At the time Geoffrey just had turned 10. Like any ordinary boy, he took a great interest in military and even thought of joining the army. The British army, as it was much more difficult for a Northerner in those days to get into the Irish army, and Geoffrey loved all military things very much: the uniform, the drills, the discipline... But his parents hinted to him that it wouldn’t be a smart move on his part... and he had two brothers and a sister to think about...

...So, on that hot summer day his mother and himself were coming back home, and suddenly, from the side of the sea that was sparkling on the horizon rattles of an automatic machine gun were heard. Mum immediately pushed Geoffrey on the ground and fell on top of him... They were laying down like that for about half an hour, afraid to move. And only later on they learned what had happened: the Loyalists had shot a progressive Protestant in their village who tried to bring both communities together. For this he paid with his life, and his young Japanese wife became a witness of his murder...

That day had been imprinted on the retina of Geoffrey’s eyes, and the cold horror associated with it emerged every time when conversations fell on "politics". How many times after that old “comrade Joe” (so called by his neighbours, who considered him to be an odd fellow for his love for the USSR, where he went every summer on holidays as others go to the Canary Islands or to Cyprus) told him: “Geoffrey, tonight the Boys are getting together. Come to us, please, do!” But Geoffrey never accepted those invitations. Living in this thoroughly politicized corner of the Emerald Island, he, like many of his friends, tried to banish politics from his life, pretending that it just did not exist. He obstinately did not want to notice that when he tried to get a job, he was almost invariably rejected, while his friend Craig McQuade was often

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426 Henry Joy, Irish rebel song about Henry Joy McCracken, hero of the 1798 rising.
427 Common name for the volunteers of the Irish Republican Army (the IRA).
immediately accepted for a job, and that practically everywhere. He continued to assure himself that those were mere coincidences. Each time he accurately filled in provided questionnaires for work - about his religion, hoping that his inner voice was lying to him. And remember that by his name noone could guess that he was Catholic, although his family name gave him away. It sounded so awfully Irish.

By his thirtieth year, after several years of work at a factory in Larne where his Protestant co-worker standing next to him in the same shop every day for three years, had never told him “good morning!”, Geoffrey finally found a purpose for his life: a university diploma as a key to a high salary on which it would be possible to buy a motorcycle and any other “toys” (“the older the boys, the faster the toys”, he liked to repeat) which would allow him to escape the life where you had no chance of promotion in the shop just because of your origin.

At the age of 30 he became a “mature student”: there is such a term here for a person who at first worked for some years, and then got a full time studentship at college. What did he want to become? Of course, a programmer!

It was the shortest way to £ 30,000 a year! Not everybody could dare to take such a step, having given up a more or less guaranteed salary: to go to college here meant to get into many thousand pounds of debt and live practically half-starving for several years (if, of course, your father was not rich, and Geoffrey’s father, a school teacher, had died a couple of years before that).

It was a sign of a certain willpower, and Geoffrey was at heart proud of himself and of his Spartan way of life. “Let them go off to Dublin!” - he heard whispers around him, and sometimes even outright declarations. Though Geoffrey and people like him were born and had grown up on this land. (People here still remembered what family possessed this or that plot of land prior to the Plantation428.) But Geoffrey was not going to leave the North. He loved his native land too much and even in Dublin he felt slightly lost. And though he would like to see a united Ireland, to do something for this purpose would mean to risk his future salary of 30,000 pounds a year, and he had already planned so well what he would buy with that money in two year’s time... For the sake of it he was ready to tighten his belt now.

You can see how different we were. I had already said that I was not used of being afraid, and that is why I was not afraid of anything. In the USSR of the 1970s it was possible to walk on the streets till morning without being afraid of any maniacs, let alone racists (not to mention Protestant racists with

428 The Plantation of Ulster was the organised colonisation (plantation) of Ulster, a province of Ireland, by people from Great Britain. Private plantation by wealthy landowners began in 1606, while official plantation controlled by King James I of England and VI of Scotland began in 1609. All land owned by Irish chieftains of the Uí Néill and Uí Domhnaill (along with those of their supporters) was confiscated and used to settle the colonists. This land comprised an estimated half a million acres (4,000 km²) The “British tenants” (a term applied to the colonists) were mostly from Scotland and England. They were required to be English-speaking and Protestant.
bad knowledge of the Irish history and geography!). But the way he described his place to me grasped my imagination. It reminded me of a Jurassic park. Really, can such a place exist in Europe, today? Something in the North inevitably attracted me, most likely it was the warm memory of my own childhood from which there had sprouted my thirst to learn what they actually were like, those “fearless Northern gales”\textsuperscript{429}, the Northern Irish.

...Soon I changed a job in Dublin, in my new job I was paid 2,500 pounds a year more, it was much closer to my house, it was possible to go on foot to work along the beautiful road along the canal. But I regretted that transition very quickly. Certainly, I did not have any illusions about meeting a new human contingent on the new job with other outlooks on life and interests. But the matter was not this. The new company - a well-known American one! - reminded me of a big incubator where each hen... (sorry, each employee!) occupied his own cell and sat there all the day long. The communication between “chickens” was reduced to a minimum, each of them sat in front of the computer without stretching even once a day and typed orders into it, not even for the computer programs of this company, but only for its licences! I felt as if I were a seller of air. There were so many orders that in the job contract which we signed, a special reservation was made, stating that in the end of each quarter our work would be non-normalized - we would be staying at the office for as long as our bosses would want us to, without any payment for the overtime. They were free to give you or not give you a bonus for that at the end of a quarter. And overtime was paid “in kind”: the firm bought its employees some cheap supper from a local carry-out or a Pizza Hut which they consumed right there, at their workplace and continued to work till night.

Such slavery - working for food! - nobody in the Soviet Union could even imagine! At my mum’s factory workers did not fret at overtime, because they were paid twice their normal salary for it. Even for a trip to collective farm they were not only paid their usual salary, but also received a compensatory leave day off or an extra day to their annual holiday!

We were trained for our a new job only for three days from which one whole day was spent on a fascinating training called “How to distinguish a citizen of some bad powers (there followed a list: Yugoslavia, Cuba, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Libya) who would skilfully attempt to get our licence”. God only knows, how difficult it was for me to withhold laughter, listening to this delirium. Sometimes I was very close to it.

I have an idiosyncrasy of improbable force against all American style abbreviations: all these DJ, CSRs, TSRs and suchlike 9/11s. In my opinion, the lexicon overflows with them to such a degree only because of intellectual poverty and laziness. And in this office only such language was spoken. How was it possible to memorize in two day’s time which of data cards was called by which abbreviation, without knowing its full meaning, and, most importantly, - for what purpose was it really necessary? It was a predominantly female stuff. All the young girls had higher education, sometimes with the

\textsuperscript{429} “For England knows and England hates our fearless Northern gales, And that’s another reason why we’ll free our lads from Crumlin jail” (“Irish Republican Jail Song” by Wolfe Tones).
knowledge of more than one foreign language. Language was necessary there only to help the clients from other countries to find a licence mislaid somewhere at a post-office. Any semiliterate half-educated person could type into computer numbers of sent licences and file orders in a special folder. I almost began to howl in my second week of work. For what was the higher education needed there? It was a scandalous waste of human talent and knowledge!

Very soon I began to get up in the mornings for work with disgust: with such a strong feeling of it that my stomach began to ache when I was approaching the building, and later even when my alarm clock was starting to ring in the morning. As if she felt it, my new boss treated me in such way that it seemed to me, she was about to begin to bark at me like a dog. At the sight of her I was eager to hide or to leap head first into the flight of stairs. Nothing like this had ever happened to me in Ireland before!

Meanwhile the war in Yugoslavia had unexpectedly come to an end. The public opinion in the West just began to turn away from the NATO adventure when President Milosevic had decided that his long-suffering people would not endure any more, and... Yeltsin’s Russia - more and more reminding a NATO’s loyal servant - had persuaded him, betraying Yugoslavia. She had played in this dirty story the meanest role. The West was ecstatic. It pained me to read such words as conditions of the “peace treaty”, on which Kosovo was occupied by the invaders. It was so painful when I saw this text for the first time, that I cried all the evening and went out, without knowing what to do and whom I could vent my emotions. I rummaged my notebook for quite a long time. There was nobody who would understand me... Nobody whom I could call!

I was almost despaired, when a piece of paper dropped out of the notebook with Fionnula’s phone number. Choking with tears, I phoned her. To my astonishment, she understood me straight away.

- Come to us now! We will meet you at the DART station.

...Fionnula with her daughter waited for me under the bridge, hiding from rain. I stayed on at their place till two o’clock in the morning, making an acquaintance of her son, a thoughtful eight-year-old who did not only enact the battle of Waterloo with his tin soldiers, but also asked me some political questions improbably deep for his age. The answers to all these questions - detailed answers, with irresistible arguments - were given by Fionnula’s husband Fintan: a thin grey-haired man with a low voice and a big nose, as at figurines of witches, which are sold here at Halloween. Not once did he call us Russian communists “devils”, and he understood everything clearly and was well informed about what was actually happening in the Balkans!

I had not realized yet back then, what a remarkable man he was.

..After the “peace” announcement in Yugoslavia and the occupation of Kosovo I was absolutely certain that the Yugoslavs would begin a guerrilla war against the invaders: because they had such a rich historical experience in this respect, and their army was left almost untouched by the bombardments (and what else was it kept intact for, if not for that purpose, - thought I): after all, Kosovo is the historical heart of the Serbian land...

To my deep disappointment, not a single real guerrilla action took place. Yes, Russia had betrayed Yugoslavs, yes, she had played a shameful role in that war, but to sit and wait that someone else would protect your land and
sort it all out for you... Certainly, it is always easier to speak than to do something, but if the enemy occupied my own native city, I would not tolerate it, unequivocally. But infected by the bacillus of “civilization”, Yugoslavs instead ran away from Kosovo, under the pressure of the real ethnic cleanings - about which the West remained dead silent! - just from time to time plaintively complaining of their destiny. Complaining to whom? Yes, to that very "civilized" world that had bombed them in the first place, - that is, to their own invaders, to the world which had done everything in its power to make the present ethnic cleanings possible! Probably, resistance to the invaders (a proper one, not just inept singing of some rock songs, standing on bridges and wearing merchandise with symbols, e.g. T-shirts with “I am a target too!”) in today's world is the prerogative only of "uncivilized" people. The "civilized" ones are totally hypnotized by the magic phrase of world imperialism - “what will the world community think of us?” And consequently, they are defenceless...

- We would like to ask you some time to talk to our young people about everyday life in Soviet Union. Would you agree? - Fintan asked me.

- Definitely! - responded I. My heart was slowly thawing out.
Chapter 8.
In the land of intrepid bigots

"- You are Pacak, you are Pacak and he is Pacak. And I am Chatlanian, and they are Chatlanians! So you put your cak on and go sit in the pepelac, got it?
- What?
- Look at me in this visator, dear... What color dot is responding? A green one. Now look at him: - green too. And yours is green as well. And now look at.
  - Uef - which dot is there? Orange? It is because he is Chatlanian! Well, do you understand?
- What?
- Plyuk is a Chatlanians’ planet. Therefore we, pacaks, should wear cak...
  - Yesss! And you should do in front of us, Chatlanians, like this!
  - Vladimir Nikolaevich, this is extreme racism”.

“Excuse me, Chatlanians and Pacaks, are they a kind of a nationality?
- No.
- The Biological factor?
- No.
- Persons from other planets?
- No.
- But in what way do they differ from each other?
- Are you color-blind, Violinist - can you not distinguish green color from orange? Tourist...“

“The society in which there is no colour differentiation of trousers, is deprived the purpose”.
("Kindza-dza", Soviet science-fiction movie)

...Interesting, how shall I begin my story if I am to speak about the Soviet Union? I close my eyes and I try to recollect it. Many things are difficult to express in words to a person who cannot imagine it himself. To explain to those who all their life breathed a different kind of air... At first in my mind for some reason a botanical garden and park near Timiryazev academy appear. Here my friends and I passed every day by tram when we worked in Moscow during the summer: it was both boundless, green and quiet... Station of young nature lovers in our city where I planted nasturtiums in the morning before going to school... Then - abatis near our town where we went twice a year: to collect the first flowers of the spring: in April to pluck opening so early that there was no even grass around yet, yellowish «little chicks» of coltsfoot, or in May to collect the bird cherry tree flowers and in the autumn for the coloured

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430 Famous Agriculture Academy in the USSR.

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maple leaves... The crude and tart smell of these fallen maple leaves, flaring with shades of yellow, red, orange and a couple of green veins... How they rustle underfoot... An obelisk stands to the unknown soldier between the trees: to the defender of the Motherland. It was not erected to someone who fell senselessly somewhere in foreign entrenchments so that someone else's purses could swell, such as the British and Irish "heroes" of the First World. War...

My grandfather once lost me there while he actually held me in his hands: “My God, where is Zhenya?” How loudly my grandmother laughed at him... Now half of this forest is cut down for private garages. They are about to get to rid of the monument too.

...I remember when Little Tamara moved to a new apartment. It had been granted to her, in accordance with our laws, free of charge after her old house had been taken down: it was during the winter, and we moved her belongings on a sledge... I remember how cheerfully we dragged her things to the 6th floor and how she was happy when she opened a tap on the kitchen sink for the first time... I remember the smell of pancakes at her house warming party and how I drank sweet tea at home, made by granny, with creamy vanilla croutons: I crumbled them into my cup, then picked the slices out after they had become soaked, with a spoon, and poured out the tea into the sink... I remember one of Grandmother's stories about how one boy from their company with whom she went together to the cinema before the war, became a pilot and the hero of the Soviet Union twice. He died in combat in 1942. He was a year younger than my grandma... I also remember the relay of the Olympic fire in my town, at the stadium... My father too carried the torch during one of its stages, and now this torch still hangs at his house on the wall... Before the race was to pass through our town, the town authorities painted the fences of all the private houses in its path, if they had not already been painted yet: naturally, this was free of charge, and private old houses’ quarters were turned into military green, the most accessible paint in our town at that time, because of all our military factories... The question “how much will it cost?” simply did not arise: if something was necessary for the people, then it had to be done, and that was it... The very first thing that so shocked me in the West were the eternal and endless conversations about money. It made me terribly depressed to listen to them. How can anybody live like that, where everything is always measured by money? Is it not disgusting? For us money was of secondary importance, and to talk about it was considered inappropriate. Money should only be a tool of humanity, not vice versa. We do not speak continuously about a sofa on which we sit, about a hat that we wear or about a toilet bowl! All these things do exist, and they all are necessary, but they do not entirely occupy our imagination: to the point that we are unable to spend any time thinking about anything else except them. For us, money did not differ in anything from these things. That is why we had immeasurably more free spirit and were able to be engaged in creativity. Exactly because this has changed, our current writers and directors are not capable of creating anything worthwhile today: they are too occupied with worries such as where to find sponsors and how to satisfy them...
This burden is so much worse than any sort of censorship! As I can see now, our Soviet censorship was aimed first of all at ensuring quality – of films, books, songs and so on. No art committee would pass the rubbish that floods on to us today from the screens of our televisions! For example, like this “patriotic” junk:

“My Vanya knows a thing or two on what costs what.
In business he’s like a wolf; he’s hurricane in bed,
Besides, he’s got everything that’s needed:
Pocket full of money and soul in his body.
Besides Vanya is a homely guy,
Unpretentious and, tame.
Mum, what for do we need these United States,
Mum, it is possible to be rich here too,
Mum, there is no need to cry, I am in love with a Russian!”

For the Soviet people these are some “couplets of aliens”, and aliens that are intellectually and emotionally underdeveloped.

I see before my eyes a slope of a ravine filled in with the sunrays, red from wild strawberry. I run down it, and my heart sings like my mum’s portable receiver:

«Sun paints with its beams the railroad,
And I look tirelessly into the train’s window.
Woods, Russian plains, hillocks and bushes,
Wooden platforms, iron bridges...
My beloved, my green, my familiar, my wide,
The Land that is my Native land, my free life!
Oh, how much have I traveled, oh, how many things have I passed,
Oh, how much I have seen – and everything around is mine!
That is a factory with made of brick high pipe,
That is a hut whitewashed, in the field drums...
And all of this is important to my heart, and there is not a single mile,
A settlement or a city that would not feel as your own!
My beloved, my green, my familiar, my wide,
The Land that is my Native land, my free life!
Oh, how much have I traveled, oh, how many things have I passed,
Oh, how much I have seen – and everything around is mine!
Already dew comes up behind the window, already the moon is seen,
But I still stand, as chained to the train window...
Already it is time to light a night lantern,
And I look at twilight and quietly I say:
My beloved, my green, my familiar, my wide,
The Land that is my Native land, my free life!
Oh, how much have I traveled, oh, how many things have I passed,
Oh, how much I have seen – and everything around is mine!

Here it is. This demonstrates exactly how I felt in the USSR!

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431 Carolina’ song “Mummy, it’s OK!” (1994/95)
432 “Road Song” (music by I. Dunaevsky, text by S. Vasiliev) (1949).
Why would I need “pockets with money” like some cretin!

...There are things that I do not like to remember: such as my first trip to Holland It was organized by “the young Reagan”, with the help of Western grants: in order to brainwash our youth... However, sometimes it is useful to recollect such events. You have to learn from your mistakes.

...Eventually we were ready with all the necessary paperwork and so we began to wait. However the trip was postponed again and again. It was not clear as to why we had been made to rush through our documents. December crept in imperceptibly, and at last the first snow covered the ground. We had now even passed our winter exams, ahead of schedule: just in case the trip was going to go ahead, but there was still no news about Holland. Lida and Lyuba even began to gently joke about it to me, but I did not take offence, because after all, I had not asked for this trip, somebody had decided to send me there.

I told my friends that at least, my winter vacation had been extended, while they still had to pass all their exams. As I no had a great deal of a free time, something came to my mind that I usually didn’t dare to think about. This was: to repeat Lida’s “feat”, and to travel to the “home town of the hero», only this time not Lida’s hero. Plus I intended not merely to travel to his home town, but to go to the place where he now lived. I desperately wanted to see where my new hero Volodya Zelinsky lived...

I went to the passport office and applied for his home address which I received within a matter of days. Now I knew also his patronymic and his birthday. He had not lied to us about the fact that his birthday was on the New Year’s Day. I had thought that this was a joke and that he had not wanted to tell us the truth... In Odessa, if you remember, my favourite school teacher lived: Emilia Veniaminovna. And I asked her if I could visit her for three days: naturally, without telling her, naturally, the real reason for this trip. Emilia Veniaminovna was delighted, we had corresponded for a long time and by then we had not seen each other for almost 5 years! She now lived in Odessa together with her husband, my former tutor of French whom I was once so afraid. The couple lived with their daughter, a girl with whom I shared much in common She was also a student, about one year older than myself, and even shared the same name! On a frosty sunny November afternoon I embarked a train at the Kievsky station in Moscow and commenced my journey to Odessa. I planned that once I had reached my destination, I would obtain a city map. This, I hoped, would lead me to the whereabouts of my ultimate goal, Volodya Zelinsky. God forbid, I did not plan to visit Volodya even if he was at home! Moreover, I was really afraid to come face- to-face with him. What would he think of me? I simply wanted to look at the house in which he lived, at his windows. Probably that would be hard to understand for some modern young ladies, not to mention modern gentlemen...

Odessa, where the leaves were still hanging on the trees, seemed to me to be a magical place, unlike any other city that I know. It was a pleasure, while traveling on a local tram, to listen to the surprising and unique local patter of the inhabitants of Odessa. I also took delight in the
walks on Deribasovskaya street\textsuperscript{433} and on the quays, in the Potemkin staircase and the famous Opera theatre... Emilia Veniaminovna introduced me to her daughter Zhenya, the one I used to write letters to. It was a very serious and perhaps melancholic looking girl who resembled her father more than her mother. Zhenya first of all bought us tickets to go to the well-known local opera theatre: for the Ukrainian opera “Zaporozhian Cossack beyond the Danube”\textsuperscript{434} from which I knew by heart 2 or 3 arias. This opera was often broadcasted on the radio, and at home my mum sometimes sang the arias. The Ukraine in general was famous for the musicality of its people among our republics.

...I remember, long ago, when I was 10 years old, on a hot afternoon the tenor from the Kharkov opera theatre followed my mother and I along the street. At that time he was on tour in our town. The tenor ate ice-cream (!) and bragged that the evening he will sing the part of Jose in “Carmen”. He invited us to the performance, and we had a lot of trouble trying to escape his presence.

- If he sang Escamillo\textsuperscript{435}, I probably would think his offer over! - said my mum- But I do not like Jose since childhood, he is such a whiner!

The aria of the Toreador had been her favourite opera aria since childhood, when she and Shurek were preschool kids and had listened to the radio at home throughout the day. Along with the aria of khan Konchak from “Prince Igor”: “All are afraid of me, all trembles around...” - mum’s stern temper was quite evident already at that tender age.

Shurek was more modest in his preferences: he addressed granny and granddad with a part from the aria of Ivan Karas from that very one Ukrainian classical opera «Zaporozhets beyond Danube» in which he especially liked the words: “Now I a Turk, not a Cossack, and in a Turk I have turned over!” At this Shurek somersaulted, because at that age he perceived words of this Cossack literally.

Many more songs were heard and perceived by children in their own way. For example, an excerpt from a song that mum heard on the radio, «Lovely friend, at last we are together. Mum in her childhood started to cry:

- I feel sorry for the horsy!
- Which horsy, Nadenka?
- The one those two both climbed up on: “Lovely friend, on the horse we are together”. They will be too heavy for it! \textit{(play of words in Russian: “nakonec” - at last, “na kone” - on the horse). And in the song “The Beloved City” she managed to hear: “Beloved city, a dark blue smoke of China...” instead of “Beloved city disappears in the dark blue smoke” (“\textit{siniy dym Kitaya}” instead of “\textit{v siney dymke taet}”).

China was then the great friend of the USSR. Nadya even corresponded with the Beijing radio and sang at home “Russian and Chinese are brothers forever”.\textsuperscript{436}

\textsuperscript{433} Most famous street in Odessa.

\textsuperscript{434} Ukrainian comic opera by the composer \textbf{Semen Hulak-Artemovsky} (1813 – 1873).

\textsuperscript{435} Escamillo- Toreador, hero of Bizet’s opera “Carmen”.

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...Family of Emilia Veniaminovna lived in a very nice five storey apartment block: clean and well looked after. All the inhabitants collected some money, and one of the old ladies who lived in the building looked after the cleaning duties. She was paid a little for doing so, but this wasn’t a compulsory payment of service charges. The building was so well kept and cared for that there were roses that blossomed on the staircase windows. The respect for the building and the cleaners work was such that the roses were never touched nor the building soiled.

Emilia Veniaminovna’s husband, now having ceased to be my tutor, was not so scary, after all. We ate traditional Jewish gefilte fish, and I told them about life in Moscow.

The Opera Theater in Odessa was excellent, but Zhenya started giving me such a full day of sightseeing, that I barely had time to search for Volodya’s home. She and I even visited a synagogue, though, when there was nobody there. I had never seen one before.

I asked Emilia Veniaminovna for a map of the city, but had not found the street that I was looking for. Reluctantly, I asked about it, under some far-fetched pretext. The street appeared to be in a “sleeping” area, a newly built one, and therefore it was not on the map yet. I managed to find out how to get there.

- And what for would you go there, Zhenya? - asked my cultured namesake, - It’s an ordinary “sleeping” area, what’s interesting in it?

Oh, Zhenya, if you only knew..., I thought.

But I was as silent as a guerrilla under questioning. For an hour and a half I managed to escape her, to make my way to Volodya’s home.

...I had to go by bus to the very last stop. I quickly found his house, but could not bring myself to enter the front door. I estimated that he lived on the ground floor and I mustered myself up to take a peek. I only put my head through the communal entrance door, took a look at the dark door of his apartment and then run out, before anybody saw me... I walked around the house one more time, gazed at his windows and then went straight to the train station and back to Moscow. I was absolutely happy! Any kind of «orgasm» was nothing in comparison with what was back then in my heart.

...When later on my mum told him that I was in Odessa and near his house, Volodya ingenuously exclaimed:

- Oh! Why didn’t you come in? We could have had a cup of tea together...

He did not understand how much that trip meant to me...

This was my last time in the Soviet Ukraine. Union disintegration hurts, but the treachery of the “orange” Ukraine hurts as a treachery of the most dear and closest person... “- To sell out like this? To sell your faith? To sell your own people?”

...That autumn I found another good friend: in our, Soviet sense of this word. Mamadou, a Fulbe from the plateau Fouta Djallon.439

436 Popular Soviet song in the 1950s
437 Nikolai Gogol’s “Taras Bulba”.
438 Fula people or Fulbe are an ethnic group of people spread over many
He came to the USSR for two years’ training at the department of
history of the CPSU. Back at home he was a history teacher in a college.
I learnt about him by accident, from Habiba.
- There is a new African in our hostel, - she told me. - For some
reason he does not leave his room.
And I went to investigate...
...At first he did not want to open the door to me: he was afraid.
When at last he did, Mamadou appeared to be a middle-aged man, with
kind, large, like a dragonfly’s, eyes and a half toothless mouth. It was
probably too expensive for teachers in Guinea to have dentures made. I do
not scoff them: it is just that in those days dentures would have been
affordable for our own teachers. It is only now, in “new” Russia that our
teachers can quite understand him in this financial sense...

Mamadou did not speak Russian at all, and if I had not known
French, no matter how little, I would not have been able to communicate
with him. Having heard that I could speak in the language that he
understood, Mamadou cheered up, and within 10 minutes I had discovered
his problem.

That autumn was cold. The Soviet system usually worked like a
clock in such cases as Mamadou’s. But thanks to “the great helmsman”
from the regenerated CPSU it had already started to glitch, and by the
time I had met Mamadou, he had already stayed almost an entire week in
the hostel, because he had not received winter clothing, as was required
according to the regulations. What was even worse, nobody had even
noticed it!

What was happening? I was beside myself from indignation. I
brought Mamadou an old winter hat of my uncle which was lying without
use in my wardrobe. I also promised to bring him a coat, and winter boots.
- And what do you eat? - I asked. After all, to get to the
supermarket, you would also need a hat and a coat...
It appeared that he ate canned food which already was coming to
an end. He had neither bread, nor milk.
- Well... - I said resolutely, - Write me a shopping list of what you
need, and I will go and get it.
Naturally, I did not take any money from him. Our country had
already shamed herself enough in this situation, and I intended to rescue
her honour...
Half an hour later Mamadou was greedily eating a grilled chicken
with a fresh long loaf and was telling me about himself...

countries, predominantly in West Africa. The countries in Africa where they are
present include Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea, The Gambia, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra
Leone, Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, Chad,
Togo, the Central African Republic, Ghana, Liberia, and as far as Sudan in the east.
Fula people form a minority in every country they inhabit, but in Guinea they
represent a plurality of the population (40%).
439 Mountaneous plateau in Guinea, Africa.
440 Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
His native village was called Tountouroun. In my mind it brought associations with the Soviet cartoon film about Winnie-the-Pooh and Winnie’s song: “Tountouroun-touroun-touroun-toun, roun-toun-toun… Tountouroun-touroun-touroun-toun, roun-toun-toun…” But Mamadou, without knowing our animated cartoon at all, for some reason took offence at this song, and I did not want to afflicct him.

Above all Mamadou loved his mum: “J’adore cette femme-la!”\textsuperscript{441} He grew up in a Muslim family, his father had 3 wives. Mamadou had already graduated from university some time ago and taught history. After this training he was going to be promoted to the position of a principal at a high school.

- Then I will build for myself \textit{une petite villa} and buy \textit{un cheval blanc}\textsuperscript{442}, - he used to say pensively.
- And what for do you need a white horse? - I asked perplexed.
- What do you mean “what for”? My dad had a white horse, and all village envied him..., - replied Mamadou.

Despite such private-ownership dreams, Mamadou was a leftist. He had great knowledge when it came to the history of our CPSU. I was surprised by the extent how well. I decided that \textit{le cheval blanc} is a simple tradition tribute.

- I need a rug, - Mamadou told me almost as soon as we met.
- What kind of a rug? - I asked.
- What do you mean “what kind”? The one for praying! Could you please find out for me, what side is Mecca here?

I had to urgently ruin the wall beside my bed at home: we had no rugs, except for my small wall rug.

Probably Mamadou was the only Muslim in the world who prayed on a children’s rug with nested dolls on it. I quickly got used to the fact that he could rise in the middle of our conversation, get a rug and begin to pray.

In our old films and books Africans are pictured to be exactly as Mamadou was: naive, trustful and somewhat helpless. But I authoritatively declare that he was an exception among real Africans. Even his own ex-pupils some of whom were also in Moscow were surprised by his pure, artless nature. Mamadou was so unadapted to the increasingly predatory world around us, that if it wasn’t for us: his pupils, I and his niece who worked in the Guinean embassy in Moscow, I do not know what would have happened to him. To the virtue of his compatriots, they were not like our comrades “reconstructed” into misters: the future authors of financial pyramids and other \textit{thimble riggers}. Mamadou was respected for his age and for the fact that he was a teacher - and none of them would ever have dared to use his naivety for mercenary purposes.

After a while I became some kind of a guide for Mamadou and advised him in our way of life. I knew where to buy \textit{du poulet}\textsuperscript{443}, books on history of the national-liberation movements and how to prepare a soup.

\textsuperscript{441} I adore that woman (French).
\textsuperscript{442} A little villa and a white horse (French).
\textsuperscript{443} Chicken meat (French).
with macaroni quickly. In spite of the fact that his intensive lessons in Russian had begun, our language was still a great difficulty for Mamadou, and he often compelled to ask for my translation services. My French was becoming better and better by the day. What no tutor was able to achieve, became a reality: I began speaking French fluently (well, maybe, with a little Guinean accent...)

Cynical Lyuba would never believe me, but Mamadou and I were connected on a purely platonic basis. Mamadou was 15 years older than me. However, the age in his passport was approximate, and even he himself did not know his precise birthday. At first Mamadou tried to court me a little, but I pretended not to notice his advances. Then a telegram arrived at the hostel bearing the news that his expected first child had been born. I brought this telegram to him and congratulated him. Mamadou seemed a little confused at first. He then told me that he had entered into an arranged marriage to his cousin named Fatou shortly before his departure to the USSR. Judging by her photo, she was a beauty. In this awkward moment Mamadou assured me that “if you want, you can become my second wife”. “It is allowed for us”.

I thanked him for such honour, but politely refused. Since then there were no further misunderstandings in our friendship any more. I considered him to be a bit like a child whom I needed to look after. At the same time I also knew that Mamadou was a real friend, true and reliable, if help was needed, he would do everything in his power to come to your aid.

Mamadou told me many things about Africa - things that are not written in books. There was a time when Mamadou threw a farewell party before leaving home to begin his training. His friends and relatives were seriously considering the taking away of all his furniture and other possessions.

- In the Soviet Union they’ll give you all these things new and free of charge! This was an absolute. Our country had a good reputation among Africans.

Mamadou would have probably allowed his guests to take it all and would not have complained: because this would contradict African traditions of hospitality. However, here Fatou interfered: she reminded the guests that she and Mamadou’s future baby would actually need all these things as well...

Soon Mamadou charmed all hostel watchwomen, although one of them was a genuine racist, convinced, like Martin that “all Africans had AIDS”. Nevertheless even she could not resist his human charm. Mamadou called her “Madame” and brought her Pepsi-cola in small bottles from the shop. Mamadou had began to settle, and I began to not worry about him as much as I had at first. If there were any problems, I thought, he would be able to take care of himself, after all...

The second semester had already started, but there was no sign of a trip to Holland.

By that time we had decided that the trip had been a practical joke, when they called one of us to the dean’s office and told us to start
packing our bags. The flight was scheduled for the day after my 22nd birthday...

... My institute friends and I had a tradition... no, it was not a trip to a bathhouse on New Year Eve\textsuperscript{444}, but to celebrate our birthdays always together, in the same company: Lida, Lyuba, Muscovite Anechka Bobrova, Verochka from Ust Kamenogorsk, Zhenya from Yalta and I.

As usual, on my birthday I bought a cake, made an Olivier salad and cooked Ethiopian wot, the way Said had taught me. Certainly, it was a far less spicy version than the original, but, probably, none of us would have been able to eat the authentic one anyway. Apart from the birthday, I still prepared this dish annually at the hostel for the date of the battle of Adwa (1\textsuperscript{st} of March) which I always celebrated by inviting the same group of girls to dinner.

After the culinary part of the evening, entertainment usually began. We sang lingering folk songs, mainly about unhappy love (after all, one would not sing chastushkas in a choir!)

This time Mamadou told me that he also wanted to come to my birthday party. I tried to explain him that only girls were invited, but he said that if I did not invite him he would be deeply offended. “Are we friends or not?” - he asked. So I warned the girls that this year we would have to make an exception to our unwritten rules. This year we celebrated my birthday the day after it: just before the departure. My plane was leaving at 8 pm.

We were almost graduates, but nobody thought about the fact that we would all part soon, “\textit{and perhaps, forever}”.\textsuperscript{445} Not for a moment! To us, it seemed that we would always be able to meet at any moment in the future. If the Soviet Union had continued to exist, undoubtedly, it would be so. We would work, raise children, visit each other, and perhaps, every five years or so we would arrange our graduates meetings... Even in the most dreadful dreams we could not imagine that we would be set apart by borders, that civil wars would begin in different parts of our vast country, and that we would suffer from unemployment, the impetuous rise in prices and gangsterism... We could never have imagined the terrible truth that in the future they would begin to buy and sell human beings in our beautiful Moscow.

After this cataclysm had occurred, you come across Western “well-wishers” who strongly try to persuade you that you should be grateful to

\textsuperscript{444} Reference to the film “The Irony of Fate” where heroes had such tradition.

\textsuperscript{445} “Clouds are hanging over the city”, Civil War time Soviet song.
Irina Malenko

Gorbachev because he "gave you freedom"... please help me to find some suitable words, without the use of bad language, to respond to them?

Lyuba only murmured when I informed her that Mamadou was going to come to my birthday party. She childishly assumed that there was some sort of romantic dimension to our amicable relationship. I ignored her reaction for by my fifth student year I had grown mature enough not to care about the judgment of others. The main thing was that I knew the truth about myself.

My friends liked spicy wot: a dish made from small meat slices soaked in hot red sauce, with potato pieces and a well-done egg divided lengthways.

- At least that idiot gave us something useful! - said Lyuba, meaning Said, licking her spoon.

At first Mamadou felt a little uneasy in our maiden company. This was not only because of his limited knowledge of the language but also because he was in general a timid person. The party continued, and when we began to sing, Mamadou relaxed a bit and even tried to echo us, without knowing words. By the way, I do not recall there being any alcohol at our birthday parties. The first time I tried an alcoholic drink, was when I was 20. It was at home, champagne for the New Year, and that’s something totally different. None of us drank vodka. Girls would only drank wine and even this was only drunk on especially solemn occasions.

- Girls, would you look after him? - I asked, meaning Mamadou. - If he has any problems, ok?
- Yes, no problema! - said Lida waving her hand, - Hey, don’t you worry, my black-eyed eagle, we will not leave you in need!

Mamadou did not understand precisely what she was saying, but smiled back. To be honest, Mamadou was very nervous, how would he cope without me for two months? Therefore, I also asked my mum to visit him during my absence.

The girls did not go to see off me at the airport. It was too far. But mum did.

The journey to the Sheremetyevo airport seemed to take an eternity! The closer we approached it, the worse I felt. I had never, ever crossed the border before. Although we had studied at the same institute, the other students and I were in different year groups, and so it was at the airport that I properly met the other three students for the first time. Ruslan was a 4th year student. He was a Cossack, a handsome blonde and a very intelligent guy who blushed easily. He liked classical music and studying historical sources. He worked part-time as a watchman in the Historical Museum. Both girls were Muscovites: Tanya was also a 4th year student, and the only one of us who was already a candidate member of the party (and that’s why I immediately thought that it was surely she who was supposed to "look after" all the others). She had a happy, but modest disposition and was firm in character. Lastly, there was Yelena - the youngest of us, she was a 3rd year student. Judging by her appearance, she was a spoilt daddy’s girl.
There were very few passengers heading towards flight registration. A couple of foreigners, the sports TV commentator Sergey Cheskidov who must have been going to Holland for the next skating championship, and ourselves. We looked at Sergey Cheskidov with some sort of hope, because his was at least one familiar face on our otherwise unfamiliar plane! The feeling of being abroad had already come about, once we had passed passport control and neither did it leave us on the plane. Our internal passports were locked away in the Higher Education Ministry. Instead of these, we had been issued with foreign passports, we were given Dutch entrance visa and, as it was required back in the late 1980s, we were also given our own, Soviet exit visa.

We were going to an unknown country without a penny in our pockets (not counting the 5 dollars, that Ruslan had hidden in his boot under the heel). This was because the Dutch side was going to pay for our stay. They were going to meet us; but what if they did not? We were nervous.

After a while under the plane's wing we could perceive small lights shining below. Copenhagen! With surprise we looked through the windows at a foreign city - the first we had ever seen in reality, it was not on TV, in «Club of Film Travellers».446 When the plane started to land, we clung to the windows even more closely.

A Martian landscape was beneath. There were huge advertisement boards for "Coca-Cola", "Philips" and more other companies about which we only knew by hearsay. At the sight of it I felt almost sick. To this day, although many years have passed, I do not like advertising. In me it calls forth associations with an importunate fat summer fly: you wave it away, and yet it returns and flies over you, it circumnavigates and tries to sit down on your knee, while buzzing disgustedly. In the Soviet Union only things that were not really that necessary, were advertised. For example, insurance services without which it was quite possible to live during that time. I do not know, how advertisements manage to influence Westerners: I have never bought anything in my life simply because it was advertised on television. On the contrary, there are such goods that I deliberately do not buy now that I have seen them advertised! It seems to me that many Westerners - even those who have a progressive outlook! - have developed an unhealthy dependency upon it. I noticed this when returning from foreign countries where advertising has not reached yet (oh the blessed corners of our planet where it is possible to have a rest from all this rubbish!) I saw how their eyes began to shine with familiarity, when they return to their habitual glossy “billboards”!

When we had disembarked the plane and were waiting for our luggage, commentator Cheskidov who only had a sports bag on his shoulder, quickly disappeared, and we felt absolutely alone.

- Why did you leave us, Serezha! - exclaimed Tanya quite seriously, and we laughed.

A plump creature was waiting for us at the exit, neither exactly a comrade, nor exactly a Sir: it was an employee of the Soviet Chamber of

446 Popular Soviet TV program.
Irina Malenko

Commerce in this country. There we were going to live for the first couple of days: we had arrived in Holland on the eve of a public holiday, and the Dutch who had invited us, were not at work.

- Nikolai, - presented himself this creature, giving a hand to us.

Our visit at that time was such a rarity that everywhere we went, we were stared at. Not only the Dutch stared at us, but even our own compatriots working there. As for the Dutch, I would say that their attitude at that stage felt almost like some sort of adoration. “Real Russians!” - That’s how our hosts represented us to the visitors who were frequently invited. They often came especially to see us. The visitors were delighted and almost wanted to touch us, to be convinced that we were real, live people.

Perestroika was popular then in the West, and they could not understand at all why all four of us were making such faces when we heard Gorbachev’s name...

On the way from the airport I was amazed that there was no snow around - absolutely, and it was still the winter! Moreover, the grass had already turned green and the first flowers were dotted here and there. The Amsterdam streets were so different from ours, what amazed me most was the quantity of cyclists and bicycle paths, the houses that stood so densely and the multi-ethnic urban population. In the trade mission we were welcomed and went to drink tea though it was already very late. All those working there rejoiced that we had guessed to bring with us black rye bread for them.

The next morning Nikolai took us for a drive: to show us around the city. From the start he began to complain to us about his difficult life: the wife was going to give birth soon, she had been sent to Moscow for the delivery, so that the state would not have to pay the Dutch doctors in hard currency. “One would not even go to a dentist here too frequent!” As though it was our authorities who established the prices for treatment here! And why use the Dutch system and pay all these bills when any necessary medical treatment back at home was free of charge, if one had the choice?

We expected that he would show us museums, theatres and some good examples of the local architecture. Instead, Nikolai took us to the market, all the way there he told us with excitement about his favorite museum in Amsterdam: The Sex Museum...

The market was called Albert Cuyp-markt. An interminably long market, situated not in a place specially designed for this purpose, as back at home, but along an ordinary street with houses along its perimeter. Market dealers, inviting buyers, shouted so loudly that I thought that the windowpanes almost shivered in the houses. This experience was entirely strange and not very pleasant for us.

In our city the market was open all the day long, except for Mondays. Thursday was considered to be “the market day”. Our market was the type that sold groceries, while the market for clothes and other consumer good (called “stumping place” as there were no tables there, and people often stepped on each other’s feet) was situated in an absolutely other place. At home our market was called “the collective-
farm market”, and people traded there in fruits and vegetables that had been grown in their own gardens: Georgians traded in tangerines, Ukrainians in sweet cherries, apples and pears, Azerbaijaniis in grapes and persimmon, Koreans in August traded in water-melons and melons, and local peasants sold different local vegetables and fruits, meat, milk, sour cream and honey. There were also the second hand dealers, who tried to re-sell items bought in shops at state prices, more expensively: for example, they tried to sell Moroccan oranges. However, this was illegal, and if they were caught, they could to run into serious troubles. If people noticed this sort of trade happening, they would put such resellers to shame:

- Where from are your oranges?
- From Sukhumi, my dear, from Sukhumi!
- And did it grow in Sukhumi right with a label “Maroc”?

In the Amsterdam market they traded in all types of goods: from fresh fish to socks and tape recorders. And it was absolutely clear that the fish was not sold by fishermen. The fish was, taking into account the boxes, mainly imported. The same applied to the majority of other products and goods. Here, there were professional shopkeepers, but I wondered, how much do they add to the real price of the goods? Then I wondered, what is actually the difference between the markets and the shops here? I especially held this questions since both of them were in the hands of private traders. It seemed that only the prices differed. Here they were lower than in the shops, but frequently the quality was poorer than the goods to be found in the shops...

Quite often we hear from former Soviet emigrant "comrades" talk of how they almost fainted, when they saw the Western abundance for the first time. However, it did not make such a strong impression on me. Yes, the choice in the West was wider, than back at home, but look at the prices! When I tried to imagine choosing from some 30 types of cheese, the quantity seemed overwhelming and once more, what I saw there around myself, seemed to me to be simply an excess.

On the other hand, Nikolai’s eyes were shining. He began to tell us almost slobbering from excitement, about his expeditions to the other market, "the flea market". Comrades, but he is just an ordinary junkman! My fellow students became somewhat gloomy. Probably, they were waiting for him to tell them stories about Van Gogh and Rembrandt, instead being taken to look at some marked down rags. We tried to be polite and so we did not complain.

However, on the way back it got to the point where I could not stand it any longer. A group of cars passed by. I do not understand much about cars and don’t really care about their appearance and names. A car, for me, is just a means of transportation, not an indicator of my public status. But for Nikolai the car-question obviously itched on his heart.

- Look, guys, here all the unemployed Negores have "Mercedes"! And what do they give to us to drive? I feel ashamed for our motherland!

A huge feeling of anger rose inside of me. It might have been bearable if a half-educated person is rude to you in the street on seeing you in the company of an African, but never in my life had I heard such
words come from the mouth of a Soviet official! “So, he thinks that our state should fork up for a “Mercedes” for him?” I thought.

I simply could not keep silent. That would be cowardice and treachery.

- It’s unhealthy to be so jealous! - I said with a smile, - Or did they not teach you that in your International Relations Institute? Nikolai’s bull neck became red. Only the back of his neck was visible to me, because I was sat at the back of his “not posh enough” car. All our student trio stared at me, mute with horror: how dare I to say such things to an official? I had a dual feeling about the incident: on the one hand, I was proud that I did not keep silent, but on the other, my mood had been strongly spoilt by his tirade. After that experience I could not wait for Monday to come. Monday was the day when at last we would be taken to the Dutch families, as we had been promised.

On Sunday it just became too much for me, and, as first in our company, I decided to take a walk alone in the city, despite instructions given in Moscow. In many respects this was because of Nikolai: I simply could not tolerate being under the same roof with him.

- I’m going to see my pen friend, - I said to the guys, - I have a map of the city, and I know the address. I will find it. Tanya expressed concerns about it and suggested that all of us could go together.

- Tanya, - I replied, - Just imagine: a person knows even me just from letters. And then we suddenly appear at his door, all four of us! Tanya thought it over and accepted that I was right.

She told me to leave the address with them, so that in an emergency they would know where to search for me.

I left her the address, and we agreed that I would come back by a certain time.

- You’re lucky: probably you will get a dinner there! - Ruslan said.

I had to walk through much of the city: the trade mission was in the south, near the metro station RAI, and my pen friend lived near Artis, the Amsterdam zoo. The distance did not frighten me. I had a map, and I was well used to long walks guided by a map. Plus on my journey there were so many completely unfamiliar and interesting sights that I constantly had to turn my head from right to left, to see everything that surrounded me.

For me, I shall ever associate Holland with a smell of grilled chicken that was fried directly in front of the shops fronts, in the streets. The smell was mixed together with the smell of sticky, like melted plastic, sweets, which tasted like a chemical substance. Everything here was small, and the streets were narrow. Only the people were tall. It was a very beautiful country, in its own way. The architecture that was so unusual to us, the canals. This impression was spoilt only by the fact that the streets here were covered with the dog excrements. Before visiting Holland I had never seen that much excrement on the streets, and neither had I seen people allowing their dogs to defecate in the streets. Here it was in the nature of things, nobody at all paid any attention to it.

I reached my destination without undue incidents. A small hitch arose only at the last moment when I could not understand from the map,
where exactly was the street I was looking for. I had to ask a little girl. It appeared that the place of my intention was... upstairs, on the first floor. To reach that street you had to go up the stairs, to the first floor of the house that was officially located on another street. And that street that I was looking for, was on the inside, between two other houses. I had never seen anything like it yet! The houses in this area had been altered from old port warehouses. It was so beautiful!!! The Dutch, due to the limitation of their resources, in general do not let anything go to waste. The first thing that surprises them when they come to our country is that “you have so much abandoned land here!”

It was as well that my pen friend was not ethnically Dutch but the native of Ghana. In Holland it is not customary to arrive unannounced. A Dutch person would probably have had a heart attack if I had visited him or her without a warning, but I did not know that then. In our city such visits - “I was just passing by and thought: why not pay you a visit...” - were in the nature of things, because not everybody had a phone. Unlike the Dutch, our life was not as planned by the minutes, and were not shocked by unexpected visitors they way they do!

Tony was only surprised a little, and met me hospitably. He was much older than I - the same age as my mum, - and he resembled outwardly a dried up grasshopper. He smoked too much and coughed too much as well “Independent businessman on import and export” as he represented himself. There was not a trace of anything typically African in him, none of the warm, sincere kindness that was familiar to me from my experience of the African students in the USSR. At that time his niece was also visiting him, and Tony did not offer anything, except for a cup of coffee, neither to her, nor to me. By the sight of his kitchen (the kitchen and dining room were together) he had fallen into hard times: I saw that there was nothing there, except for some mildewed bread...

This was the first Western habitation that I had seen from the inside. It was large more than enough for one person. It was a duplex apartment, that consisted of a living room combined with a kitchen downstairs and a bedroom, a shower and a toilet upstairs. Naturally, I did not know how much it costs, or how much rent was charged. When the windows were opened, screams and howls from the zoo animals resounded from the horizon, and that made the atmosphere somewhat uncomfortable. Most of all I was surprised with a practicality of the local arrangement: the light switch on a ladder was situated both below, and above so that it was possible to turn the light on while downstairs and then to switch it off after you walked upstairs. In our country we simply did not think of things like that, not because we couldn’t make it, but because we had other mental priorities: not some little tricks making life more comfortable, in which the West so succeeded (and they did not do it because they cared about the people, but to create a new market for such things!). No, we thought about how to solve global problems, we reflected upon the purpose of life, about the whole of mankind and so on. It seems to me that this is in general a character trait of the Russian people, no matter under which social order we live. We are just simply different by nature, compared to the Dutch.
Irina Malenko

I presented Tony with some souvenirs: all of us came to Holland with suitcases, filled with gifts for forthcoming acquaintances, to not do so was unthinkable! We drank a final cup of coffee, and then I went home by foot. My stomach was aching with hunger.

Who had been coveting the Blacks and their "Mercedes"?.. My experience taught me that the opposite was true.

On Monday Nikolai brought us, along with our luggage, to the museum to which we were associated, and passed us into the Dutch hands. An amiable, but serious old man called Jos came to meet us. He talked to us about our job description. The museum was preparing an exhibition about the historic relations between the two countries, and we had to help with its preparation. But the organizers expected us in the autumn, however, by the time when we had arrived, the work related to the exhibition was more or less complete! We were left to translate some writings into Russian, to walk around museums, archives and similar institutions. We were placed to live with certain Dutch families. The organizers gave them a little money with which to make us breakfast. We were given 1000 guilders pocket money a month (in small sums, each two weeks, so that we would not spend all money at once). This was quite a good amount of money at that time, especially considering that we did not have to pay for our place of residence, nor for electricity or water, not even for the public transport (all expenses for transport were paid back to us, backdated). Actually it appeared to be a vacation, pre-paid by strangers. A popular proverb states that “free cheese can be only in a mousetrap”. But what was the main reason behind this trap, I understood only some years later...

Ruslan was placed with a family that took a considerable interest in classical music and they had a daughter who was an opera singer. This particular placement was nothing more than what is called “put a cat near the goldfish bowl”…. He could never have dreamt of that! In the space of a week he began to call his hosts with pride “my van der Bergs”, and they drove him to the opera performances almost once a week. They paid for him, so Ruslan had no idea about the costs of tickets.

The girls were less fortunate: they were placed with a student whom they took an immediate disliking to. The point of contention was the fact that the girls had eaten her monthly stock of jam and butter for breakfast in a space of just one week. The student was horrified, but our girls were horrified too:

- You can’t imagine, Zhenya, how thinly she smears those sandwiches! A butter layer so thin that it is transparent, as if she had stolen it from someone! Such a greedy person! And when we take a shower she nearly stays under the door with a clock: trying to save water...

Although all of us studied at our institute dialectic philosophy and historical materialism, at our institute, none of us really thought that the reality of life defines consciousness, rather than the reverse. We simply physically could not imagine the necessity to economize such basic necessities as personal hygiene and especially our meals. The poorest student in our country was able to feely spread thick layers of butter (real
butter, not margarine!) on his sandwich in the mornings. Not to mention the jam: we ate over half of a jar of it with a spoon and a cup of tea in one evening.

The Dutch student’s budget could not recover from the financial blow caused by our compatriots, even after compensation costs were handed to her by the Dutch party. She begged the workers of the museum remove the students and thus the financial burden from her care. Then girls were moved to a magnificent private residence belonging to worker at the museum. He was the heir to a family who owned one of the largest networks of high class department stores in Holland. In the city we constantly saw his surname on store signboards. His house was like a palace. Here the girls were able to eat jam and butter without refrain and to take a shower (or even a bath - a luxury in Holland!) for as long as they needed.

I was placed with a Jewish family, as I understood straight away by the surname of the lady in question. When I saw her, my last doubts disappeared. Oh, it was so interesting! After the war there were very few Jews remained in Amsterdam. My hostess, Marietta, who also worked in the museum, was Jewish on her father’s side, and her husband, a programmer and mathematician Hans, was a quarter Jewish. During the 1950s Marietta had travelled to the USSR with her father who was a journalist and a communist. However all that she could remember about these trips was how her parents illegally smuggled a surplus of alcohol into Holland, by hiding the bottles in her children’s satchel. Marietta was not a communist, although she considered herself to be left wing. She and Hans had been part of the rebellious “flower-power generation” but now, having settled, they had left their own rebelliousness in the past and become ordinary bourgeois burgers. They lived on a quiet small street far enough from the centre, in the western part of the city, in a three-story house: Hans had a separate living space on the ground floor, Marietta occupied the first floor, - this area had its own separate entrance door. Their two daughters who were aged thirteen and eleven, lived in the attic and it was here that there was a room for me. The house’s basement was inhabited too: someone rented it. The narrow staircase that led straight upstairs, was twisted in such a rousing precipitous spiral that I felt dizzy looking at it for the first time. Dutch houses were narrow, the doors and stairs were narrow, and new furniture was usually brought into the house through the window: there was a special hook nailed over the upstairs windows specifically for this purpose, to pass a thick rope through it.

When the youngest of the girls ran out to meet me, I must admit, I felt a bit scared: “Oh, they have children”, I thought. I did not know how to behave with children, and because of that I was usually a little afraid of them. For all that, I found a common language surprisingly quickly with Esther and Maritsa. The girls spoke well in English and a little French. The hosts themselves spoke freely in both of these languages as well as in German. Maritsa adored Madonna and her hamster, which lived in a big glass box along with Esther’s rabbit.

- Hou je mond!447 - Maritsa screamed at her sister. And then, seeing me, gently translated: - Keep quiet!
Esther and Maritsa studied ballet and the harp. Based on my experience of Soviet life, where there were free music schools and various free of charge extra curricular activities, I saw nothing unusual in it. And therefore I decided that everybody in Holland lived like my new hosts: they worked for just 4 days a week, and the fifth day was set aside "for intellectual development". They went on vacation 2-3 times a year, they ate dinner at a restaurant at least once a week where they discussed the latest literary opus with their intellectual friends, over a glass of good wine. They also frequented art exhibitions and other cultural institutions. That is to say, life here was about the same as ours, only with better living conditions and plenty of amenities. This was our first cardinal mistake: to believe the idea that our “little Reagan” wanted to plant inside our heads, so that we would come back and talk about it to others. So that in our clouded minds we would think “more democracy, long live the cooperatives!”

It would mean all the advantages of socialism in conjunction with Western levels of consumption. In real life it is incomparable. “Either I lead her to the registry office, or she leads me to the prosecutor”. We forgot old people’s wisdom and as the old saying goes, “you cannot climb up on the lime tree without getting your butt scratched”. Soon we were deprived of there being any possibility of choice. We could not even choose whether or not to climb up that lime tree. Today it is common to laugh at the fact that foreigners in the Soviet Union were led to attend only "special families". Ha, do you really think that in Holland we were taken into an average working persons home?

For example, in the house where I was placed, a movie was once filmed! Marietta had many affluent friends and was on friendly terms with the family of the choreographer of the Dutch National Ballet (Dutch aren’t famous for their ballet skills, and it seemed more or less natural that the lady in question was Yugoslavian). Once Marietta took me to visit another friend, a theatre director. We stayed there till late and when it became dark, that friend’s husband came home - a cheerful and funny blonde. Seeing that there was nothing to eat in the house, he obediently began to peel potatoes for his own supper in the kitchen while singing and fancy dancing, and he began to cook it in a frying pan. A week later, I saw this very same blond-chef on television. He was well-known in Holland, being the lead singer of a rock group. In addition, he was a poet, an actor and an "anti-capitalist".

I noticed that these people liked to call themselves “anti-capitalist”, but they were quite satisfied by capitalism in general. As for fighting it, obviously, it was enough to peel your own potatoes. Marietta’s family were the same, they were proud of the fact that they rode bicycles to work, rather than going there by car. Well, that’s fine, but to greatly inflate the value of such trifles? This action was portrayed almost as an

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447 Shut up! (Dutch).
448 Cooperatives in the USSR in the late 1980s were basically first private companies.
expression of their solidarity with the poor. Marietta was proud of the fact that she allowed a Moroccan mother who had many children (from different fathers) to clean her home once a week, that she paid her 50 guilders and that she even sat together with the Moroccan cleaner after she had finished cleaning at the same table with a cup of coffee. Yes, it was almost a feat!

The translations for the exhibition were made by a quiet Dutch lady who spoke Russian fluently. She kept her grey hair in a braid and her teeth resembled those of a rabbit. Her father was a Russian language specialist, and her husband too; he looked much younger than his wife. She was affiliated with the pro-dissident and pro-Solzhenitsyn clique of Slavonic languages specialists, who, throughout their lives, fed off the fake martyrdom of the Soviet "dissidents". To study the Soviet Union in the "free world" and to get a decent salary for it was only possible if one did so from certain political positions: who pays the piper calls the tune. With particular fanfare we were taken on a tour around the Institute of Social History which was famous for its anti-Soviet works. The staff also tried to acquaint us with all sorts of their research. Naturally, our organizers did not tell us about themselves in plain text: it was only years later, when I read their CV's on the Internet that I understood the magnitude of the whole operation. These people acted more subtly: for example, they offered "rare books that were hard to find in your country". That's how I got a textbook of Yiddish, and our girls got all sorts of emigrant literature. We were given a Bible in Russian - but none of our new friends themselves were believers or churchgoers. "We know that you will not find it back at home". They took us for the first time to the Eastern European literature shop "Pegasus", where they had some really good books in Russian, which were really difficult to buy back at home. In addition they were selling a huge number of books by Voinovich, Solzhenitsyn and all sorts of Amalrics. I remember how we laughed when we saw the title of a book by the last author: "Will the Soviet Union Survive Till 1984?"

- "Is this science fiction or something"? We thought.

Jokes are jokes, but a variety of Nikolai's were already digging deep under the Soviet Union, with the approval from somewhere high up. Our embassy and trade mission were entitled to a significant discount while buying books in that store, and Nikolai offered to help, by extending this special rate to us. I did not take advantage of his offer, having bought at full price, only the plays of Yevgueny Schwartz. On the other hand our girls took back to Moscow volumes of Solzhenitsyn and other gory stories, they took as much as they could carry, and Nikolai, of course, knew about it.

I am not going to talk about Solzhenitsyn, that "I have not read it, but I do condemn him": I honestly have TRIED to read it. At least in order to know what some intellectuals admired, and what was forbidden there. Having read with great exasperation about one chapter, I realized that I would not lose anything if I did not read the rest. Reading something just because "everyone read it" is not for me. We met our immigrants in the bookstore for the first time, mostly they were Jews, who fled to Israel, became disappointed in it and then managed to settle in Europe. They
were all very homesick and asked us how life was back at home. Their main dream was to be allowed to travel back to the USSR. We were treated very hospitably and - even received offers to stay with some of them, but we remembered well the received instruction and didn’t socialize much with them. We talked to them normally, of course. This was the time when that angry “sunny clown” Oleg Popov\textsuperscript{450} emigrated: the one who claims that he \textit{didn’t get enough sausage in his life}. It has been almost two decades since, and he still sprays poison somewhere out there, on the margins of Europe in his “multi-coloured tents”\textsuperscript{451} instead of a good, permanent circus building\textsuperscript{452}. Apparently, \textit{because he is very happy there now}.

We went to the museum every day, although we had nothing to do there. We went around all of its rooms in the first two days. I made friends with the security guard, a black Surinamese, who had a beautiful singing voice like Paul Robeson. He sat in the guardhouse and sang all sorts of gospel songs. His Polish wife, a blonde, also worked there. That’s why I felt such sympathy for them. Such marriages in the Netherlands seemed to be no problem at all!

Marietta was in charge of the museum department concerning the Second World War: for her as a Jew, this topic was close to the heart. Based on our lectures on the history, we were well aware of the Nazi system of classification of races and their policy towards the Jews. However, their policies were not in any way better towards us, the Slavic peoples. After spending some time in Holland, you could seriously believe that the Jews alone were exterminated in the concentration camps. I tried to tell myself after visiting Anne Frank House: this is probably because the Dutch themselves did not suffer from the Nazis on such a scale as did, that’s why they feel so guilty of the fate of their Jewish countrymen. There is even a special Jewish Museum in Amsterdam, where this theme is also played out in every way.

It is a disgrace, to put it mildly, to hear such one-sided ideas about history. We lost in that war not six, but more than twenty million people, from all ethnic groups! This is the worst of the worst: \textit{to divide the victims of fascism into ethnic groups, in order to select and recognize only the chosen ones}. Here are the words of a Soviet woman, half-Armenian, half Cossack, who grew up in Georgia. She was a partisan and prisoner of the concentration camps herself, who saved the life of a Jewish woman there: \textit{"For us, these people were our fellow citizens: civil servants, doctors, teachers, workers, artisans, children, pioneers, students. It was the Nazis who identified them as Jews. And for us they were just our Soviet people. Just as our citizens of any other ethnic groups: Kazakhs, Ukrainians, Russian, Tatar, and others"}.\textsuperscript{453}

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\textsuperscript{450} Oleg Konstantinovich Popov (born 31 July 1930) is a famous Soviet and Russian clown and circus artist.

\textsuperscript{451} Title of a Polish pop-song by Maryla Rodowicz (born as Maria Antonina Rodowicz, in 1945), well-known Polish singer.

\textsuperscript{452} In the USSR there were numerous permanent circus buildings around the country. Circuses did not perform in tents, like in the West.
Every morning we walked to the museum. Knowing how much the Amsterdam public transport cost, we were so horrified that we made a pact to walk everywhere by foot. In addition, Dutch transport has a very complicated ticket system. The tickets were cards, consisting of strips that needed to be validated, the validity of which depended directly both on time, and on distance, for example, two band strips were valid for one hour, and so on. Tickets bought from the driver, for some reason, were far more expensive than those bought in advance at the kiosk. This system was too confusing for us because back at home we simply struck a hole in the ticket and could ride on this tram at least until the very end of the line. If you changed tram, you bought another ticket. Although the Dutch reimbursed our travel expenses, they were only backdated, and with such high costs, as things stood, we would not make it until the next "payday"!

Our hosts were amazed at us, they could not believe that we did not even want to take a ride on a tram, but we never admitted to them the true reason. We said simply that walking was good for our health. I left the house two hours before the start of the working day and quite happily walked to the museum across the city. After some time, the hosts lent me a bike and I, initially not without having some misgivings, mastered my Amsterdam bike route. Mostly I was afraid of the tram lines and crossroads, but I found that the Dutch drivers were quite careful.

Marietta and Hans planned their week day by day: Monday and Tuesday after school the girls were with Hans, on Wednesday Marietta did not work, she had the right, - with a full day’s pay - to go to the library! For the rest of the week the girls were with her. We thought it was a very unorthodox family, where a husband and wife lived more or less their own separate lives.

- “Oh, we got so fed up with each other over the years, that’s why this state of affairs is quite satisfactory for both of us” - said Marietta.

Marietta and Hans quickly switched to feeding me not only with breakfasts but also with dinners, especially because I didn’t really eat much. It happened after one hilarious misunderstanding that emphasized the differences between our cultures. When they first asked me to join them for dinner, I, as it is common for us, politely declined, although I really was starving: expecting that, like in Russia, they would return the offer at least two more times. It turned out that the Dutch take everything literally, no means no. The plate was returned to the drawer. After that if I wanted something I never said “no”, but agreed at once! Later I explained to them what happened, and we both laughed. There were other similar cases: for example, if you received a gift, in the USSR it was considered polite to say thank you, set the gift aside, and open it later, when no one sees: if you begin immediately to open a gift, it looks unpleasant. But in Holland, on the contrary, while presenting a gift, people look at you with eager anticipation. It is assumed that you will open it immediately, and praise, and they are waiting to see what your

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453 Tamara Lisitsian “The war was grinding us”.
face will look like. The first time I had to do this, so as not to offend the hosts, I almost died of embarrassment.

A lot of things surprised us in Holland; I cannot remember all of it now. For example, the fact that exactly the same product, in different stores, was sold at different prices. We were told that, compared to the USSR, there were no queues. Firstly, there WERE queues - although not as long as ours, and secondly, what is the difference on what a person spends their time: waiting in a queue or finding a store in which that product is cheaper?

What about the fact that in Holland a bath is almost considered a luxury item and not everybody has one? The fact that the first thing the Dutch ask their guest is “what will you drink?” - They rarely ask their guest to “have a bite to eat with us!” The fact that they earnestly serve you one biscuit for a coffee and quickly remove the box before you had time to realize it and take some more.

I really liked to wash dishes in Holland. At that time we did not have liquid soaps for dishwashing, and washing dishes with them seemed so easy that I liberated Marietta’s girls for the whole two months from this, what was for them, unpleasant duty.

I barley watched TV in Holland. In the first place, I had no time, too many interesting things were going on without it, and secondly, because of the language barrier, though all foreign films in the Netherlands are shown in their original language, with Dutch subtitles.

The only thing I watched during the two months was an English film called “Letter to Brezhnev” (by the way, it was sympathetic to the Soviet Union, but still very funny, in the portrayal of our details) and a satirical program “Kijk op de week” with Kees van Kooten and Wim De Bie, that Marietta never missed. This program was in Dutch, but I tried to guess what they were talking about by looking at the faces of comedians.

During these two months, Marietta and Hans became almost like family for me. I looked at them with Soviet eyes and considered them to be my friends, in Soviet style too.

However, I did not know that I was in a way a sort of exotic animal for them, to show to their friends and family. They really liked to entertain me and observe my childishly immediate reactions. Soon it was Marietta’s birthday party and I prepared for her and her guests an unknown to them foreign soup “Borsch”, the guests ate it from little cups, later asking me about the recipe. Marietta introduced me to her friend from Aruba, who told me where I can buy the textbook of Bobby’s language - Papiamento. Hans took me to an old, ramshackle Amsterdam Olympic cycling track - after I told him about how many years ago their countryman, Jan Jansen was performing in the velodrome of my hometown. Another time Hans showed me a game on his computer which responded logically (in the computer’s opinion!) to any sentence you typed. When Hans took me to visit his sister, where I spent hours stroking her cat, he, in the absence of Marietta, told me compliments like “In my next life, Zhenya, I would like to be your cat”. Hans and I also rode

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454 Look At The Week – weekly satirical political program on Dutch TV.
bicycles and crossed with them on a ferry to Zaandam – to see the famous house of Peter the Great. I remember the time that I told them both, how, without even knowing it, I walked straight into Walletjes, the infamous red light district. I was looking on a map trying to locate the nearby Bible Museum when I lifted my head from the map and saw where I was. I almost fainted! I ran through the Walletjes like I run the gauntlet, I was ashamed to be in such a place! When Marietta took me along with her girls to Madame Tussauds, I flatly refused to be photographed with the statue of Gorby. One day Marietta’s gay co-worker, a Protestant, brought me for a church service in French, there I met some refugees from the Congo. I also felt that I was on show when I, with all the family went to Bergen-on-Ze for Easter. It was the home of Marietta’s parents, and we were there at the request of her communist - father. During our stay I along with Esther and Maritsa searched all over the garden for hidden chocolate eggs. Incidentally, even though Marietta’s parents were old communists, they lived in what looked like a true old mini-castle.

...In Arnhem - the only Dutch city where trolleybuses exist, we were approached by an elderly man, who had been waiting for us since the early morning. He spoke in Russian and his Russian was good. He told me that his wife was Russian. “She wants to meet you very much! We met during the Second World War when both she and I had been sent to work in Germany, since then she has lived here”.

My fellow students turned out not to have time for her, but I felt sorry for an elderly person, and I went with him. I did not regret it.

Rosalia Ivanovna worked as a folk dance teacher. She was not at all anti-soviet; on the contrary, she proudly told me that before the war, when she was a child, she had seen Stalin in her native Crimea. She was hurt, of course, that her relatives who remained in the Soviet Union for all these years, did not want anything to do with her because she married a Dutchman (“who knows, maybe that would get you into some trouble!”), However she was well received at the Soviet Embassy, nobody took her Soviet citizenship away, and she had travelled many times to the Soviet Union. Now, with the beginning of perestroika, her many relatives suddenly conspired to “get to know her better” and come to visit her in the West.

Our changes arose in her some bad suspicions. When I described to her what was going on at home, she said that her fears were confirmed. When parting she gave me to read a children’s book from Stalin’s time, which had miraculously survived... Goodness gracious! I had never seen anything like it, if I may say so. We had been told about such books many times, but it is one thing to listen to stories, and another to read the very documents from that era with your own eyes.

In Holland we were asked a lot about perestroika, and we did not paint the situation in rose colours.

It was the Dutch who saw it through tinted glasses. They believed in their own tales of the good Gorby and really could not understand why we preferred Yeltsin at that time. Back then we sincerely tried to explain this to them.
Irina Malenko

When the Dutch first raised this issue they said, “You have that perestroika of yours there, probably now it has become so cool...” and so on. We just looked at each other for a moment, then Ruslan opened his mouth and began:

- Oh yeah, it is so “great” there, you cannot even imagine!.. Like Sakharov, we for some reason, suddenly decided that we had met a form of “higher developed” human being who possessed a special wisdom. We believed that they genuinely cared about us, that we could be honest with them, as with true friends, and that we could complain to them openly if something were bothering us. That is what I am still awfully ashamed of!

The Dutch treated the idea of the independence of the Baltic republics with more scepticism than we did:

- “They cannot survive economically, they are too small!” Argued the Dutch, We asked:
- And what about your own country, can you call it big?
In response to that, the Dutch looked at us with a profound sense of superiority:
- “We have centuries-long experience of democracy!”
Please remind them about this experience now, when their own government is afraid to organize a referendum in the Netherlands over the Lisbon Treaty!

In the Netherlands I discovered Bob Marley\(^{455}\). I mean, I had known about his existence before and even knew about his death, but I had heard only one of his songs, and now I had an opportunity to listen to all of them. Hans borrowed a large selection of Bob Marley LP’s (records) from a local library for me (in the Dutch libraries, they were lent like books - although, of course, this was not free of charge).

Today Russia knows little more about the “Rasta”, than in Soviet times, but this knowledge is, just as in the Western countries, very, very superficial. Yes, now we can see Marley on television. However, apparently, the problem with the popularization of his work in the Soviet era was not as much in the fact that his rebellious ideology was non-Marxist, but because of Marley’s way of life, that is to say, because of his usage of “Ganja” - marijuana.

Ask any more or less well-educated Russian youngster today, what he knows about reggae music and Rastafarians, and he almost certainly will answer that reggae is some sort of joyous music for never getting sad, that the musicians are tropical residents, who smoke “herbs” for fun, and that Jamaica is a sort of island like in a classic Soviet cartoon, which Sonny, incidentally, considered to be deeply racist: “Chunga-Changa, blue sky, Chunga-Changa, summer all year round...”\(^{456}\). It was exactly that sort of interest for his music that our “Soviet censorship” didn’t want for our youngsters!

An average citizen, both of our country and of the West, does not care about the historical roots of the Rastafarian movement and its


\(^{456}\) Soviet children’s song from the cartoon “Cutter”.

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essence, does not want to know the fact that the ritual use of marijuana is only a superficial part, and not the main manifestation of Rastafarianism. (Latin American Indians, too use, for example, coca leaves for medicinal purposes!). It is convenient for them to think this, moreover, they have been brainwashed into such perceptions. If you listen to any Western radio station today, you will not hear any of the radical lyrics written by Bob Marley. You may even think that he never wrote anything radical at all. All they play are his sweet love songs or those songs in which the political content is on the back burner. “One love”, “No Woman No Cry”, “Sun Is Shining” and so on.

Many of Bob’s songs, that are passionately loved and remembered by his fans, are never on the radio or television, although they have been released on CDs and recorded on video. They are too hard to swallow for those who think that they own our lives, of whom Bob sang, “Them belly full, but we hungry, a hungry man is an angry man”.

I was, of course, a typical Soviet girl. I went into shops in search of books about Marley and for T-shirts with his image, being completely unaware of the fact that in this store they were actually was selling “light” drugs, and various devices for their use. If I found out about it, I probably would have been very embarrassed, blushed, bought that book and jerked away. Now, when I already know about it, I think that European drug addicts like to hide behind the name of such celebrities as Bob.

I listened to him at night through headphones and froze with the sweet pain caused by what he sang. I do not understand the Jamaican “patois” (a dialect of English) and had no idea about the Bible, which he had quoted in his songs so often, but even what I knew was enough to make it penetrate to the depths of my soul.

“Most people think,
Great God will come from the skies,
Take away everything
And make everybody feel high.
But if you know what life is worth,
You will look for yours on earth:
And now you see the light,
You stand up for your rights”

One of his songs always associated me with Gorby:

“Them crazy, them crazy
Ne gonna chase those crazy
Baldheads out of town;
Chase those crazy baldheads
Out of our town.
...Here comes the conman
Coming with his con plan.
We won’t take no bribe;
We’ve got to stay alive”.

The genius of Bob Marley lies in the fact that he sings about universal things, his rebellious songs are universal, and they could be the song of almost any person, almost anywhere in the world, regardless of the time. Shortly before his death the American CIA asked Bob to work for
them, understanding the force of his influence in the Third World. Bob stayed true to himself: not only did he refuse to cooperate with this infamous institution, on whose hands is the blood of millions of people from around the world, but he even included in his song “Rat Race” a line: “Rasta don’t work for no CIA”.

And the most important thing about him not the fact that he was not a Marxist, but exactly this!

I literally became addicted to his music then. No, of course, I had not turned into a Rasta myself: no need to make people laugh, you cannot be who you are not born. But my theoretical Marxist knowledge of the Rastafarians from literature was filled after this trip with new, live content. I was not only able to finally hear all the songs of Bob and to learn about his background, but I also saw a real, live Rasta: I attended the concert of a Jamaican poet Mutabaruka457 in Amsterdam.

Hans decided to accompany me to that concert in Amsterdam’s “Melkweg”458 concert hall because it would be too late for me to go back home alone through the city, even on a bicycle. What was my first impression at the concert? I was a little shocked by the number of white Dutch people in Rastafarian berets, pretending to be someone that they could possibly not ever be.

- Can you feel the smell? - asked Hans.
- What smell? - I asked him quite sincerely, making him almost shed a tear at my innocence. Sweet smoke filled the air, to which I did not pay the slightest attention. It turned out that people were smoking weed. Mutabaruka, a fat, very dark-skinned easy moving middle-aged man, with a very picturesque appearance (in Rastafarian colours: the colours of the Ethiopian flag, and with the proper “dreadlocks” on his head) sang a chant.

Many of his songs have been directed against both “empires of evil”, both the USA and USSR who, in his opinion, were not allowing the world to develop, for everybody to live in his own way. I did not take it as an offence, but tried to understand it. I think that one of the problems of our past was in the underestimation of the original character of the development of various countries and in the pedantic attempts to impose on other nations, forms of solving problems that may be effective under our conditions, but not necessarily work in others. Just imagine our typical party apparatchik like Nikolai, who haughtily considered that he knew better than others what they need, - and you can probably understand Mutabaruka.

At that concert I became acquainted with Katarina too. She was later to be the witness at my marriage to Sunny. It was Hans who noticed her as he already knew her a little: she worked in library from where he borrowed the Bob Marley records and he introduced me to her.

Katarina was the Dutch variation me - the only essential difference being that her interest for the black part of mankind did not have any

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457 Mutabaruka (born Allan Hope, in 1952 in Jamaica) is a dub poet. His name comes from the Rwandan language and translates as "one who is always victorious".

458 Melkweg (“Milky Way”) – well-known concert stage in Amsterdam.
Irina Malenko

political character. Katarina was 29 years old at that time. She was impressive, tall, a close-cut elegant brunette with big grey eyes and a languid deep voice. She had a boyfriend from Surinam, called Wendell. Before him she had boyfriends who were all from Surinam or from Nigeria. She helped one of them to remain in Holland, having got with him into a sham marriage! Katarina was a good judge of “black” music and of “black” culture: she read a lot, because of her work that was her true calling. It was a pity for me that we met so late, just a couple of weeks before my return home. I looked at her with deep admiration as a younger schoolgirl looks at a senior. I poured out my heart to her, having told her the story with Said in its entirety.

That was what Holland had “bribed” me with: not shop counters with 30 types of cheese and salami, not stereo-systems, but the fact that here it was possible to learn any language, to order the textbook of Amharic in a shop, to go to work in Africa (what kind of a work and for whom could you actually really work in Africa, going there from Holland, I didn’t think about it back then!). I liked the way that people did not say scurrilous things to you, if they saw you in the street with a black man (I did not think that people could smile politely to other’s faces and still continue to discriminate them!), that there was Tropical Museum (which was here, of course, because of the colonial and slave-selling past of this country!).

...In these two months we had time to visit and to go round almost every more or less interesting museum in the country, not to mention archives and libraries. I had bought for myself, and as presents, so many books that I had to send some of them home separately in a parcel, otherwise my luggage would have been severely overweight. We had visited different cities: Rotterdam, The Hague, Leiden, Haarlem, Utrecht, Arnhem, and Nijmegen, we even had a chance to visit Antwerp in neighbouring Belgium. Life seemed excitingly interesting and carefree. This was because we in general did not know what real life was like, for the ordinary people who lived in Holland. We did not know the Dutch language, we had no idea about various household expenses such as the monthly payment of bills. At the time, however, it seemed to us that we did know how they lived. After all, here they were, with their lives right in front of us.

The time of our visit had flown by awfully quickly. It was sad to leave our hospitable Dutch hosts, even sadder - to part with a carefree life, where there were no problems and all was presented to you on a plate. We already had begun to imagine that this was a normal way of life!

The Dutch wanted to prolong our visit for a month, although there was already absolutely nothing for us to do. Only Tanya and Yelena agreed, Ruslan and I, unfortunately, had to refuse such an honour. He had to go back to work as the watchman in the Historical museum, and I had to write my diploma thesis! There were only two months left before I had to defend my thesis in front of a commission, and I hadn’t even begun to write it yet, not a single line! Although I did like Holland, not even for a
second did I think about remaining there. Then for what had I studied all these years?

When Ruslan and I went back home, I knew that it was going to be exactly Nikolai who would be giving us a lift to the airport. I, like Khrushchev, decided to show him “Kuzma’s mother”! 459 Bob Marley was the inspiration for my first public act of protest against our officials.

That morning I dressed up in all my newly-bought Rasta-souvenirs. I braided my hair into African plaits as far as it was possible, and decorated my head with a huge yellow-red-green beret with an image of the Rasta variation of “The Star of David” on the top. You should have seen the face of that creature who felt so “sorry for our Motherland”! It should really have been filmed on video. In addition, you should have seen the face of our official at passport control desk when I arrived home in Sheremetyevo! I was examined for at least ten minutes. He sighed then, uttered “noxious influence of the West”! - and allowed me to pass.

The Soviet Union had altered considerably during our absence of two months and it was as if Ruslan and I had arrived into another country. Something invisible had definitely broken out here over the last two months, and. we could not recognize Moscow. Instead of our a bit grumpy, but kind and sympathetic natured people we were met by a colony of zombie-like humanoids in whose empty eyes there was only one thing: thirst for money!

We were not met at the airport, but we were not upset. We had enough money with us, as we thought, to get back to the hostel by a taxi (to go by several buses with such luggage was unthinkable). But we soon found that no taxi driver - and they were all official, state-run taxis! - agreed to drive us for less than 100 rubbles. This figure amounted to nearly three of our monthly grants! We did not have such a sum of money with us, not even in the hostel. Thus there were state employees, who were supposed to be working with state tariffs, and the counters in their cabs still operated. Previously, maybe, a driver would ask for a little "tip", but for only about five rubbles, no more. We considered this to be reasonable in some cases. But if anybody ever dared to ask for such an enormous price, - obviously in favour of his own pocket, instead of the state’s, -then the militia would sort out such an audacious gone too far "businessman" quickly enough. Now the militiamen, whose task it was to keep order, pretended not to notice anything. For all 22 years of my life I had never seen anything like this. Was this supposed to be "freedom"?

- “What stuff do you have? We can take things”! - offered taxi drivers "graciously".

Things? My books about Rastas, my textbook of Amharic in English or Ruslan’s LP’s of opera music? What a cheek!

459 Kuzma's mother or Kuzka's mother is a part of the Russian idiomatic expression “to show kuzka's mother to someone” which means "to teach someone a lesson, to punish someone in a brutal way". It entered the history of the foreign relations of the Soviet Union as part of the image of Nikita Khrushchev, along with the shoe banging incident and the phrase We will bury you.
But what were we supposed to do? I probably, out of principle would not have gone anywhere. I would have phoned my mother from the airport, it would have been a long distance call but hopefully I had enough money for that, and I would have waited for half the day for her to come and pick me up. I would have had enough patience for that. The matter wasn’t even so much in money. I was certain that we shouldn’t encourage such behaviour and take it for granted. But Ruslan did not want to wait. He agreed with one taxi driver that he would take us to the hostel and wait downstairs (with me as a hostage) while Ruslan raised the necessary amount by borrowing it from his friends. And I later on will return half of this sum to him. I had to go along with it.

I felt awful. I had anticipated my homecoming with such pleasure, and here we were, in this new and absurd Moscow where everything seemed to have turned upside down... I went across Moscow in the taxi of some “business shark”, dressed up more or less like a clown in the circus. I looked out of the window and noticed suddenly something that I had never noticed before, how wide were the streets in Moscow, how monumentally-grandiose the houses in the centre were; there was something Maoist in them, it seemed to me that they held the same spirit. In that moment Moscow suddenly seemed to me to be awfully Asian. I remembered the cultural Dutch in whose circles we had rotated for these past two months. They would have never dared to plunder us like this!

It felt as if even the sky pressed on my shoulders. The sensation of being as light as a balloon along with the exciting and interesting life had evaporated. “Damned command system”! - I thought in then fashionable terms, without realizing that what I was witnessing in Moscow that day, were in fact only the florets of the “market democracy”.

...When the next day I went home from Moscow - in a T-shirt brought from Holland with the image of Bob Marley - a tipsy guy stuck to me, trying all the way to guess, who was it on that shirt. Eventually he has come to a conclusion that it was no other, but Valery Leontyev.\textsuperscript{460} I did not begin to over persuade it. What do all of you understand? Since I had returned home “from there”, inside of me there was something wrong, as in a worm-eaten apple. Outwardly nothing had changed. My friends in the hostel gasped and gawked over the bible and the “Wekcamp”\textsuperscript{461} catalogue, tasted unprecedented for us then bars of “Mars” and quickly lost interest to all this Western stuff. But inside my soul there was something empty, something dreary. Something was happening around me, something bad. I felt it, but what it was exactly, it was difficult to define and even more difficult to put into words.

On the radio they continuously read quotes from the Western press, and they told us how different Western statesmen praised the wisdom of “Mister Gorbachev”. This change of term - from “comrade” to “Mister” - did not escape my attention. I recollected all the last agreements signed by Gorbachev and the feeling of growing disaster amplified. Detente and steps in disarmament which were reached before

\textsuperscript{460} Popular Soviet pop-singer (b. 1949).

\textsuperscript{461} Wehkamp – Dutch postorder catalogue company.
by decades of delicate negotiations, in the mode of “one step forward - two steps back”, were suddenly achieved completely effortlessly, with ease of the goose plume let soaring in air.

And what if... What if the matter was not in any especial wisdom of a newly baked “mister” of combiner assistant origin; what he has simply unconditionally agreed to everything that was demanded by our foes? When this thought unexpectedly dawned upon me, I felt terrified. I tried to drive it away. It cannot be! What then was the whole Politbureau doing? What were the KGB and the military people doing?

The alarming feeling did not go away. It seemed that in our country everybody began to pull the blanket over himself, without thinking at all about others around him. Miners, justly indignant because soap and washing powder had disappeared from free sale (such a thing had never happened in all my life under the conditions of the “command system” and “stagnation”!) started to demand suddenly absolutely strange things:

“A group of reasonable people managed, with their own hands, to destroy that system in which they existed as an exclusive social group. They also demanded the establishment of a system in which they as social group should be inevitably transformed into misery. The miners imagined (not without the aid of manipulators) that if the mines were privatised, and they become shareholders, the they would be able to sell coal for dollars. They thought that all the rest, that is to say, the taxes, the energy prices, cars, transport tariffs -and so on would remain, as it was at the Soviet system”.

“Or the right to employment/work - or the right to strike, that was a fatal choice the miners were facing”.

But that was exactly the thing that none of us understood! I had seen strikes in Holland. At first I thought that it was some sort of a carnival, but I found out that the nurses were apparently striking. At the word “strike” the imagination traditionally draws to us angry workers with clenching fists who chant their demands and move along the street as a terribly powerful stream. In Holland it came across as pathetic clownery. These people, the nurses, were cheerful, almost singing, they dressed in carnival-like suits, and brandishing balloons, they bounded along the streets. How could anybody take them and their demands seriously? At the sight of them you’d think that all the workers in the West live an easy and cheerful life, and that they strike simply for entertainment, out of boredom.

After returning from Holland, having faced the unattractive reality of perestroika which I mistook for socialism (after all, officially we came to have “more and more” of it!), I was walking around Moscow with a feeling that from now on I was a part of some secret society: I knew

462 “Stagnation” was the term that Gorbachev was using for the 1970s-early 1980s.
463 Quote from Sergei Kara-Murza (b.1939) describing these events of the late 1980s.
464 Gorbachev’s slogan at the time was “More of socialism!”
something that was not known to mere mortals: I had seen “the real capitalism”...

Although this stage only lasted for a few months of my life, to this day I feel tears of shame when I recollect, how I tried to argue in letters to my Brazilian pen pal who was fairly indignant at my words that there was “a good”, “correct” capitalism: such as in Holland. “You just have to build it in a proper way”. The fact that I was not the only one who suffered from making a similar error; that the majority of our population at that stage, fooled by “Ogonyok” magazine and “Inter-girls” 465 suffered from the same illusion, does not take the responsibility off my shoulders. We still have some odd fellows who believe in this though recently there are less and less of them left.

I did not realize four facts back then:

1. Firstly, that capitalism in Brazil, Zaire, or the Philippines is “normal capitalism” too;
2. Secondly, that “good” capitalism in Holland is “good” because it can afford to throw crumbs from its table to the workers in its own country at the expense of the rest of the world. And the whole world cannot construct such “good” capitalism because there are no aliens from other planets, at whose expense it could exist!
3. Thirdly, that as soon as our socialism stopped existing, no matter that it wasn’t ideal, “good capitalism” would also cease to exist, as capitalists will not have any deterrents stopping them from forcing their own workers to tighten their belts.
4. Fourth and the most important thing, the reason for all my mistakes - the fact that I did not know the reality of life and work for ordinary people even in the same Holland, but I was absolutely certain that I knew it!

Eternal shame on me and on all of us for those days!!!

Within a couple of weeks of my homecoming Kweku returned from London. I honestly waited for him, without admitting even to myself that I thought of Volodya Zelinsky more frequently. Looking back, when mum led the conversation to Volodya: and she asserted “look, what good guy”, I only became shy and interrupted her, assuring that I did not look at him at all from such a point of view, and that he was simply my sports idol.

I still stubbornly intended to connect my life to Kweku’s and to leave with him for his native country. Holland did not appear in my dreams as my future residence even then. It was just a place where “people have such a life!” and no more.

Joyfully I went to meet him to Donetsk, familiar to me already! To stop at Galya’s this time was not necessary, all the watchmen at Kweku’s hostel were “in his pocket”, and they allowed me (not officially, of course!) to stay directly at his place. Kweku had one room mate - a short Abkhasian, but he left almost at once for his home. If I tell to you, that even after that nothing happened between Kweku and me, you probably

465 Reference to the popular movie of that time whose heroine was a prostitute providing her “services” for hard currency.
Irina Malenko

won't believe me, but nevertheless, it was so. You just have to behave with men in the right way.

I arrived just for 3 days and was very glad to see him. He too was glad, but he was too preoccupied by the selling of all sorts of junk that he had brought with him from London. To me he presented a couple of dresses. I at first refused, because it seemed to me inappropriate, but then I recollected the Dutch habit to not refuse when they offer you something. On a twist of fate, I later married Sonny in one of those dresses!

When I expressed to him my anxiety concerning his activity on the black market, Kweku tried to assure me that it was only because he was “a poor student who wished to live normally”. However I observed that these transactions were made with local black marketers whom I would not approach for a mile, and I felt more and more uncomfortable in his company. Is he really the right kind of guy for me? I thought.

He, just like myself, soon had to defend his diploma thesis, but he didn’t give a damn about it and continued his trade:
- Do not worry, it will be all right with the diploma!

When I saw, how he rejoiced over his «C» grade for the state exam on Marxism-Leninism - and not because the examination was difficult, but because he did not even prepare for it properly! - I understood that it was time for me to go back home. This was also because I had my diploma thesis to write and I took my studies, unlike Kweku, very seriously.

But I had given him my word to wait, and I did not like to be the first to break it, so I decided to test the ground before my departure. I asked Kweku about the plans he had made for the future and what he was going to do when he returned home to Ghana. His reply was so vague that I understood; something wasn’t right here.

Afflicted, I got on the train and returned to my native city. On the way I got so poisoned with a shish kebab in a dining-car that I barely reached home alive. The dining-cars, it appeared, had already switched ownership from the state into private hands. For private owners nothing on Earth existed, neither professional honour, nor conscience, only profit, A short time later our whole country would fall into their dirty and greedy hands.

...In May a group of Dutch students came to our institute: “young Reagan” intended to arrange student exchanges in a big way. Joyful, I hastened to them - full of warm memories about their country. I wanted to show them Moscow, to assure that they liked it there.

Alas, the students appeared, to put it mildly, to be far from intellectuals. The only thing that amused them was to drink beer and to descend into our local supermarket with a video camera, to film the shelves that become empty thanks to the economic sloppiness of the empty talker Gorbachev. “Ho-ho, just look at it! And we thought that this was a superpower!”

It was unpleasant to see, how they rejoiced in somebody else's problems. There was something mentally unhealthy in it. I did not know yet that the Dutch are the brave European champions in the sport of kicking of dead lions.
There was, among them a person who didn’t like all of this just as much as me. A Law student called Guus Jansen. He was as tall as a watchtower, blonde and had a classical Dutch face as if from an old painting. With fastidiousness he looked on at the nursery school level of activities of his fellow countrymen. Perhaps, because he was a bit older and smarter than they were. Guus was already 27, and he had travelled almost half of the globe. Latin America was the only continent which he did not see properly, after he had been robbed in Nicaragua, he had to come back home.

We began to talk.

- I would like to see ordinary daily life, - Guus said to me, - You know, capitals they are all identical in some ways, all around the world, and I’d love to see how people live in some place where local traditions remain.

I dared to take a courageous step: to bring him on a visit to our city. This was a daring step, because Guus was so obviously a foreigner. Although he spoke a little Russian, but even if I had said that he was an Estonian, nobody would have believed me. The trip passed without adventures. Only once an old man approached us in the street and asked our classical tricky question:

- Could you tell me, what time it is?

Do you think he was really interested to know that? He simply wished to hear what Gus will answer - to check up, was he a foreigner or not. The old man was curious.

Guus understood what he was asked - though he did not understand that it was a question with a catch.

- It is 13 hours and 45 minutes - he said with a strong accent.

- Ah, quarter to two! - Grandfather was delighted.

- No, - said Guus with the same accent strictly, - It is 13 hours 45 minutes.

I hastened to pull him away.

Our town delighted him. He wandered in the streets, photographing old wooden houses which no longer existed in Moscow, drank water from a street pump, tasted strawberries from the market, climbed together with me up the bell tower of a local church, I even brought him to our old house where the granny, the granddad and Shurek still lived then. Of course, we didn’t go inside: granny would have had a heart attack, but we sat on the grass in our vegetable plot, near my swing, and I offered him sorrel directly from a bed. When he saw a woman with buckets on a yoke, Guus was so delighted that he frightened her to death. We didn’t have many tall foreigners with expensive cameras wandering around our quarter!

- What a life! - He exclaimed continually. - All is so natural, so real, and so peaceful! And these our little fools... Let them dig there in some empty supermarket... They did not see the real Russia!

It was pleasant to hear it. Apparently, among the Dutch there were also some thinking people with unlimited by the shores show-windows outlook!
At parting the Dutch students decided to leave to us a half-empty jar of peanut butter: which, by the way, none of us was going to eat as we did not know what it was. However, they then consulted each other, changed their minds and took this half-empty jar back home. Well, they surely needed it much more than we did! The Dutch amused us far more than they were amused by our empty counters. We had never seen such cheapskates. To decide to leave their leftovers to people who absolutely neither asked for, nor required it, - and then to change their minds and take these scraps back to their own country was ridiculous. Yes, for this purpose you surely needed four-century’s experience of democracy!

I completed writing my Diploma thesis marvellously quickly. The defending of it passed smoothly, like clockwork. This was probably also because none of the teachers knew anything about my subject and did not know what questions they could ask me. The subject was too exotic being, “The role of African archives in preservation of oral historical tradition”.

I was certain that after all the years that we had spent together at the institute, we would hold some sort of a farewell party in our hostel. In my mind it would be a large and good farewell junket. After all it was our serious farewell from each other and from such important part of our life! To my astonishment, it didn't happen. The spirit of “blanket pulling” had already started to transfer itself to our students. They stopped caring about each other. At the end of term everybody quickly collected his own belongings and left. Even Lida, who was going to join her spouse in our “second capital” Leningrad, felt herself so important as though she had won a lottery. I could not understand it. I thought that she would be the first to want to spend this last day together.

The last thing that I remember from the life in our hostel was my farewell to my foreign friends. It was doubly sad because the chance that we would never see each other again, was in this case was much greater.

With tears I said goodbye to Habiba, the previous day I had said goodbye to Fatima, and then to several other fellow students. I did not say goodbye to Mamadou, because he was still going to be in Moscow for at least another year and therefore even if I did not enter into postgraduate study, I could still come to visit him. Tadesse at parting promised to send me cards for the 7th of November. I have not received any cards from him since then.

I did not say goodbye to Said - neither I, nor he wanted to. The last time I saw him was through a hostel window. I saw his bendy back when he, with suitcases, got into a taxi; I hardly constrained my desire to throw at this back from my 7th floor a big raw potato. I am sure he was happy at last to be leaving “these Russian savages”!

...I was returning home from Moscow that day with my belongings, by the last electric train. At first the carriage was overcrowded, there were so many people, that there was even almost no place to stand. That's why it was even more irritating that in the middle of the carriage a couple of drunk, unshaven types of criminal look stamped on other passenger's feet. They were playing loudly some lousy criminal slang songs
on their tape recorder and already, at this time, nobody dared to say a word to them. As yet I was still “untouched by perestroika” - and when one of those hoodlums, (who had probably just come to freedom from a prison on some dubious amnesty for “enemies of the people”), rudely pushed me, I pushed him back. He began to roar, and the crowd looked at me with horror, as though it was I who was in the wrong.

I also did not understand anything yet, because I still considered that I continued to live in a normal world. I did not understand why the carriage began to empty gradually, but quickly, and by the time that we were drawing near to my town, it was already empty to such a degree that in the whole carriage only myself, these morons and one other person remained. I still was not afraid of them. I had never even seen this type of people on the street. I couldn’t get into my head that these were the future “owners” of our life. Such a thing seemed too idiotic to even contemplate. I assumed that with so many normal people about, of whom there were so many MORE around me, how could it be possible that they would just simply sit and concede our mutual life to those criminals without a fight?

Probably, I would have had big troubles - the kind that doesn’t revolt or even surprise anybody in Russia today. I, still not suspecting that I was in danger, was rescued by a man - not even a man yet, a boy of eighteen or nineteen, a Georgian from the market and the only other person that remained in that carriage. He came to sit next to me and said:

- Let them think that I am with you! - He started to teach me the Georgian alphabet and to tell to me how nice his newborn baby son was. The bastards did not dare to approach us.

I didn’t even understand then that I had to be rescued! I understood it only about five years later when I returned to the already “free Russia”.

I was sent to work in my native town, which suited me well: all the same I was not going to spend much time at this work because I decided to pass exams for postgraduate study in the autumn. I even planned to attempt two of them at once: in my own institute and in the Institute of Africa: I hoped to pass and get into at least one of them!

It was the last arranged distribution of graduates in the history of our institute, but we did not know it at that time.

I still had a free month before going to my first place work. It was not exactly a vacation, but all the same, it was better, than nothing. At that time in our town the national championship of track cycling has just begun!

I was so nervous on the eve of another with sprinter Volodya! I was probably not less if not more, nervous than he before the start. I literally did not sleep all night long. When I came back from Holland, I went straight to the post office and with a fast beating heart posted to his home address in Odessa a magazine about cycling that I brought with me from Amsterdam.

The cyclists at this time had stopped at a small hotel at the velodrome. We came to the velodrome on that day far too early.

- Come on, go and ask him if he has received your magazine! - Mum told me.
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- Oh, mum, I can’t, I’d be embarrassed!
She pushed me to the door, and I resisted, until finally that very
door flew open, and a medium-height guy, still a boy, came out: like
Pushkin, he had curly dark-hair and a snub-nose.
- Who are you looking for? - He asked.
I felt as if I had swallowed my tongue, but mum answered as if
nothing had happened: - For Volodya Zelinsky.
The boy was surprised.
- He isn’t here at the moment, he’s training.
He kept silent for a moment, gave it a thought and added:
- By the way, I am his brother…
That’s how we became acquainted with Alyosha Zelinsky. He was
also a cyclist and had just graduated from secondary school. He had
passed his final exams at the training camp in Kyrgyzstan, at the lake
Issyk-Kul. Volodya didn’t seem to be surprised when he saw us in the
spectator’s seats. My heart was pounding, would he say hello or not?
While passing by, he waved to us... Hurray! The contingent here was quite
different than at previous competitions, there were even some Olympic
medalists! Nobody took Volodya really seriously, because he wasn’t
outstanding, he was an “average” cyclist. But not this time!

On the first day of the competitions everybody, including his coach
Matvei Georguevich, (who apparently thought that last September
Volodya had won just due to a lack of strong opponents) and the
venerable Olympic winners were shocked to the core. There was a brand
new Zelinsky in front of them: such as he hadn’t been since he was 19
years old, a hurricane on the track!

I must say that some cycling officials didn’t like Zelinsky for his
splintery, sharp Cossack character. But he could not help himself: his
tongue was his enemy. He was meek as a lamb when he was chatting to
us, but I learned very quickly how difficult his character was from his
funny, easy-going and cheerful Polish team-mate Pavel.
- This comrade is really complicated! - He said to me about
Volodya.

Have you ever seen easy-going Cossacks? Especially from the Terek
river! I didn’t care what his character was like. He was a great - a God-
blessed sprinter! I couldn’t believe that he didn’t know that himself. Did
he really need someone to be his fan in order to show his talent in all its
glory? So, is it really that important to a man?

The officials often tried to disqualify him because they didn’t like
him. He was a brave cyclist, and often even though he didn’t really
violate the rules, he was at the very verge of it, so it was always possible
to find some fault. Oh, how he made us worried at that time!

It was quite an unforgettable week, the culminating point of which
became an event that none of us, none of those present at the velodrome
expected, perhaps even Volodya himself didn’t. He became the champion
of the USSR for the first time in his sports career, the career that
everybody considered to be already over! There was one more thing, that
none of us knew at the time: that Volodya would soon also become the
very last champion of the Soviet Union.

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But for now Volodya, Alyosha, Pavel and Matvey Gueorgievich rejoiced together! We invited them for a cup of tea at our place, as their good old fans. Now we knew him a little bit better. Tanned, almost dark-skinned Volodya had the same southern accent as my Cossack Granny Wall, and he had dark brown, almost black eyes, that reminded me of ripe cherries (they didn’t reach the size of Lida’s Nariman’s eyes in order to be compared with plums).

Volodya and Alyosha’s parents lived in Grozny. Their mother worked at an ice cream factory. Their father was a welder. Their mother was Ukrainian, and their father’s hereditary line (for many generations) was Terek Cossacks. They also had a sister who worked as an engineer in Sverdlovsk.

- I’m also a student - Volodya told me at the parting shyly. - I study at the Sports Faculty.

...Oh good, happy time when there was no war in Chechnya, when you could trust people, when simple human happiness, immeasurable in money, was possible! I’ve changed, our country has changed, Volodya has changed too, and I still cannot help but smile, when I recall those days.

I was not greeted in a friendly way at work, although one could not call it hostility either. It’s just that in the office there were a couple of small groups of employees already formed, as it usually happens in female-dominated collectives (in all countries) and each one of them tried to drag a fresh person to their side. I didn’t want to participate in any intrigues and machinations. I didn’t come to work for that. I went there to work out my time honestly, to do everything needed to be done, and nothing more.

Some of the ladies in high positions were at first worried that I might have wanted to take their place (they did not have a special higher education at our field like I did). Then when they realized that I wouldn’t want it and that I was going to enter a post-graduate course, they didn’t like that either, it caused them to be envious. It seemed to me that some people simply have nothing to do and that is why they have so much energy and time to be engaged in such nonsense at work. We worked in the former building of an old church, where the roof periodically leaked, right on the ancient documents. In the institute we were told that we would do scientific work after graduation, and I came to this place where people had to draw self-made forms for some documents with a ruler, because the copy machine did not work, and we had to do this all day long. I got sick of such work very quickly, and worse still I didn’t have any real friends there. I went to the pancake café near the circus building for my lunch and sat there until the very end of the lunch break every day. I did not respond even when the boss allowed us to go to the store to queue for something. I did not need to do that.

I was counting the days until October, when the entrance exams for the post-graduate course would start. I had to struggle to be allowed to go there, and if it wasn’t for the main boss, a man, who knows how this all would have ended.
I was lucky that none of the examinations at one institute clashed with the day of the exams in the other. Until now, I don’t know how I managed to pass them all.

I have already mentioned how I passed my philosophy exam at my institute - the one at which I faced the New Russian examiners. I got a good mark. I got “excellent” for History and languages at my institute. At the Institute of Africa it was more difficult: in front of me the commission brutally "knocked down" a guy from Alma-Ata, who had come to pass exams without knowing anybody at the institute personally. They knew me, probably because my Eleonora told something to somebody, so nobody attempted to make me fail. I was passing the exam together with a very well-connected girl: she was a wife of a big boss' beloved son and she lived in the same street, where the Institute was located. She was going to specialize in Algeria. I would not have found out that she was so well-connected, if she hadn't told me that herself.

After the examination she offered to take me to her house, and I agreed. “Let’s go to my place”. She said, and then asked “Can you show me what you are preparing for the philosophy?” It was one of those houses which we heard about so much from the “Voice of America”! Outside it was a typically dilapidated and dusty old mansion, which remained inconspicuous to the passer by. But as soon as we opened the front door it turned out to be a real palace!

- She’s with me! - said my companion to a watchwoman. “Gosh, they have watchwomen here, just like in a hostel!” I thought. I didn’t envy her. But what should I have felt when I saw, after all of this, that she got "excellent" for the exam, and I got only "good"?

Although I was passing my exams successfully, my mood was in decline. Life in the late perestroika’s Moscow became more loathsome, more cynical.

"The gangs are flourishing,
Different bastards are breeding,
There is no bread but plenty of shoe polish,
And a humpbacked leader is mocking us".

And the fools still rejoiced to a song composed a few years earlier:
"I will live different now
We will live different now
Ah Lube-Lube, Lube
Ah Lube-Lube, Lube,
Ah my Lube-Lubercy!
I get up early to do my gymnastics,
I’ll chop your head off for the detente,
I harden my body up -
Watch out, capitalism!
Ah Lube-Lube, Lube
Ah Lube-Lube, Lube,
Ah my Lube-Lubercy!
I accelerate myself at age of sixteen

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467 Reference to the Soviet thriller “The meeting place cannot be changed” and at the same time – a spotting hint at Gorbachev: “gorb” means “hump".

468 Reference to the song composed a few years earlier called "I will live different now", a typical song from the perestroika era.
The kolkhoz “Dawn” accelerates itself too
And my country accelerates itself as well -
That’s what’s happening, brother!
Ah Lube-Lube, Lube
Ah Lube-Lube, Lube,
Ah my Lube-Lubercy!

Two last exams were passed not at the Institute of Africa, but at a special centre of the Academy of Science, so people there were not so exigent. I remembered two things: the fact that I was passing this philosophy exam while having a strong toothache and the expression of one lad’s face who was passing the same exam just before me. He was entering the post-graduate course at the newly created Institute of Europe. Firstly, I’ve never heard about such an institute ( “The creation of this new academic centre was caused by need to review scientifically the important changes in Europe, the estimation of their prospects and consequences, the problems of developing a new security system, the cooperation with Europe in economics, politics, information science, human values...” - typical Gorbachev’s bla-bla-bla). What surprised me, was how proud he was, to the point of being burlesque, to declare that. It looked like he was just about to bust! As if Europe was something a full head higher than the rest of the world Even after visiting Holland I didn’t think so. I would actually make him fail his exams just for his attitude to his own country! He reminded me of a country bumpkin from Vysotsky’s song “A Letter form the Agricultural Exhibition”:

“There’s a respectable park near the river,
I walk around it and I spit only in garbage bins.
But of course you won’t understand that, sitting behind your stove there,

Because you are just an illiterate yokel…”

But the French language exam was a kind of balm for my soul. Thanks to my long conversations with Mamadou (who was worried for me during all the exams) it was very successful: I got an undeniable “excellent” from the Academy of Science. So in the end I entered both post-graduate courses!

Now I had to make a choice...

It wasn’t easy to do. I was eager to choose the Institute of Africa. I had been dreaming of it for so many years! This dream seemed so unachievable to me. So here was I who finally achieved that aim even without being a Muscovite which was considered to be a serious obstacle at that time. But I didn’t want to give up my own institute either! I felt guilty, I did not want to let down my professor who counted and relied on me. Besides, where would I live? In my old hostel where I could help Mamadou to live out his time in Moscow until he returned home safely or in a hostel belonging to the Institute of Africa, where without a doubt there would be a lot of interesting and talented people nice to communicate with?

468 Acceleration (“uskorenie”) word introduced by Gorbachev before “perestroika”. 401
-Mum, can I not study at both institutes?- I asked at home. I felt that I was well capable to do it
- “Well, how do you imagine it”? - She said - “You’ve got only one employment history book. Are you going to write and present two scientific theses? And do you know it’s illegal to get two scholarships”? Postgraduate Scholarship grant was about 90 rubles. Even if I refused one of them it would have looked at least suspicious. The good thing was that I had a few weeks to think about it. As far as I understood, studying at the postgraduate level started in early November, but I felt uneasy.

In the midst of the exams Marietta and Hans sent me an invitation to Holland. I asked them about it when I was going back home, but I did not think they would do it so quickly. I decided to go there for the New Year and started arranging the necessary paperwork. At that time an exit visa was still required, and I went to the OVIR\textsuperscript{469} to apply for it. I was scared to death. I waited for an array of different biased questions, and who knew, would they let me go or not? My mum still worked at a military factory, though I personally had no idea about any secrets. To my surprise, I was met there almost cordially. Still only a few people travelled abroad. There wasn’t a queue at the OVIR. Women working in the office looked at me almost with envy because I had already been abroad. They asked me different questions about how I had become acquainted with my Dutch hosts and what was life abroad like. Sometime later I received a permission for the exit visa.

Mamadou was very glad that I had got a place at the post-graduate studies and hoped that I would choose our institute. I didn’t keep an eye on his Russian neighbours during the exams. They flustered him with beer and once broke a pretty plush toy which he bought for his kid. Then they felt ashamed and came to apologise:
- Mamadou, come on, we’ll buy you another toy! You just tell us what you want, okay?
- Ça va, ça va\textsuperscript{470}! - He tried to reassure them - saying, “I do not need anything, I’m okay”.
- Oh, you want an owl? - His neighbours rejoiced. - Okay, we’ll look for it! (“Owl” in Russian is “sova”).

In our hostel at that time only Lyuba still remained: her husband was still a student, but she was pregnant and decided not to travel according to where she got a job after graduation: to Latvia, “to the Nazis”, as she already called his fellow-Latvians, having a closer look at their behaviour. In the autumn she gave a birth to a daughter.

Having gathered the courage I decided to choose the Institute of Africa, although I had already been given a room in my old hostel, along with a post graduate student from China. So I went to the post graduate office that I had chosen- to find out when and where the classes would begin.

Quite unexpectedly for me I was shouted at, and quite rudely.

\textsuperscript{469} Office of Visa and Registration in the USSR.
\textsuperscript{470} It’s OK (French).
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- “They wander into here, all sorts”! - A red-faced man named Yuri Ivanovich yelled at me. - “Classes have already started long ago! Eleonora Alexeevna takes in some unknown provincials, and I have to deal with them! She already buzzed my head off about how much she needs you. She said you would even marry a Muscovite, if necessary. And you didn’t turn up for ages”. Perhaps I was too sensitive at that time but I was offended to the very depths of my soul. Who the hell does he think he is? He is just some kind of a caretaker here, not even a scientist! What had I done wrong for him to talk to me like that? What crime have I committed? I’ve never talked to anybody in such a way and I would never allow anybody to yell at me. Firstly, I had definitely been told that the classes would start on the first of November. Secondly, I was reminded again that I was a second-rate-person. I was not the same as that “special lady” from the posh house with whom I had passed the exams, just because of where I was born. Had he ever tried to scream at her? I bet that he wouldn’t dare. Thirdly, I thought, so that’s how things stand, Eleonora Alexeevna has already even decided whom I will marry and what will happen to me in three years time when I graduate? Will she urgently look for a husband for me, so that I can stay in Moscow? Why should I depend on it my dream was doused with dirt. And my memory peddled the image of the Dutch, a polite, intelligent, thoughtful, and proactive people, nobody there would talk to me like that!

While I was recovering from this visit, Kweku arrived in Moscow. He still had not gone to Ghana and he now had come to apply for a UK visa at the embassy. He had always spoken vaguely about his plans for our future together. And then he suddenly blurted out:

-“I think it will be better for you to live in Europe”!

I was struck dumb with indignation. Another well-wisher, who knew better than me what I needed! So he thinks that I’m such a sissy that I would not survive in Africa? He thinks that I’m looking for all this Western junk which can be resold?

Then I became extremely angry. Oh, so you say, into Europe? Well, okay, let’s go to Europe!

He meant, of course, to go there with him.

You know what, baby? I can do it on my own, if needed!

It was stupid, very stupid, that one phrase of some African black marketer had decided my fate. Of course, I decided it myself, it’s silly to deny that but if he had not told me that I often wonder what would have happened then. And could I live in modern Moscow which is much worse than any Africa?

This is not that kind of Moscow where I studied.

Would I write scientific articles about Africa from a non-Marxist point of view? The very same researchers from that time, who told of how popular Marxism-Leninism was in Africa, now write about how unpopular it was. Would I too have started to write about the “red terror” of Mengistu, instead of the outstanding success of his campaign against illiteracy, about which now all these Africanists modestly keep quiet? Did I need such a job which would require from me to become a turncoat?
Moscow is not the only place in the world, I told myself recalling how during the summer before entering postgraduate school I met one of my former classmates at the market in my home town. She had been nicknamed "Professor". She graduated from our local pedagogical institute and was about to start working in a school as a teacher of physics. Having discovered that I was sent to work in my hometown she sarcastically said:

- “Well, could they not keep you in Moscow”? - With a look as if to say that this was my complete failure in life. I became angry. None of my other classmates had dared to go to Moscow to study in their time!
- “Are there no other good cities except for Moscow”?
This thought crossed my mind more and more often.
I will not describe all the steps of obtaining a Dutch visa for 3 months, how much effort it took for us to buy a ticket (because they suddenly dramatically changed the exchange rate for our citizens travelling abroad), and how upset Mamadou was when I shared my plans with him. He was about to write a report on the history of CPSU that year, from which all the results of his training depended, but how could he do it if he still barely spoke Russian? I promised him that I would not leave until I had written the report for him. So I did, and by the end of November everything, including his report, was ready. I didn’t warn anybody at the institute because I was not sure what would happen next.

- “Mum”, - I said at home - “If I can, I’ll stay there for working. After all, I do have friends there, I’m not just going into the unknown. And if it doesn’t work out, I’ll come back. Then I’ll invent something to settle the troubles if they happen to be”.
Mum just threw up her hands in the air, she knew my tough character and that if I decided something I could not be moved.

- “But don’t risk anything, I beg you”! - she said. - “And what will I say to Volodya Zelinsky during the winter championship”?
It was my soft spot and she knew it!

- “Maybe I’ll be back before that time”! - I told her.
There was another reason, the preeminent reason to cause such an undertaking - and the reason which I did not tell anyone fearing that I might be made fun of. I thought that nobody would believe it.

...I could not properly express in words my predicament back then, but in my heart there was a mixture of pain from the growing realization of my own irrelevance, and anxiety for some yet unknown but clearly gathering troubles over our country. The problem was not so much that “the fiddler was no longer required”.

I felt something that my mom couldn’t yet see. A catastrophe was looming. Such a one after which the realization of all my dreams would lose all of their meaning. I did not know exactly what it was going to be, I did not know from which side to expect it, but I was sure that it was going to break out soon, I had no doubts. Of course, it was cowardice to leave the country at such a time. We all know the proverb about who is leaving the sinking ship first. It’s meaningless to justify your actions in such cases. The only thing that remains is to try to explain why it happened.

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I did not see anybody to rely on and to join in order to prevent this upcoming catastrophe. The voice of Nina Andreyeva\(^{472}\) who could not compromise on her principles was drowned in the screams of the innumerable “little Reagans” who did not have anything to compromise because they had no principles. They were given all the tribunes, and it seemed that they formed the entire population of the country, that there were no other people except for them, in the whole country. Although this was definitely not so, it was just that the fish was quickly beginning to rot from its head.

I tried to convince myself that I did not care what happened, that in my lifetime in our country there were no longer any revolutionaries. That is why I hoped to meet them among the Africans. I tried to assure myself that in a nation where its people had become so mad that they allowed somebody to do such things to our country, the very things that were unfolding before my eyes, they deserved all that would happen to them. But this was not true; it was merely an excuse to pacify my own conscience.

Habiba told me that for a person to become a revolutionary, you must send him to study in the West. “Since I have not met the revolutionaries among Africans here, I am sure to meet them there!” - I thought.

I could invent three boxes of heroic fairytales, like thousands of our local "storytellers" who seek political asylum in the West did, although in fact they did not have anything to do with politics. However I was not going to do that. I could say that I wasn’t the one who felt that way in that time (for example, Nikita Arnoldovich too!), but this is not an excuse. I committed a craven, cowardly act, having escaped from the problems of my own country - and I admit this and blame only myself. *Mea culpa!*

Like in an old Russian fairytale, “the princess was so furious that she took off the ring, dropped it down and said: “Nobody will get this goddamn ring, neither you, nor me!” I left both postgraduate schools and on one chilly November evening I got into a train and left Moscow.

...In my last day in the Soviet Union it was snowing, as if in order for me to remember our winter. I was leaving by train, the plane had already become something I could not afford.

- “It’s even more interesting - to go across the whole of Europe”! - My Mum said.

I had to change the train at another station, which was in West Berlin. I didn’t speak German. Mind you in Berlin I had - guess! - correct, a pen-friend, Detlef, who volunteered to accompany me to the train (East Germans had just been allowed to visit West Berlin). My mum and Mamadou accompanied me to the Beloruskaya train station. All three of us were sad. Before the departure we went to a cafe on the fifteenth

\(^{472}\) Nina Aleksandrovna Andreyeva (born 1938 in Leningrad), was a chemistry lecturer at the Leningrad Technological Institute. She joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1966. Author of the famous letter “I cannot forsake my principles” where she implied that Mikhail Gorbachev and his closest supporters were not real communists.
floor of the Moscow Hotel - my favourite one - for a farewell dinner. I asked my mother not to leave Mamadou alone and to help him until he'll return home. When the train began to move, Mamadou burst into tears and rushed to my mother's neck. Mum could not stand it either and began to wipe her tears, I felt like I got sharply stung in the nose.

What am I doing? Why am I doing this? What would happen if I do not go ahead with it?

All these issues swirled through my head, but the train already carried me away to the West.

Poland covered with snow was very beautiful. I liked Berlin a little less but it still looked quite lovely and the people also seemed quite satisfied with their lives. Compared to Gorbachev's Moscow, it was definitely an oasis.

Detlef worked as an engineer at a plant. I stayed at his place for a couple of days before continuing my journey. I wanted to see the city. The only thing that I did not like was the acoustic permeability in his apartment. I could hear almost every word from his neighbours. But in general the GDR looked quite respectable in my eyes.

After three days, in the early morning, Detlef and I crossed Checkpoint Charlie, and he put me on my Dutch train.

Germany was a country of contrasts, in the sense of the diversity of successive landscapes. I communicated with gestures to a German family who happened to be my neighbours in the compartment. When I talk with Germans I always wonder how they could fight with us during the war, but this is a subject which is better not to talk about.

When the train crossed the Dutch border and stopped at the first Dutch city, Hengelo, I felt so relieved, my heart thumped with joy. I recognized the familiar yellow trains and red mailboxes outside. Life ahead seemed endless and problem free.

Life seemed to be one continuous string of happiness without hiccups. I had never been so deeply wrong.

...You already know what happened next. It turned out that the people who advocated the freedom of movement for Soviet citizens, and such tolerant Dutch did not rejoice when we actually used this freedom. Of course, I could have started to lie and to claim that I was persecuted for political reasons at home and was looked to obtain refugee status. Especially since, at that time, it was not as difficult as it is now. Later I meta lot of people who remained in Holland that way, having lied about the persecution. As for me, I would not do it. I could not insult my country unjustly, even if I was not satisfied with something back at home, it was strictly our own internal business.

I was almost ready to go home when I met Sonny...

What happened to the heroes of the previous story? Oh, they were all right, except for Detlef. After the unification of Germany, which he had been waiting for, his factory closed, and being a graduated chemical engineer he found himself unemployed for the first time in his life. Only after ten years did he find a low-paid job as a shop assistant. He was also evicted from the apartments in the downtown Berlin by returning pre-war owners. Eleonora Alexeevna is still working at her old place. After a
disagreement with the “young Reagan” Mikhail Evseyevich left the institute. They say that he has now radically revised his perestroika views on Stalin. Better late than never! Mamadou who taught me what the difference is between réfrigérateur and congélateur\textsuperscript{473}, successfully survived his academic year in the Soviet Union. He successfully defended his report about the history of the CPSU (the CPSU History Department was disbanded only the following year). My mother visited him about once a month and brought him “du poulait” and other delicious things. He became attached to her as to his own mother. Mamadou took back home his réfrigérateur and congélateur and a whole container of different things. His niece, who worked at the embassy, helped him with the dispatch. I do not know whether he bought a white horse back at home but he became director of a lyceum and he is raising two more lovely daughters along with his son. It’s just a pity that he’s got a bad heart. Kweku returned to his London. Once he called up at my mother’s work from there which caused a stir in her Personnel Department.–“It’s Kweku from London” - he said with Churchill’s air of self-importance. - Please tell to Zhenya that…"

-“I can’t tell anything to Zhenya, she lives in Holland now”! - My mother replied.

- “Oh”...

Yes, I managed to impress him by this act, but was it really worth moving into a terrarium?

- …Next stop is the Hole in the Hedge! - Bus driver announced seriously.I thought I misheard.

-What? Geoffrey laughed.

- Yes, it is really called so. Do you see, “there is a hole in the middle of those bushes?”

Geoffrey was a cheerful two-legged creature. Sorry, but I could not call him different. I did not have any illusions about Geoffrey. He did not reach the level of a human being. His bad mood usually didn’t last for long. There were a couple of things that wiped it away immediately. Beer was among them. Another thing was “food.” He even pronounced this word with a peculiar expression, stretching his lips into a tube. Well, and of course, there was also “Star Trek”!

We were on a bus, on our way to his mother. We were going to a small seaside town in South Down, where I was going to buy a house. Of course, only if I found a suitable one.

...Although my Dublin friends were trying to convince me for a long time what a dangerous place the North was, I decided to see it with my own eyes. Better to see once than to hear about it a hundred times! The very first time I came here was on a three-day tour designed for young Americans, Australians and New Zealanders who look for adventures. Our driver was a native of these places, though he was now living in Dublin, and therefore he described the local life to us in a vivid way. They really can do this so skilfully! I remember how tense my neck, muscles and spine became when our minibus crossed the border for the first time. This was

\textsuperscript{473} Fridge & freezer (French).
near Newry, and my feelings were not without a reason. The road was in the sights of the British army forts that were built over it on a slope, and NATO soldiers wandered along the road with assault rifles ready for action. Although nothing actually happened, I could only sympathize with the people who lived in such conditions every day. I felt almost like Zina Portnova\textsuperscript{474} at the very first evening.

Our tour passed through South Down with its beautiful and dazzling coastline and through Downpatrick with its grave of St Patrick’s. We went to Belfast where they showed us the murals in both Catholic and Protestant parts of the town (in the Catholic part they happily waved to us, in the Protestant part they almost threw stones at our Dublin bus). We saw the severe Antrim Coast and Derry or Londonderry, depending on with whom you spoke. For our guide, it was Derry.

Somehow I do not recall hearing about Orangemen parades\textsuperscript{475} during the Soviet times, the parades which often deliberately passed through Catholic neighbourhoods. Somehow it had not been left in my memory. Here our guide told us in detail about the features of local life. Having looked more closely at the Shankill residents who behaved not too dissimilarly to the inhabitants of a zoo, I felt even more sympathy for the indigenous Catholic minority.

I was pleasantly surprised by the fact that despite this apparent external dissimilarity many places here - the Falls Road in Belfast and the Bogside in Derry- reminded me of my childhood.

These were communities where everyone knew each other. Where the inscriptions "No to foreign imperialism", and the image of Che Guevara on the walls could still be seen. The Derry guide shook my hand and said looking with pride that when he was younger, Lenin was his hero, in the same way as Bobby Sands was my hero at that time for me.

The Devil is not as scary as he is painted, I thought! At least we have common enemies.

I really wanted to get to know better how this region lives.

Before our first meeting Geoffrey was nervous. Strictly speaking, there was no reason to be nervous but he could not help himself. He had never been in this situation before. He has never before met a person at the train station whom he got to know through the internet! Added to this was the fact that I was a foreigner, and moreover a Russian. No, of course, Anna Kournikova was great but for some reason he stubbornly imagined a hefty strong woman like Russian kernel pushers whom he saw as a child on TV. Somewhere from the depths of the subconscious the face of the evil Rosa Klebb\textsuperscript{476} from the James Bond film floated in his mind and he could not cancel this picture although he got my photograph by email and I wasn’t like a kernel pusher. His mind played games, but what if?

\textsuperscript{474} See page 165.

\textsuperscript{475} For more information see: \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orange_walk#Form_of_parades}.

\textsuperscript{476} Colonel Rosa Klebb is a fictional character and the main antagonist from the James Bond film and novel From Russia with Love.
He was a little bit reassured by the fact that, judging by my emails, I was not one of those desperate Russian women who were eager to find a husband abroad. They wrote so much in their newspapers about such women. No, I seemed to be entirely independent and in our correspondence there was not anything personal. It was interesting to learn about life in a country which had only recently been for him as far away as Mars! It was like communicating with an extraterrestrial: Geoffrey, like most men in all countries who have a TV loved “Star Trek”.

I was two years older than Geoffrey. I recognised him at the station at once by his frightened face that I had seen on the photo. He kept wiping the cold sweat off that face. I saw how he sighed with relief at finally seeing that I was not like Faina Melnik. Although I didn’t reach Anna Kournikova’s level either.

Geoffrey was a stocky, heavy-headed guy with a very Irish face and his hair was prematurely greying (the greyness had been caused by shock from a car accident that he had been in when he was drunk). The day was unusually warm for late April and Geoffrey took me to see the city. No, not Bobby Sand’s, Kieran Doherty’s and Joe McDonnell’s Belfast, but a respectable south Belfast with its university and cozy little cafes where his friends, Craig and Paul, and his brother Danny had settled.

We talked incessantly and by the end of the day we felt like we had already known one another for ages. He treated life with ease and his stories about life here seemed so interesting to me back then. He treated life with so much ease that with him I could relax and put my worries to one side. This was the feeling I needed a lot at that time.

My nerves were almost at breaking point. This was because of the tensions at work, because of the war in Yugoslavia and because of the uncertainty of the reunification of my family. I did not tell Geoffrey about it. If our friendship had turned into a serious relationship, then of course, I would tell him. However having talked to him, I quickly realized that “we do not need such Geoffreys”, and simply to socialize with him, on friendly and pleasant terms. Suited me just fine.

A lot of Irish men (and Irish women too!) are unfortunately quite superficial people. You should be aware of it when socializing with them, in order not to get a “broken heart”. They light up very easily with a new idea or get easily carried away with new people, but just as easily lose their interest in them without any visible external reasons and sometimes this happens quite unexpectedly. This concerns not only relationship between men and women but relations amongst friends, colleagues, comrades, in business, and so on. The Irish temper is as changeable as the Irish weather. Therefore you have to assume that your friendship in Ireland won’t be just as deep as we are used to back at home. Of course there are exceptions to the rule but these are just the exceptions.

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477 Faina Grigorievna Veleva-Melnik (born 1945) was a Ukrainian-born Soviet discus thrower, a 1972 Summer Olympics champion in the discus event.
478 Nikolai Ozerov’s “We do not need such hockey!” (about Canadian ice-hockey players) in the 1970s became a classic expression in the USSR.
Irina Malenko

We parted at that time in a friendly way and since then I’ve often been to Belfast. I practically spent every weekend there, so that I didn’t have to sit at home alone longing for Lisa and feeling sorry for myself! Geoffrey listened to my eager questions about what, how and why, and deep inside he was proud of himself for he will help me to fall in love his native land!

Geoffrey opened up a new world for me. He told me about things that were ordinary for him, but I listened to him with my eyes wide open. I learned that here unlike in Russia people do not talk to each other about politics, that Protestants in the bar or disco can be recognised not only by their names, but by some inner greater stiffness and rigidity. I laughed heartily about the story how his father, when handing the documents to a British soldier at the check point, tied them to his sleeve with elastic, so that when the soldier reached for his passport it was “running away”, and the upset soldier said: “Very funny, Sir…” He did not dare to beat up the headmaster of an Antrim village school, of course: he wasn’t some unemployed “Taig”479 from West Belfast!

It turned out that relations between Catholics and Protestants here were not as straightforward as I had imagined! I became aware of it when I absolutely embarrassed Craig, almost to tears. Thinking that because three of my new friends were childhood friends and one of them was a Catholic, the two others surely should be Catholics as well, I came back one day all flushed from the loyalist Shankill and said right in the doorway:

- How awful! What disgusting, hateful murals I saw there on the walls!

Craig blushed to the roots of his hair and mumbled that he did not support it, that he was against it too. For a moment I looked at him puzzled. Why was he blushing so much? It was only when Geoffrey whispered in my ear: “You know, Craig is a Protestant, I understood and myself became as red as a tomato. I did not mean to offend him and did not think to compare him to those Shankill dudes!

I had a big deficiency, according to Geoffrey. I was “too interested in politics”. I supposed that this was due to my origins. I tried to explain that, to me, it was not something pleasant, but politics unfortunately defines the lives of all of us and that we should fight against injustice. It was such a natural, intrinsic part of me as fair hair - for Anna Kournikova. But Geoffrey just hated all politicians; he did not believe any of them (well, except, perhaps, a distinguished man like John Hume!480). He did not believe that someone can or even wants to change his life. And he told me that in no uncertain terms.

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479 Traditional Irish name that is being used as an insult by Northern Irish Protestants for Catholics.

480 John Hume (born 1937) - a former Irish politician from Derry, Northern Ireland. He was a founding member and a former leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and was co-recipient of the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize, with David Trimble.
Irina Malenko

“Who will guard the guards”? - He asked me his favourite question. “Politicians have their own lives and we have ours. I will not let them poison my existence”.

- But they get to poison it anyway! - I was furious. Although his question, of course, was reasonable, to me the fact remained that it would not be resolved by itself!

Geoffrey came to Dublin to see me several times and even did something for me that he would never have done for anybody else. He took part with me in an anti-war demonstration in the centre of Dublin. He walked, himself surprised that he was suddenly there, on O’Connell Street, in a political demonstration! Maybe he was sick? Or, God beware, fell in love?

I realized that Geoffrey disliked “politics” and I tried hard not to speak with him on these issues. What then, what could we talk about, beer, or “Star Trek”? I did try. I suffered when visiting him at his house from the fact that he sat there, watching television for days long, just like Ilya Muromets had spent 33 years sitting in his hut: without turning the TV off, watching no matter what, as long as he didn’t have turn it off, down till 3, 4 or 5 o’clock in the morning. I wanted to visit West Belfast where the famous Feile festival was held at the time, I wanted to climb the Black mountain, not to sit in a smoky room. But alas...

We didn’t quarrel, in general. But as I’ve already said, I quickly realised that we walked down different paths. Especially when he kept repeating about his nephews, who, by the way are totally healthy kids: “I don’t like weens!”

Sometimes I erupted. For example, the time that he began to retell a story that he had seen on television, the programme honoured two British soldiers, who went to Kosovo to fight on the Albanian side. He did not understand why I suddenly shrunk into a ball; so, it was the Serbs who destroyed the poor Albanians? Wasn’t it? That was the reason why I spat in his face angrily.

- Geoffrey, don’t you see that those Albanians are just like your loyalists? The Serbs had lived on this land for many generations before the Albanians came? Don’t you know anything about history, and don’t you want to know?

I was so upset then that I went back to Dublin and did not write to him for almost two weeks. Eventually he apologised, although he did not understand why he should. The British soldiers were brave fellows; really they were heroes for him.

When he found out that I had decided to move to the North and was looking for a home there, he promised to help me choose the right

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481 Ilya Muromets is a Kievan Rus’ epic hero. He is celebrated in numerous byliny (Russian folk epic poems). According to legends, Ilya, the son of a farmer, was born in the village of Karacharovo, near Murom. He suffered serious illness in his youth and was unable to walk until the age of 33 (till then he could only lie on a Russian oven), when he was miraculously healed by two pilgrims.

482 Feile an Phobail – West Belfast community festival, held annually in August.

483 Weens – Northern Irish word for “kids” (from “wee” – “small”).
place; he knew which areas were good and which areas were not. Of course I was inexperienced in the local political topography. I was looking for a house on the Internet pages, focusing mainly on price, and I arranged meetings with estate agents to view these houses. House prices were ridiculously low here because nobody wanted to buy them.

Once I got Geoffrey into such a den that he was glad to get out of there alive! Later he explained to me that the most horrible places for a Catholic are those where the curbs are painted in the colours of the British flag. I understood.

Once he took me to his native village in Antrim. It was formerly the favourite place of “the most famous British person of all time”, Winston Churchill, whose holiday cottage was now converted into a hotel. Geoffrey joked about his village:

- “We are surrounded from all sides! If something happens we can only get away by sea”. - He was alluding to the fact that from the north, south and west it was surrounded by Protestant settlements. These were not just any Protestants, far from it, the notorious “Bible Belt” of Ballymena passed around the village, - they formed the bastion of Paisley supporters, they were Protestant militant fundamentalists. Thus in an emergency it was possible to get out of Geoffrey’s village only by boat, and even then it was those Protestant’s ancestral home beyond the sea - Scotland.

Geoffrey told me of his childhood and about his family. His parents, school teachers, met in Kenya where they taught the Masai English. His mother, however, left her job after giving birth to four children - one girl and three boys who were as stubborn as bulls! It was hard to get by on the father’s salary alone, and at his insistence the mother got to run her own business. They opened a small ice cream shop from home on the main street where buses with Yankee tourists stopped en masse in search for the graves of their ancestors at Antrim Glenn.

Until his father’s death his mother’s life was spent in her husbands native village and as I understood from Geoffrey’s stories, although he did not understand it himself, she lived in the way that his father had wished. Perhaps that is why after his death Geoffrey’s mother did not listen to anyone anymore, she sold her wearsome house-shop and returned to her own native coastal town in South Down. That town was overwhelmingly Catholic and a terribly beautiful place.

Geoffrey was not born in the village itself, but in Ballymena which was the nearest town with a hospital. The town of Ballymena is not only famous because of Paisley, but because of Liam Neeson484 too. Geoffrey’s uncle, by the way, taught him boxing. Everyone here seemed to know each other!

We were walking down the village street and I grabbed his arm suddenly:

- Look! Look! Geoffrey raised his head. There was a car leaving a church, driven by a bespectacled bearded man.

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484 Liam Neeson (b.1952) - is an Irish actor born in Northern Ireland, who has been nominated for an Oscar, a BAFTA and three Golden Globe Awards.
- “It’s”… - I gasped. Geoffrey laughed:
- “All people think so! This is our local Protestant minister”! Well, he was shameless and insolent enough to wear his beard in such away that he looked exactly like Gerry Adams!

I refused to believe that this was not Adams, but Geoffrey assured me that it wasn’t.

It was a pleasant Sunday afternoon and families along with their children slowly walked down to the quay. At the end of the street there was a funfair from which music and laughter were heard. Suddenly a string of “funnels” appeared on the street, and military armoured cars that used to roam around the village came into sight. From each armoured car the figure of an English rifleman, with his face covered tightly in a mask popped up. Passing by the crowds of children they were pointing their automatic weapons at the people. It was spring of 1999.

The gulls were screaming all around us and the air itself seemed to be salty because of the sea. I felt furious; it was like Yugoslavia had once more struck in my heart, but with a new strength. Meanwhile, Geoffrey kept speaking about how much he loved the sea and the wind, that he would at sometime buy his father’s old house back from its new owners… no, perhaps he better had build a new one, on the shore, such a one that would look like a rock and fit naturally into the wilderness. He also spoke about buying a motorcycle on which to drive me all over the North, without stopping in Larne485, of course! He said that he would order a special motorcycle helmet for me with a hammer and sickle on it! He liked my stories about the spetsnaz486, which he asked me to tell him. If I could only bring a Russian military uniform to him by for Halloween! The previous year two guys at his university had dressed up in American military uniform and everybody was so jealous, so this year he would have looked best of all, with my assistance!

Geoffrey did not notice that I was becoming gloomy, and even if he had noticed, he would not have understood the reason. He was not aware of the immortal tale by Saltykov-Shchedrin about the wise gudgeon487 which we had learnt in literature lessons at school. I looked at him once again and suddenly asked whether he cared about what was going on here? Did he want to see his country united, without these soldiers that looked like Nazis, without these painted curbs, on which he was so terrified to walk, without the need to wear headphones to listen to traditional Irish songs?

- I do want it! - protested Geoffrey. - Do you know what I dream of? How wonderful it would be to take a road roller - you know that one with which they paint lines on the road? - to smear it with the three colours of the Irish flag and to ride it all the way from Dublin to Derry! To paint the road in three colours! Can you imagine how angry the Loyalists would get?

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485 One of the sectarian “hot spots” in Antrim, with overwhelmingly Protestant population.
486 Russian Special Forces.
487 Classic Russian satiric fairy tale about Gudgeon who is afraid of everything and only cares about his own life.
But this didn’t cheer me up. Still grim, like a cloud, I went into the pub with him. Yet still, Geoffrey did not understand what had made me so upset.

The pub was noisy and fun, with traditional music playing. Geoffrey ordered a pint of beer for both of us. I kept silent and he tried to correct the situation.

- Do not think of anything, - said Geoffrey - I was brought up by Aunt Melda from Rathfriland - do you remember I told you about her? So her entire family was killed by the Black and Tans, including her husband and little son. I remember better than you what animals the Englishmen are! Well, Aunt Melda then dedicated her life to us and for a long time had been carrying the food to the mountains, for the Boys. But now they are different, you know? They think only of themselves, and make money by selling cigarettes and fuel illegally. They are not the same heroes of the 1920s, you know?

Being a Northern Irish man is so hard, he thought in desperation - whether you’re Catholic or Protestant. You just want to live your life, to eat dinner from a Chinese takeaway, to drink “Harp” or “Guinness”, to study, to buy a motorcycle and a new stereo, and... to dream about climbing a mountain someday instead of looking at it through the window. You don’t disturb anybody. It is possible to dream of a united Ireland, too, and what a beautiful dream it is! When you learn how to secretly whisper (so not to offend anyone, he assured himself) a couple of Irish rebel songs, looking in the mirror after that, it feels so nice! For this also courage is needed! But there are always those who want to change the existing order of things, who always muddy the water, who rebel against the authorities. What do they want? Surely they also want beer and a quick motorcycle ride with Anna Kournikova on the back seat, like any normal person?

All this was written on his rustic face so clearly that one did not have to be a gypsy-fortune-teller to read it.

When we went outside, the bar was closing. Geoffrey himself used to work as a bouncer in a student bar at the university (two free pints were supposed to be paid to him for each evening!) and he knew from his experience that it would take at least half an hour until the bouncers and bartender would persuade the visitors to leave the premises. A noisy, jolly, tipsy crowd threatened to pour out into the main street of the village and continue walking.

I walked towards the former summer residence of Churchill thinking how long will it all continue? My patience was decreasing exceptionally, as chagrin leather.

After that night Geoffrey and I did not see each other for several weeks. I responded absent-mindedly to his emails, as usual their content was that of a puppy dog’s childish joy of life. Too much was happening at that moment. I found a broker in Belfast, who promised to help me find a bank that would give me a mortgage loan and they explained what type of those loans were available. This is despite the fact that I was working in

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488 Rathfriland is a village in County Down, Northern Ireland. It is a hilltop Plantation of Ulster settlement, with a Catholic minority.
the South, in another jurisdiction. The broker told me that he had told the bank that I worked for a company where I had to travel to the North often! Now I had to have patience at work: it was impossible to look for a new job until I found a house to buy and until I had secured that mortgage loan because the bank would check where I worked and how much I earned.

Biting my lips I walked to the office every morning, not knowing when I would be allowed to go home at night. Besides, I had already bought the tickets to go home. I wanted to spend time with Lisa on her birthday, but the boss told me that I was not allowed to go anywhere at the moment. So it became necessary to resolve all these issues as soon as possible! Every weekend I viewed the houses in Belfast, but they were not what I was looking for. The child cannot be put at risk.

I almost bought a house in a loyalist area of south Belfast because they were so cheap in that area. A terraced house with three bedrooms and a garden cost no more than twenty six thousand pounds. I was captivated by the fact that the centre of the city was within just ten minutes walking distance. I did have my reservations, at the end of the day I was not a local and I wondered, will they treat me like an enemy?

The real estate agent was grateful that I was interested. His office was empty, the business was deteriorating. He gladly showed me all the properties in his portfolio that were in this district. To convince me he brought me to a house where a Russian family from Kazakhstan lived. The family only rented the house, but the agent asked them to share their impressions of life there with me.

- “No, here’s even better than among the Catholics. They drink less”! - replied my former compatriot.

The estate agent ruined everything himself. Do I have to explain that he was a Protestant too!

- It is a very good, quiet area, - he said, - if you were Irish, I would not advise you to live here, but you are a foreigner, so that’s OK. "Excuse me, but what if I want to invite some Irish friends to visit me?” - I thought. Anyway, why should I live among such people, among whom it is better for the Irish not to show up? Experience has proven that I was right. Foreigners in south Belfast were not going to be beaten only when there were very few of them. Today tells a different story, Polish, Lithuanian and Portuguese living in this area suffer nearly every day from arson attacks, window breaking and other assaults committed by the locals. However, the local residents occupy a familiar position: "I am not a racist, but...” There can be no “buts” or "ifs". If there is a “but” then you are already a racist!

What if, I thought, I try the town where Geoffrey’s mother lives? Once we visited her. She was a cheerful red-haired woman who somehow resembled a squirrel. Having been a widow for several years, she had recently met her first love - also a widower; the feelings had come over them both with a new force and Geoffrey joked that soon he would get his mother married off.
Geoffrey was going to take his exams soon, and then - hurray! Such a well-deserved summer vacation! He could spend it at his brother Danny's in Belfast. His brother had such a cool job as a lifesaver in the harbour, where you could sleep all through the night and the salary was £800 a week! Neither did Danny have to break his head over the basics of programming, as Geoffrey had to now! Oh, how lucky can some people be.

He already imagined how he would watch TV until Danny returned from work (Danny has 20 channels, cool!), then he would go to sleep until three of four o'clock in the afternoon, then he would go out with Danny, Paul and Craig to the pub (surely, they would not refuse to buy a beer for a poor student? He was ready to wash dishes the whole summer for them!). I could come for a weekend too; there was plenty of space in the house. In other words he had thought of everything and, frankly speaking, he was quite proud of himself. Why not to be proud? Maybe by the end of the summer he would finally dare to ask if I wanted a trip on a motorbike around the North! Of course, Danny would lend him his bike.

I came only in July to see him when his vacation has already begun. Just before the “silly season”, the season of Orange parades, when all the normal people leave the North. If only Geoffrey had the money, he too would go away somewhere. Unlike other students, Geoffrey had not managed to get a summer job but he thought that in the end it was not too bad in Belfast, and that you don't really have to leave the house during these days. You’d survive somehow.

On Sunday when the infamous parade at Drumcree⁴⁸⁹ was held Geoffrey and his friends gathered together around the TV stocked up in advance with plenty of beer.

- “Paul, would you get some crisps, quickly”? - Geoffrey asked, providing space on the couch for me. - “You’ll get back right in time for the start”.

- “Every year we gather together by the telly and watch this performance,” - he explained to me. - “Such craic!”⁴⁹⁰

- “Why”? I asked.

- “Did you see how they behave and what they do? It's so funny! You're just in time for beer and crisps. Paul, hurry up, don’t be late”!

I was silent. If Geoffrey had looked at me, he would have realized that my face did not promise anything good. But he did not think: he was too busy with what was going on on the screen. A scuffle was going on

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⁴⁸⁹ The Drumcree conflict or Drumcree standoff is an ongoing dispute over a yearly parade in Portadown, Northern Ireland. The dispute is between the Orange Order and local residents (represented by the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition). The Orange Order (a Protestant organisation with strong links to unionism) insists that it should be allowed to march its traditional route to- and from Drumcree Church. Today most of this route falls within the town's mainly-Catholic and nationalist quarter, which is densely populated. The residents have sought to re-route the parade away from this area, seeing it as triumphalist and supremacist. The "Drumcree parade" is held on the Sunday before the Twelfth of July. There have been intermittent violent clashes during the yearly parade since at least 1873.

⁴⁹⁰ Craic – Irish word meaning “fun”, “good time”
there. The Orangemen were attacking the police officers and the police, in their turn, as if it were agreed, didn’t pay any attention to them and happily unleashed their batons on the heads of those who were trying to restrain angry local residents and therefore stood with their backs to the police: the Catholic stewards.

Geoffrey even licked his lips. Hm-m-m… Cool! Better than any action movie!

He looked at me. His whole appearance seemed to say: do you see how cool our country is, isn’t this great?

- “I’ll go for a walk,” - I said - “I have a headache”.

… When I came back, after half a day, Geoffrey was still sitting and watching television, in the same position in which I had left him and was watching how courageous Rambo was fighting with cruel colonel Zaytysyn in far-away Afghanistan… Yes, that was the real thing!

…Now we were going to his mothers again. I had found on the internet that houses in her town were more suitable to my needs both in price and type and was going to view them all.

It was a small town situated right at the seashore, at the foot of the dark-blue mountains. When I went for the first time to its only sea-front promenade and looked around I was really astonished by such beautiful view. Three quarters of the inhabitants here were Catholics, the town itself was a seaside resort and the Protestants here were pretty quiet. Moreover, it was half-way between Belfast and Dublin. I could not find a better place in all of Northern Ireland!

I was lucky. Almost at once I found a house that I fell in love with. It was just ten minutes away from the beach, five minutes away from Geoffrey’s mother’s house and there was a large supermarket across the road. It was only a fifteen minutes slow walk from the bus station, which connected the town with the outside world. The windows were facing a view of those marvellous mountains, not to mention a big, green field in front of the house. The house itself was two-storied, with three bedrooms and it had a small front garden. I imagined Lisa being there - and my mind was set.

The couple selling the house were over the moon to find a buyer. They agreed to wait for me while I was sorting out my mortgage, and promised to leave me all the curtains, blinds and carpets in the house.

“Well, then I will have to move here from Dublin”, I thought. It wasn’t the worst thing in the world. The main thing was to find a job in this town, so for now I had to come here only for the weekends.

I collected the keys for the house on the day when the sun eclipse took place in Ireland. Dogs howled and thick clouds crossed over the skies. I didn’t really know if this was a bad or a good omen, but at any rate I was beginning a new chapter in my life.

Several days after that I called work to say that I was sick and then went to the airport. It was Lisa’s sixth birthday, so I had to be with her at any price, even if I got fired. Que sera, sera. She had already been through too much in her short life.

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491 Whatever will be, will be (French).
Lisa was lying in bed with fever and quinsy, when I arrived. She was sadly looking at me. She was so sick that she couldn’t get out of bed in spite of her uncontrollable hyperactivity. I was looking at her and my heart was bleeding.

- Sonny’s got married! - said my mum right away. - He sent a birthday card to Lisa, but for some reason it was sent from Suriname, and signed both by himself and his new wife.

I looked at the card. His wife’s name was Chinese. Obviously this card was meant more for me than for Lisa. Sonny will never grow up!

Well, if he intended to upset me, it was in vain. Quite the opposite, I had a sigh of relief. All that time I tried not to think about how it was hard it must have been for him to recover from what had happened. At least Lisa was with me or was going to be with me, and he remained there, all alone with his painful thoughts and emotions. When I imagined how he might feel, I became almost sick, but he hadn’t left me any choice. God knows, I didn’t want to end it with him like that, so that he couldn’t see Lisa anymore.

I needed to get away from all those thoughts otherwise I would go mad.

Maybe at least now he would be happy. I really hoped so.

When I was visiting my grandma, I heard about Drumcree on a Russian television channel.

Now then, what were they going to say? This would be very interesting! “Goodness me! How can you live in a place like this”? - said granny fearfully looking at the screen. I tried to calm her down, explaining that it wasn’t that bad, meanwhile listening to what the Russian reporter was saying about it (of course, he had never been to that place himself). I wanted to pinch myself in order to be sure I wasn’t sleeping when I heard him saying in a lively but totally thoughtless way:

- Gerry Adams, the leader of Irish terrorists, declared that...

I couldn’t believe my ears! They talked of Drumcree in connection with other Orangemen’s parades through the Catholic quarter, the Lower Ormeau Road492 in Belfast. A few years ago, loyalists shot five people there in a local bookmaker’s office.493

There it was, on the screen: police unmercifully beating unarmed civilians, who were sitting in protest, while a lively Russian reporter behind the screen was stating that the heroic police officers were battling with those dreadful terrorists and hoodlums!

After that I fully studied all the Russian newspapers on the subject, and found out that there were no more international journalists left in our country. Their place had been taken by an army of second-rate English translators who were accessing all their knowledge of the world from the BBC and CNN web sites.

The Soviet Union had its own correspondents, who possessed their own viewpoint, in every part of the world. The new regime had no interest in such journalists, because our own opinion about the state of affairs in the world was no more. Therefore there was no in-depth analysis in the Russian

492 Lower Ormeau Road – street in South Belfast.
493 In 1992.
mass media because it was too difficult mental job for these new local scribblers. It was much more simple for them just to translate (with the help of a dictionary) some BBC’s reporting instead...

Ireland is not “the country of “Guinness” and terrorists”!

We could learn so much from the Irish: how to love and respect our own country, how to be proud of our own culture and how to remain resilient under any circumstances. They know how to stay both strong and humane at the same time.

A lot of things we’ll have to learn again now, because for the greatest part we have forgotten them since Soviet times.
Chapter 9. Untied broom

“Father ordered his sons to live in peace; but they did not listen. Then he told them to bring a broom and said: - Break it!
Whatever they tried they could not break it. After that father untied the broom and told them to break every twig separately. They easily managed to do that. Father said then: - So you see now that like those separated twigs you are vulnerable when alone, but when you are together no one can ever break you”.

(Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy “Fathers and Sons”) “I have never spoken in support of Russian separation, but for the sovereignty of the Union, for equal rights and sovereignty of every republic. Therefore they would be strong and strengthen our (Soviet) Union. I adhere only to this position”.
(B.N. Yeltsin, May 29, 1990) “Fairytale forest has disappeared, Not a single oak is left They were all chopped down to make coffins”. (V. Vysotsky) “Freedom! Freedom! Welcome to the land of fools!” (Mouse, film “Buratino”) …Once again I’m dreaming of pigeons cooing on our roof. It makes me calm and somehow warms me lulling in the long winter night. I imagine how those pigeons scratch the floor in the attic, rustle their wings, and chase one another... and somewhere little pigeons peep. My grandfather had his own special sound to call them for feeding; no one could ever make it like he did. It even impossible to write that sound, it was like “g-sh-gl-gl-gl-gl-sh”, but still nothing like that. For example, compare the new Russian anthem with the Soviet one - the music seems the same but anyway it does not sound like it... Moreover, it touches nothing in me.

When I left my mother’s house, it didn’t stay empty; on the contrary, most of the time it was full of my friends! In a letter my mom wrote: “You did not make my life easy! My house became a hotel with all your friends coming and going”.

Pedro, a strict Peruvian man with his Georgian wife came from Tbilisi on his way to Lima. Sometimes Volodya Zelinsky showed up, sometimes his brother Alyosha or sometimes their parents, who became refugee. At least they were happy to have managed to sell their flat to the Chechens, although nearly for nothing. After that they watched on TV how Russian “peace-makers” completely destroyed their home in Grozny by bombing it...

Then Verochka from Ust-Kamenogorsk visited my mom; her life was the most sorrowful of all of us. This gushing young woman, who used to go
to the Australian ballet performance in Moscow with me, had to flee from her home in Kazakhstan with her mother. What actually had happen there no one knew, but she was really scared to death about something. After that Verochka and her mom decided to settle down in Moscow at any price, so they lived with us for a couple of weeks. One day my mother came home a bit early to find out that every single curtain was shut and Verochka was hiding in the corner so horrified that she was shaking all over.

- Silence! - she shouted when she saw my mother, - There they are, right behind the window, I know that...

We lived on fifth floor so naturally there was no one behind the window except for birds. And there was a bank across the street which was closed after five p.m.

- Who are these “they”, Verochka? There is no one out there, look... - my mother tried to open the curtains but Verochka nearly seized her by the neck...

The poor girl must have gone off her head and her mother as well. They moved to Moscow and worked somewhere as street cleaners and lived in a one-room flat (they both had a higher education!). They disappeared without leaving a trace...

Hardships in times of perestroika and after affected many people’s mind. It was hard when someone you knew as happy, cheerful men and women one day just lost their mind: they became religious, drunkards or even committed suicide...

Those who claim that all those things also happened before in our country, but we just didn’t know about it, must have been misled by the “democratic” press or simply lied. And this has nothing to do with glasnost. We always had a lot of acquaintances, but there were never so many to whom something happened.

My mother’s colleague’s wife embraced religion. While she was praying hysterically, her son climbed the church roof and accidentally fell off and died. My former classmate, who had served in military submarine forces, went fishing and never returned - someone hit him on the head with a stone and threw his body into the river... Another classmate, who worked in a morgue, made his post-mortem examination. After that he left all his earlier life behind and hid somewhere in a shabby hut. My friend Alla’s husband hung himself. Our first teacher’s only son, whom she loved blindly, did not live to 30. My second cousin’s friend, whom we knew since childhood and who became a security guard in a bank, was shot near his porch. The same thing happened to Tomochka’s former boss’s son. He was shot dead in the yard near our house... In broad daylight! When I lived in the USSR it was an inconceivable to imagine that someone would even have a gun. Only inveterate bandits, who were headed for the gallows, had guns and there were few of them. My aunt Glafira’s brother was found hanging from a tree - he had borrowed a lot of money but couldn’t pay back. He was going to earn money in Chechnya - nowhere else to earn it - but he never made it - his creditors found him first... Not to mention various accidents on the road! An old lady was hit by a bus on the main street right in front of me. It happened the second
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week I came home... After witnessing that I had nightmares of her rebounding from the ground.

When I went to visit my grandfather’s grave, I cried my heart out seeing how many graves of teenagers were there. Almost all of them were younger than I was and had died in the last few years...

Who had promised to go and lie down on the rails?..⁴⁹⁴

Zhenya from Yalta stayed at Moscow too after many trials and tribulations: at least she wasn’t insane! One of our teachers helped her to get a job in the library. She was 35 but never had a home of her own. Even though she had some love affairs with her students she never complained of anything in her life. One day she wrote me: “Zhenechka, you know when I go out for a walk I can’t help feeling that everything is ok, well, nothing has changed, except for Martians that have taken over the streets…”

Vitalik Reznikov from Rostov, another group mate with whom I had common memories and the only one who didn’t get a diploma, tried to make ends meet by teaching kids to play chess. He was a tall, nervous, Jewish, a grown-up mother’s boy, who often had a bloody nose. Of all our group mates he was the only one who openly said that he was a Jew, when it wasn’t so popular to say so. His father migrated to France during a Jewish emigration wave from the USSR in the beginning of the 1970s, but living conditions there terrified him so he came back. That’s why everybody laughed at Vitalik now when, unlike in Soviet times, emigrating to the West became a desirable goal for many... We shared our common memories because we had gone to theatre together when we were in our third year. Moreover, once he took me to visit his aunt in Zelenograd. He was Said’s roommate in a new dormitory and I was even going to date Vitalik just to make Said angry. But when I realized that for Vitalik it was going to be more serious (once he even tried to kiss me), I was so terrified that I started to hide from him. I was absolutely not ready for that. He was a smart guy and understood everything very quickly… I still remember Antoine de Saint-Exuperie’s words: “We’re responsible for those whom we tamed…”

…Anechka Bobrova was the most exemplary student in our group. She was even better than I was, although I lived in a dormitory where I had seen a lot, while she lived with her parents all those years. She had a well-educated, serious and quite prosperous family. Her parents always kept her money that she received as a student grant. They gave her one rouble a day so we often took her to a café at our own expense, even though we were poorer. Money wasn’t that important in those days. Some of our girls disliked Anya for her direct and not always diplomatic straightforwardness, while on the other hand others loved her for that. Sometimes she came to see us in the hostel.

⁴⁹⁴ In the early 1992 Yeltsin promised in a live broadcast to “lie down on the rails”, if his liberal economic reforms by means of shock therapy would cause an increase in prices: “If prices become uncontrollable and rise 3 or 4 times, I will lie down on the rails myself...” Yeltsin never kept his promise, although prices increased a hundred fold and the people's standard of living decreased sharply.
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Anechka was keen on foreign languages and retro music such as Elvis Presley’s. She used to do needlework, knitting and embroidery, and spoke fluent English. When she fell in love with an Estonian group mate in the third year, as I said before, she decided to learn Swedish. And she did it!

But her beloved Estonian didn’t notice her feelings and married another Moscow girl. However, soon his family life was not going well so one day he came to visit Anechka while her parents were out (on holidays in the South). They were drinking tea with cake and talking about life, but when he timidly asked to stay the night with her, Anechka resolutely turned him out of the house. She could never have an affair with a married person. I remember how I admired her strength of character, asking myself if I would do the same in her shoes.

...It was the time of Perestroika and one day at its height Anechka, who was the daughter of a Soviet officer, was very Soviet and socialist herself, said aloud what some of us hadn’t even realized yet: that our country was about to die.

To ruin such a country one really had to do one’s best!

Some told her to be quiet, not seeing that she was right in her bitterness. And I stood overcome by fear...

I haven’t seen her for many years, receiving only a few short letters sometimes. At the beginning she worked in her profession, then worked in the bank. She never showed off about her new life, since from her last letter it was clear that she was doing not bad under the new government. But she wasn't happy. Life wasn't right. All she could do was shut her eyes to everything that was happening all around her. There still were some good things that she can venture, such as pleasures like the Mediterranean Sea cruise or her favourite hobby, photography, and then education in a juridical faculty. All her relatives were adjusted to life one way or another. Her brother learnt a sufficiently exotic Eastern language and so he switched over from science to trade. Her father although retired was still teaching...

She didn’t express it out loud, but there was contempt for the new Russian chiefs in her letters. Still she never complained about her life. So what if there was shooting outside? One just had to shut one’s ears. So what if there not a single decent thing on TV? One didn’t have to turn it on. So what if there were homeless children begging on the streets? One didn’t have to go outside. Just go directly from the subway to work and back. In the evening there were some small tea parties with old university friends as cultured as herself... Some of her friends worked unhappily on that very same indecent TV, and some worked on dissertations about history that disproved all they were writing in their student years - with their eyes closed.

In private life there was no place for high ideals. Anechka, like all the most intelligent and beautiful female friends of mine, hadn’t married. I tried to convince her that she hadn’t lost much. It’s better not being married than suffering from an unhappy marriage or other family “pleasures” like divorce, but she refused to believe me... And she set off for her next date with another married womanizer, still hoping for a...
miracle... And again and again she had her heart broken. Finally she ended it up with a brother of one of those quiet and intelligent female friends, who usually came and stayed with her only in between his relationships with other women...

After that Anechka became unemployed, because her bank had been closed during a pre-election struggle against corruption. It had stirred her a little. Foreign cruises were a thing of the past. She was about to get a cash benefit for just three months. And in that time she would have to find a new job by any means. Anechka complained that no one would take her on because she was already 35; that meant she wasn’t fit to work as young secretary any longer (it seemed she wasn’t thinking about what those young secretaries were “supposed to do” at their jobs!). Once she even uttered something nasty about capitalism.

Our Anya became radical through being unemployed. She started thinking about life and even complained about it for a while. As soon as Anya got a job (well, her good old family of Soviet times still had some contacts!), her radicalism had disappeared again without a trace. She had fallen back into place as well as into her favourite hobbies, embroidery, book readings, conversations with her intelligent friends...

I was amazed how she practically had repeated my American penfriend Mark’s process of development, but in a Russian way. He tried to act brave in his letters to me, showing off about how he would make money when he became a successful solicitor. But instead when he joined the ranks of the unemployed, in his letters he became an ordinary, vulnerable and open person. It was then that I heard from him everything he really thought about his government, the American way of life and of United States course on the international scene! And then Mark suddenly became silent - as soon as he had an opportunity to work for the very same government, having filled up the ranks of civil servants...

Are only those who live more or less well suffering from an “adaptation syndrome” in today’s Russia?

“We live in a terrible, almost unbearable living conditions”, Lida, another one of our university friends with whom you are already familiar, bitterly admitted to me in a letter. She lived in St. Petersburg and had also managed to work her way up to a high rank in the militia in the last years of Soviet rule. Her mother and brother were at home in the Ukraine. Her father had passed away. And she just couldn’t leave her husband, who was an unemployed alcoholic and drug addict, because she had no place to live. Lida lives half-starving all year, sending any money that she uses sparingly to her unemployed mother and brother. And all year she tries to put some money aside to go home to the Ukraine on holidays. When she couldn’t go then she wouldn’t be able to see her mother for a year or more...

Do you remember how we used to travel to the Black Sea together: I, Lida, her parents and her brother? We used to live carefree for two weeks. This family used to visit the Black Sea annually. But today her mother is sometimes short of bread...

So do you really think that Lida is craving for social changes?
She lives by the day, by the week, in hope of a vacation or waiting for the end of the year, hoping just not to collapse, not to become ill and stay in bed, not to be left on the street or to lose her mind...

After all, the worst thing would be to sit and think for a second that your life is leading to a dead end. There would be just as many bandits on the streets tomorrow or next year. There would be a growing fear the next day. There would be less and less free services available to any civilians. And our daughters will grow up just to end up in some Russian or Western brothels. They are nearly proud of being pinched on the street, especially by some owner of a splendid car - instead of giving him a good slap in the face. Do we realize that there is not much self-respect left in us? That there will be new Chechnyas for our boys? And there will be the same life for our unborn children and grandchildren if nothing is done now. Of course, it is more pleasant to dream that there will a nice future for them where they would met a prince or a princess who would take them on a yacht to the Cote D’ Azure or to the Bahamas. Places where they would live happily ever after and would never forget their parents. But that is just not going to happen.

...I have been trying to see how our people who grew up in our Soviet community, the ones who have something to compare with, unlike Westerners, can so easily get accustomed to all the abominations of our life nowadays. If I can’t accept all these abominations and other nasty things as normal even after 15 years in “relatively civilized” conditions (when you are not dying of starvation at least).

It’s because I always remember the previous life. Not a luxurious one, with animal-like cravings and needs, a dull consumerist one, but the life, which was full of something that nowadays no young people from the West or here can ever have. Namely endless spiritual and intellectual development, respect for other people, not a self centred purpose in life but one which would be useful for other people. Therefore one could feel like a human being who does deeds not for money but for the will of his heart. We had a feeling that life opened us every way to live so that we didn’t have to be afraid for our children’s future. New Russian sub-humans, who don’t have that feeling of self-respect, are subconsciously jealous of it and try to destroy that feeling very intensely...

So how can one get used to all these abominations instead of fighting them obsessively with all one’s strength? How can one tolerate them? It still remains a mystery to me. I’ve tried to convince myself to do this. I’ve tried to live “just like others do”, to think only of the one day and what to cook for dinner...

But I couldn’t again and again - after I saw little Tajik kids begging on the street instead of being at school, old Russian ladies in Grozny who were hiding in basements from the missiles shot by their own grandsons. And I saw old men selling their war battle medals in order not to starve to death. And among all of these there were big stupid fellows with huge gold chains around their necks who thought they honoured a girl by grabbing her leg. They imposed their sentimental morals of thieves of former prison days’ on all of us through TV and radio (in a supposedly free society the one who pays the money plays any music he wants). And there
were those who were hiding behind their backs: former Komsomol members who became “respected businessmen” nowadays. These “respected businessmen” are dealing in anything left lying around, anything that was created by others. They are selling our people and are ready to sell even their own mother if the price is right (“but who would need that old woman?”). They have fulfilled the hopes of those “civilizers” who in the 1970s gave them their first pair of jeans and bubble gum. But they’ll end up the same way as in the short story by Prosper Merimee, where the African chieftain Tamango sold not only half his tribe but also his own wife, eventually he himself was captured and sold... These my obese compatriot compradors think of course that they are much clever than “some negroes” but still they will all end up like Tamango: in a boat in the middle of the ocean not knowing how what to do...

...Once at the end of the 1980s I had watched a film “A man from the Capuchin Boulevard” by Alla Surikova, where genius actor Andrei Mironov played his last role. A whole population of a small town abruptly got stupid and wild in a matter of hours: by imitating what they saw on the screen.

Unfortunately this grotesque scene was so close to our reality that sometimes my hair stood up. How could such empty, cruel children indifferent to everything who mostly had normal humane parents possibly come into the world? Is it possible to convert men back into primates so easily within 10-15 years?

Our society today is “levelling” down. In the past we were supposed to develop and even those who had some difficulties with that development had been pulled up by their head and ears, not without considerable results (even though not always to the pleasure of those who had to develop; remember some characters in “The Big Break”movie or Fedya the Boor from the film “Y-Operation”). “It is necessary, Fedya, it is necessary” - Shurik sadly repeated while giving him a hiding. And Fedya, whatever was happening inside him, was no longer disturbing the life and work of other people. But today these impudent Fedyas give hard times to everybody!

We are forced to lower our intellectual, moral and spiritual levels to such creatures as these Fedyas. We’re pushed by the head and ears into degradation this time. Myriad of these Fedyas, who occupy mostly all mass media, present themselves as “experts” in various fields, although they do have severe spellings problems.

Anya tries not to notice all this. She thinks that if she shuts herself away from the world she can keep on living a normal but...
imaginative life. Lida tries to do nothing but survive. She has no time to think about anything else. It would be terrifying if she had time to think...

So people get used to things that should not even be tolerated. And we and our kids are being transformed into half-slaves, half-apes which are ready to make coitus in public for a bowl of soup. And to be even proud of what they’ve done in order to get this bowl of soup!...

Memories, memories...

... And now guys tell me please, what do you think made Egyptians sell items of historic value found in pharaoh’s tombs to foreigners so easily? You don’t know? - asked Professor Mikhail Yevseevitch while looking cunningly at us.

- The point is that, my dear colleagues, - he continued - those tombs were not of their ancestors. Arab settlements appeared in Egypt much later. So, of course, when it comes to tombs of somebody’s ancestors who are strangers there is a different sort of attitude towards them... by the way, does anybody know, which group of inhabitants in modern Egypt are descendants of the ancient Egyptians?

I knew that for sure! I was the only one in whole group who knew it, as it turned out.

- It’s Copts, Mikhail Yevseevitch! - I said.

...That conversation took place a long time ago, in a practice seminar, and I still remember it. Not because I knew about Copts. Simply because no one then thought that in a few years many of us would overshadow Arab Egyptians in such a trade. But if Arabs took things from the graves of “somebody else’s ancestors, “our” patriotic grave diggers” don’t mind stealing from their own ancestors...

...- How many train carriages did one have to strip for this! - my mum and I exclaimed, while unpacking the parcel from a company in the United States that specialized in reselling things from the USSR. We saw a huge metal National Emblem of USSR pulled out from a Soviet passenger train sheeting. Pillagers must have been broken a little piece of the Emblem in their passionate desire to get some cash. I can even imagine them using foul language when they learned that they would get less money for improper wares sold to the West for $70 while the suppliers must have gotten even less!

Why has no one asked himself what happened to all these metal Emblems from train carriages, to all the Young Pioneer’s flags from our schools, to all the Lenin’s busts from offices? And under such conditions people never stop complaining that Russia is a “pauper country”, where “nothing was left to sell except for oil”...

Probably all those things were “left-overs”. Once I asked my mom where were all those hand-written slogans and flags in their factory which we used to go with to First of May and November parades? Is it possible that nothing was left? Or were they destroyed in indignation for the “crimes of communism”? Not even close: all of them were sold, including huge portraits of the Politburo’s members, which we used to roll on small wheels and on which children enjoyed sitting. Even the factory museum was taken apart. After that the owners closed down the factory and rented manufacturing facilities to trading warehouses.
Do you know whom they resemble? They are like Skooperfield\textsuperscript{497} in N. Nosov’s “Dunno on the Moon”. He litters in one room, then goes to another and does the same and never cleans after himself. But what would happen when all rooms are filled with garbage? “Then we shall see!”…

...Western Internet auctions are packed with Soviet watches, lamps, military outfits, valenki, cameras, night-vision devices. Or maybe all these things are also “left-overs”? “Flea markets” of Berlin and Paris are full of immigrants from the Southern regions of the former Soviet Union, with a soft southern accent like Mikhail Gorbachev’s. They pull out pictures which used to hang in a school or rural club and praise them highly to potential customers...

This is plain pillage. For such things one would have been shot in times of “evil Stalin”. The same things happened in Iraq where American dare-devils sell on eBay “Saddam Hussein’s stuff” and treasures of Baghdad’s museums. The only difference is that our grave diggers sell things which were made by their own grandmothers and grandfathers. They are selling everything that mattered to their parents.

And they feel no shame for what they’ve done. Thieves were blushing and shy in the books of Ilf and Petrov\textsuperscript{498}, but today’s thieves are quite proud of themselves and their “entrepreneurship”. Here they are, praising highly their wares. “The portrait of a heroic Soviet woman! It’s socialist realism! A rare specimen! A remarkable quality!” - they repeatedly invite customers to Internet auctions. But if you want save a picture on your computer’s desktop it will turn out that this petty tradesman named this file in a not very romantic way while boosting the heroic Soviet woman. “Stalin s tetkoy.jpg” (“Stalin with peasant bitch”) he crudely called his article of trade (apparently, he was sure that his customers do not know Russian, if they buy such things, and would hang this portrait somewhere near the lavatory inside their pub...).

Each little thief sells whatever he can: some deal in stolen paintings from schools, some deal in desperate women who don’t know how to feed their children. Some dealers make profits from Soviet orders and medals, buying them up from starving old veterans who root in rubbish dumps...

Others sell themselves. For example, Olympic champion Olga Korbut took part in a fight with another woman for $70,000. Another blissful thief of all times, M.S. Gorbachev, sold a dinner with himself in person at an auction (for merely 7000 pounds sterling!). I saw an article about it on internet in 1998.

...“This is a unique thing made by a man’s hand! Men will never be able to make anything like this again!” - the pillagers highly praise their article of trade created by their grandfathers and fathers, grandmothers and mothers. Apparently, they think that way because they haven’t

\textsuperscript{497} Skooperfield (“skupoi” means “scrudge” in Russian) was a rich factory owner who had to make his own living after there was a Revolution on the Moon.

\textsuperscript{498} Ilf & Petrov’s novel “12 chairs” (1927).
created anything in their life. They are able only to sell things made by others.

Don’t be so sure! There will be even more unique human made creations.

But only after sanitization of these parasites and rodents which is absolutely necessary for our country.

...I remember a little boy with whom I spoke on a train.
- Who is your father?
- He is Uzbek!
- And your mother?
- She is Ukrainian!
- And what about you?
- I am Russian!

Then we all laughed. But as a matter of fact there was nothing funny about it. That boy was Soviet.

I realized that “Russians (not Soviets!) have come” when for the first time I saw painted on the wall of one of Dublin’s newly-erected building a huge Russian bad word of three letters. But these were absolutely different Russians...

...From the beginning he refused to talk to me, claiming that I was “KGB agent”.

- Where are you from? Russia? - He stared wide-eyed and sprang to his feet, when he heard that. He tried to convince his solicitor in broken English that he didn’t want Russian interpreters because they “could contact the relevant authorities immediately”.

I watched without any emotion. I didn’t even want to try convincing him that I left the USSR many years ago. That the reason I left wasn’t political and that I wasn’t a sort of Mata Hari and that obviously he didn’t have any secret information in order for the nation’s special services to hunt for him. His solicitor sobered him up at last:

- Excuse me, Mr. N***, there is not a wide choice of interpreters here.

Mr. N., whose name was Kostya, didn’t want to see one obvious thing: it was he who needed me, not the other way around.

...I got acquainted with Kostya at his solicitor’s, as an interpreter. In Dublin I had to interpret quite often for my former fellow countrymen. Thank God, it wasn’t at the interview with immigration officials but while meetings with those who represented them. But in Belfast it was my first case.

Kostya came to Belfast deliberately. He stayed in Dublin and looked at the “cheerful chaos” around him so that he wished for “civilization”. He got on a bus and after three hours arrived in “civilized Great Britain”, where he surrendered as Ivan Vasilyevitch Bunsha did, exclaiming: “I happily hand myself over to our dear militia, hoping for the best…”

Kostya was from the Urals. “A quite ordinary, a quite ordinary story” as a Soviet song goes. It was an ordinary story for the majority of

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refugees who ended it up here from our former Soviet Union. They tried intensely to convince Irish and British officials that they had left for political reasons. As a matter of fact, there was not even a hint of political reasons in 98% of cases. Many of those people were from the so-called “middle class”; in Russia they were called “businessmen”. They didn’t run away because of the policy of our authorities (although sometimes it could make people insane!), they ran away from “troubles” with others just like themselves...

Being an “informer” isn’t my way, and I don’t think that being an “economic refugee” is a crime in itself. Therefore I interpret everything people tell me without adding any comments or raising suspicions, even when I have to interpret absolutely improbable stories. All in all, I am just an interpreter. Well, I have seen a lot, for example, speculators running from “the revenge of Chechens” (it is very possible that it was bandit’s revenge of that particular ethnic group, but again it had no connection to politics!). I have seen elderly women from Russia’s out-of-the-way places who where “hired by Azerbaijanis to bring some young girls because girls trust old women”, and now this “old woman” is in Ireland and cannot stop crying and says that those Azerbaijanis raped her.

By the way, the old woman calms down surprisingly fast after she leaves the room and informs me that she is going “to marry an Irishman” because she simply “cannot be alone”. And looking at her I do not have any doubts that she will! Even though she doesn’t speak English and is no longer young and attractive...

I have seen people who thought that it was a sufficient reason to get political asylum for having been enlisted in the army 15 years ago when they were studying in the university, although they would not have been conscripted back then. Or people who claimed that they were not allowed to cook in a rural canteen and instead had to work as janitors because of their Jewish origin... Somehow all of that does not fall into the pattern implied in the word “refugee” by the Geneva Convention.

The common thing among all these people is that they can do these things that I am not able to do. They “complain” about their own country and cast slurs upon it in front of the officials of another country which isn’t any better than ours towards its own “dissidents”.

Even if I was not satisfied with many things in my country, still it remains my country. And my problems with it always were only mine and never a matter of concern for foreign officials.

How many people behave as if our country wasn’t theirs at all... I cannot do the same!

But the majority of people coming here are not well prepared and “sophisticated in respect of legal proceedings”. Kostya was like that. For instance, he didn’t know that according to the Dublin Convention if he arrived in Britain territory from another country, he had to ask for asylum there, but if he didn’t then he could only be deported back to the country from which he managed to arrive. In other words, in his special case the matter concerns his attitude towards “uncivilized Dublin”...

I don’t know for sure how civilized the Ural Territory from which he came was at that particular time. But obviously Kostya was “forced out”
by the militia riot squad. Not the sort of guys to mess about. As he claimed, it was because of his mother’s Caucasian origin (his mother lives in a different town and he himself changed his surname to his father’s and didn’t socialize with his parents for many years). According to his story (since he dealt in the most dangerous “business” in Russia, namely, real estate), some militiaman wanted to buy his house at a give-away price…

He imagined his future life abroad differently from that of a refugee.

- I thought that I would live in a dormitory and work - he explained. Here he would be granted permission to work only after having six months of “a long ordeal”. In the Irish republic he would have to wait for about a year and even after that he would probably not get any work permit, if he didn’t get status. And he certainly would be declined by a court of first instance. So he would have to appeal on grounds of his health defects, for example, because he had got a stomach ulcer. Or that he had an operation on his knee-cap and if he would be deported back to Russia, then he would suffer great physical pain since the world’s “worst physicians” practiced there…

If Kostya were a woman he could have gotten pregnant and given birth to a child. If your child was born in the Irish territory it would automatically become an Irish citizen. And who would dare to deport the mother, father or even grandmother of an Irish citizen? (That old lady who had been delivering sexual slaves remained here because she had a little Irish grandson…)

...Dublin. Bus station. Late evening. I waited for my friend who was going to give me a lift. I stayed and saw near me an exhausted woman with two plastic bags from a cheap supermarket. Two Hindus tried to find out where she needed to go but she didn’t speak English.

- What language does she speak?
- German.

Figuring out that her German was also not much better, I asked her:

- Maybe you speak Russian?
- Yes, I do - she replied half-happily and half-surprised.

...Aurika is Moldavian. She was in her fifth month of pregnancy and just got off the bus with her brother who doesn’t speak English either. Unlike Kostya, they came through the “back way”: from London via Scotland and Northern Ireland to “uncivilized Dublin” where they were going to ask for asylum.

It was a Saturday night so all instances were closed until Monday. And they didn’t have a single acquaintance here, and moreover they only had 30 Deutsch marks with them. But they didn’t complain or ask for help. Aurika only asked if she could see a doctor. When they arrived in Dover a border guard noticed them so they had to run. And when she was climbing over a fence she cut her leg. The injury was deep and needed stitches because it had been three days without any antibiotics so it started

500 Nowadays the laws have changed, and it is well possible to deport them.
rotting... She had sprinkled it with salt because this was the only “medicine” she had.

Yesterday they slept on a London street... Aurika showed me a small album with pictures of her two little daughters who stayed at home.

- Life has become so severely hard nowadays - she silently takes a breath. I look at her in that condition when there is nothing left, only imagining how terrible life must have been if this pregnant woman had to leave two kids at home and then had the courage to do what she had done...

She hopes to give birth here and then, God knows when, to collect her two other daughters...

I was very happy to be able to help her settle in for a night’s lodging. But I couldn’t get rid of the thought that Gorby, “Perestroika’s pioneer”, had disfigured millions and millions of lives all over the world. The Irish, who actually don’t like an influx of refugees, don’t see the connection between the activity of this “remarkable” politician and this influx. But there is a direct coupling.

I humanly feel sorry about Aurika. Honestly I don’t feel anything about those like Kostya who thought that they could live just fine back at home, at the expense of other’s poverty.

...Kostya had changed his mind and moved me from his list of “KGB agents” to that of “useful people” by the end of our meeting. After all he came to think that if I had lived in the West so many years then I knew much about living here. I had really bad feelings about this so I let him know that I was “married”.

Do you know what was both the most wonderful and ugliest thing about our compatriots abroad? It was that the majority of them only want to socialize with you if you are “of any use” to them.

Kostya also tried to “pave the way”. The fact that I was married had put him off for a while. But then he started asking if I was happily married. He had even interpreted my reply that everything was just fine differently. “Well, if one says that everything is just fine then something’s wrong!”

I felt too lazy to argue with him. It was lovely weather outside and I didn’t want to be rude to a person I hardly knew.

He passionately started telling me about himself. He used beautiful but completely meaningless words like a “half-educated magician” which reminded me of a famous Khlestakov’s monologue: “Well like this somehow... somehow everything is like this...” He was speaking about what a person should do to be happy, and he also he talked of bandits he had to mix with during his career. It seemed that he was almost proud of that.

I listened to him for about ten minutes and I was really surprised at him being such an empty two-legged creature. Why was he wasting his...

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501 Title of a popular song performed by Alla Pugacheva.
life? He himself didn’t know the answer. He could never understand my life just as I couldn’t understand his. He didn’t care about anyone. He didn’t care that in Moscow alone there were a half million of homeless kids. He didn’t care about Afghanistan or other countries which soon would be bombed. He didn’t care about what was going on around him in Belfast.

The only things that mattered to him were his own needs of food, drink and a female who would be exactly the same type of creature as he was. And that there were no militia riot squads or any “business” rivals.

There was nothing I could talk to him about.

I felt sad. Not because we were different: that people are not all the same is a natural fact. I was sad because there were too many of those like him in modern post-Soviet Russia. Moreover, these “Kostyas” are at the head of state, trying to force us to think just as they do. They are trying to make us watch a Russian variant of “Big Brother” where someone will have sex with another person “live”. And they call it “culture”. Due to their limited imagination they cannot picture that there are people for whom something more than food, drink and sex exists.

But did they at least aspire to some self-development! No, they believe that all others have to degrade themselves to their level!

Kostya’s ignorance was awful! And even unbelievable, because I started to doubt that he had studied in a Soviet school although he was two years older than I was and claimed that he had a higher education. I decided to hint to him that “his presence was no longer required”, so I told him a short story from my own experience. I told him how in my hour of need in Holland I was fed up with daily visits from a social worker who was a native of Bolivia, and I was too polite to tell her the truth. Once my mum noticed my suffering and asked me why I could not tell Conchita to leave. “I do not want to be rude to her”, – I said. “Do you want her to leave?” – offered my mum. “Then interpret word for word what I say and you see what will happen!”

- So are you from Bolivia? – asked my mum.
- Yes, I am from Bolivia.
- So did you kill Che Guevara? - smiled my mum.

Conchita vanished after 5 minutes and never returned.

Guess what Kostya’s reaction to my story was?

- Who is she, this Che Guevara? - He asked with such a touching frankness that I was on the verge of tears.

Well, how shall I put it to you, Cheburashka503...

Kostya likes the fact that the police in Northern Ireland are well armed and walk with machine guns. “It makes me feel protected!” - he says.

How would he feel if that riot squad captain in Russia had come to his place with such a machine gun?

503 Cheburashka is a character in children’s literature, from a 1966 story by E. Uspensky. Cheburashka is a funny little creature, unknown to science, who lives in the tropical forest.
Kostya likes the fact that here there is “civilization” (but what does it mean, aside from what he once read from some Russian newspaper, namely that “England is a civilized country” (ah that's English self-appraisal!). He didn’t see that he wasn’t even in England. Dublin was “savage”. Kostya was placed in Dunmurry, the Southern outskirt of Belfast. He hadn’t seen anything here yet, but the uneasy life of the local people didn’t concern him at all.

- What are you going to do if soon it would be the same here as in Dublin? - I asked him.

My question caught him unawares.

- No, it is impossible! - was all that he could reply. But I could read on his face that he was quite scared of that...

Our country has lost nothing from Kostya’s emigration. Quite the contrary, the less of those Kostyas remain there, the better. But what do other countries would need them for?

...Arnold, a handsome bearded middle-aged man, awfully resembles the Georgian singer Vakhtang Kikabidze. I recognized him from a distance, simply because I was told that I would interpret for a “Russian Gypsy” today. On the streets of Belfast there was no one else who looked even close to him.

He has just arrived here and was going to ask for political asylum. Especially since he could tell, for example, how much Gypsies are suffering from modern racists (any Gypsy from any country in West Europe and Great Britain itself can tell quite the same story!).

Nevertheless, Gypsies are considered to be our own compatriots in Russia and even loved (for example, Nikolai Slichenko’s popular theatre “Romen” or a male character Yashka in the film “Elusive avengers”!), unlike in West European countries, where they totally segregated.

Well, speaking honestly, it is a true that the majority of us try to avoid socializing with Gypsies in Russia. The reason is very simple: the only place where you can talk to them is in a bazaar where they follow you and ask invariable questions like “Girl, can I ask you? (for money)” or “Gild my hand dear friend”.

Sometimes there were some exceptions in Soviet times. Some Gypsies from settled families studied in our school and they were friends with us. Yanush was a local karate star, his sister Albinka was one of the most attractive schoolgirls. Sometimes it was possible to talk with a Gypsy about some aspects of life in a suburban electric train to or from Moscow when it was still “working”. But it was a rare thing, so we almost didn’t know one another.

That’s why I was very interested in socializing with Arnold. While he was waiting for his solicitor he told me many interesting things about Gypsy customs and traditions. And afterwards he learned where I was from and about our local Gypsies who, according to him, were “too desperate”.

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Nikolai Alekseyevich Slichenko (b.1934) is the leader of the Moscow "Romen" Music and Drama Gypsy Theater.
Unlike English Gypsies who are forced to live separately from the rest of the population, “our” Gypsies took over a considerable “ethnically cleared” (by themselves!) region around a provincial centre in the years of democracy. By the way, not a single Russian complained about that...

Arnold “tested the ground” in the conversation with his solicitor: what would happen if he asked for political asylum, what kind of rights would he have, what would he be allowed or not allowed to do, what chances he had... Learning that after he asks for political asylum they would take a copy of his fingerprints and all the information about him would be registered in the National Computerized Card Index and that he might even be put in prison (since in Northern Ireland emigrants who ask for asylum are sometimes put into prison *preventively!* ) he started to hesitate. Then he said sadly:

- I am dying for a cigarette!

A pack of cigarettes here cost about five pounds while he was granted only 36 pounds a week... A good-hearted female solicitor bought him a pack of cigarettes...

- Belfast is a bad town - Arnold told me when I met him again a couple of days later. How did he define that? Simply because in good towns on the weekend after people go out, drinking in bars, eating in restaurants they certainly lose money on the street. At least some money. But in Belfast Arnold couldn’t find even a single coin in the whole city centre. All I could do was smile. What did he expect? Protestant ascetics!...

Arnold didn’t show up for the third meeting with his solicitor, who was finally going to get him to apply for political refugee status. Not long before that he confided to me that his sister was already living somewhere in England. He just didn’t want the authorities to know that. Most probably, he had asked his sister for advice, and she told him to move to her place before the authorities take his fingerprints and possibly throw him into prison “preventively”, without any misdeed, as they do in Belfast...

Oh mysterious and unpredictable people of strange destinies, refugees from the ex-USSR!

Faces, faces, faces... Here they are, one after another, in front of me, all those whom I came across in Ireland, both South and North, and in other countries during all these years... A businessman from Chernigov trying to prove that his life is in danger by showing a small article from his local newspaper where it is written how his car was blown up (what’s THIS got to do with politics? - ask any Russian or Ukrainian familiar with this sort of people and our reality today). A family of long-haul truck drivers from Chelyabinsk hiding from the “revenge of the Chechens because he was fighting in Chechnya during the war” (is that the real reason for their revenge? Or were it some material interests in mutual “business”?). A Moldavian pair, brother and sister, policeman and journalist (at least, that’s what they said) pretending to be husband and wife: they already have many relatives living in Germany and had already been deported for some reason from Denmark. A family of Uigurs from Kazakhstan with two adorable children, hiding abroad from unpaid debts of their father to their
local mafia and vanished off the radar completely after they were refused political asylum in their first application (almost everybody gets refused, automatically; they just shouldn’t have panicked). A Dagestani Lak man from Tajikistan who “could have stayed in America, but didn’t and now regrets it” and throws money left, right and centre. And of course, a “real estate dealer escaping prosecution by the corrupt Russian police”, the infamous Kostya who doesn’t know who Che Guevara is...

Kostya realized very quickly that it is a lot harder to get refugee status than to get married; most probably he gathered the required sum of money to pay one of the local women and cheerfully pollutes Belfast streets with his useless presence today, as if there were not enough local hoods around. He became a security guard in a shop and spent already 6 weeks on sick leave with a broken little finger; like most of that sort of people, Kostya isn’t a particularly hard working individual...

But most of all I remember Vitaly from Ivano-Frankovsk. I met him back in Holland, many years ago. He could have easily become a science fiction writer or script maker for thriller movies. One way or another Vitaly convinced a Dutch acquaintance to send an invitation to Holland for him and his friend Andrei. Once they arrived in the Land of Tulips, they hid their passports under the ground in some quiet place, gave themselves up to the authorities declaring that they both were... Jews from Tajikistan (by the way, none of them had ever even been there!). They even claimed that they “received cut-off pig’s heads” at their doors, and so on. Andrei had such Slavic looks that they didn’t believe that he was a Jew, so he had to improvise and make up that his mum was Estonian...

Until recently the “Jewish card” was the most effective weapon for Eastern Europeans to stay in Holland. Because the Dutch seem to feel more guilt for betraying their own Jews to the Nazis during the war than other nations. And these guys knew it. But the waiting time for the permission to stay was so long that they got bored. Then they bought a second-hand car, dug up their documents (they were registered as asylum seekers under different, made-up names) and went back to the Ukraine in that car, going through the whole of Europe, with a single expired Dutch visa... Back home they sold the car, and Vitaly decided to go back to Holland, but Andrei changed his mind and stayed: in Holland he was homesick and sick at the uncertainty what was going to happen...

Vitaly used the second copy of the invitation that he still had from his Dutch friend, applied for a visa again and got it (naturally, the Dutch embassy had no idea that he had already registered as a “Tajik asylum seeker” in Holland under a different name!). When he came back to Holland, he dug up his passport again and came back to the camp, where he got out of his tricky situation by claiming that during these months he... had fallen in love with a Dutch girl and went to live with her, but then she dumped him, and he had no other option than to come back to the refugee camp. And they believed him.

When you listen to all these stories of “political” refugees of the 21st century, you unwillingly begin to ask yourself: what if the refugees from other countries are just as “political” as ours? And what the hell then is Amnesty International doing with these fake claims? But that...
wasn’t something new for me: just take a look at who in reality were those Soviet “heroes” of the Western human rights activists back in 1979!

“...Thieves, hooligans, black market traders, repeated libellers, bribe takers and conmen - those are the real faces of those whom anti-Soviet propaganda portrays to Western public opinion as innocent people convicted because of their ideas and beliefs in USSR.

Black market trader Levinson. 27/28th of May 1975, a people’s court convicted S. Levinson to imprisonment for black market dealings. It has been proved that between May 1974 and February 1975 Levinson bought in the shop “Platan” in Odessa 15 rolls of crimpline\(^{505}\), 6 rolls of knitwear, Japanese head scarves, and re-sold them at an increased price. Levinson did not have material needs, he was working and receiving wages, and his wife had a large amount of money in her savings account. Besides, Levinson received money orders from various countries...

Spouses Anna and Yuri Berkovsky from Novosibirsk were convicted to 1 year suspended sentence. They are free. But abroad they add their names to the list of “prisoners of conscience” and their names are on the list of “dissidents”. Anna Berkovskaya, 44 years old, a teacher, was a small-scale black market trader. She was recognized by witnesses, and she didn’t contest the accusations.

“We didn’t have any financial difficulties,” – said Berkovskaya, - “We just wanted to have some more money”. During a search of Berkovsky’s redidence a “Walter” pistol was found, # 773211, along with bullets for it. The pistol belonged to Yuri Berkovsky who bought and kept it illegally...

Mikhail Leviev is also on the list of “political opposition”. He is a former director of the trademark shop “Tajikistan” in Moscow. The best national silk destined for sale never came to open sale in the shop: they were sold clandestinely, at increased prices. Altogether 220,000 meters of silk was sold this way, for 1.5 million of roubles (in 1975 prices!). During this time Leviev received 77,500 roubles in bribes. Leviev was buying up and re-selling gold, was involved in smuggling and illegal foreign currency operations. (…) At his arrest approximately 40 kilos of gold in coins and ingots were confiscated, along with other valuables worth 2 million roubles...

Conman Koltunov. In June 1974 a people’s court of Pervomaisky district of Chernovtsy was deliberating about the case of Albert Koltunov, 53 years old, who had already been imprisoned previously for similar crimes. While working as a boss of the local “Sportlotto” lottery office, Koltunov refused to pay winnings to several citizens, claiming that they had filled out the ticket incorrectly; he claimed that to get their winnings they would have to bribe some officials. Some easily conned lucky guys went ahead with his demands and gave him 100 or 200 roubles “for necessary expenses”. Koltunov took this money for himself. By doing so he compromised the work of a state institution, caused damage to the

\(^{505}\) Soviet name for polyester - material that was very much in fashion in the 1970s.
state and to private individuals... This conman is also portrayed in the West as a “dissident” who “suffers because of his views”...

Conman Pinhasov. American “defenders” of Petya Pinhasov - a “sufferer for his beliefs” - managed even to rename Bannett Avenue in New York with his name, though only symbolically and temporarily. Pinhasov is already free: he did his time for his crimes, and it wasn’t the first time. Previously he had been caught stealing building materials from the Repairs and Building Centre where he worked. That time they decided not to bring the case to court and just fired him. Pinhasov got a job as a carpenter in “Dagkonservy” company and continued to steal. This time he received 12 months of community service without being imprisoned: he continued to work in the same place, but 15% of his wages for 12 months were taken from him by the state. When his punishment time was over, Pinhasov moved to work... into a carpenter shop. There he began to steal and resell finished products of this company. He short-changed his clients and the state: while taking certain sums of money from the clients, he wrote down a smaller sum. The difference he put into his pocket...”

So, what really changed during all these years? Well, a couple of things...

It’s probably funny to read nowadays about such a black market dealer Levinson, who is modest by the modern scale of “business”. But the former shop director Leviev - he’s a big fish. He was a real “new Russian”, a real “respected businessman”. The kind from whom nowadays the “oligarchs” grow.

The problem of today’s Levinsons, Pinhasovs and Koltunovs is that if during Soviet times the West would gladly grant them political asylum status, because the West needed them as proof of “human rights violations” and “lack of freedom” in the USSR; when there was no longer a USSR, the West no longer needed them.

That is why it is becoming more and more difficult for them to remain in the West: no matter how hard they try to blacken their native land (even though today we really do have people and things to be afraid of!), it just doesn’t impress the West any more. They even feel hurt: “Look, I have all the proof of how horrible life is in Russia for a Jew (a Baptist, a Chechen, an Armenian, a businessman)!” But nobody jumps at them with fiery eyes to grab those proofs with both hands, as they did 30 years ago.

People of the scale of Leviev - that’s a different matter. These ones are loved and respected in the West. The status of political refugee will be given them on a golden plate. As long as they bring with them their stolen millions, because thanks to “democracy” it is OK to rob whole nations, it’s even welcome, but to confiscate the stolen stuff from modern Levievs... God forbid! That would really be a “human rights violation”...

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...When did I realize for the first time that my nostalgia was not about “home” in general, but about the Soviet Union and our way of life in particular?


I tried to block the thoughts about what was happening at home at that time. My hidden feeling of guilt for my departure was too great, and it began to come up to the surface. This guilt wasn’t caused by the fact that Holland appeared to be different in the reality than I imagined: I was certain that in another couple of years, we would move to Curacao forever and my imagination was already drawing me pictures of how interesting and full of events our lives would be, and how I would help people like Jean...

But the little worm of guilt was gnawing and gnawing at my heart. I have only just began to feel that if I hadn’t left the USSR that cold November evening, there wouldn’t have been anything bad happening back at home. That all these things that were taking place there now, wouldn’t have happened. I knew that it wasn’t the truth, I understood that one person can’t be a warrior in the atmosphere of mass madness. But it was just the fact that this madness was so “en mass” that got me so mixed up for a while: can people really make such a mistake? Especially the Soviet people: the new historical unity of human beings, the most literate and most politically conscious people on Earth!

Yet, there is no more Soviet Union. And who knows what was going to happen there now?

It seemed that they were all content at home? That they were all jumping on one foot for joy when the August coup had failed? And even more so when Yeltsin got rid of that Misha the Teddy Bear once and for all? I myself enjoyed watching on TV the face of Gorby who used to be so full of himself.

That meant from now on everything should have been hunky dory. Another 500 days, and... Yeltsin promised that if needed, he would lie down on the rails. One doesn’t say things like that for nothing, does one?

The period between September and the end of December of that year - when at home it was already not just a wind, but a real hurricane of changes - simply fell from my memory. A total blackout. That’s how hard I was trying to block my own thoughts and feelings. Curacao had helped me a lot in this sense: new impressions and adventures diverted me for a while from another, grim reality.

So, September came, and the new university year began. I was full of plans and signed up for various courses meant for a student’s free choice. I was hoping to learn another couple of languages, dreaming that my remaining 2 or 3 years in Holland would pass as quickly as possible (that’s what I hoped)... How lucky I was that my husband wasn’t Dutch! I’d probably have to kill myself if I was forced to spend the rest of my life there...

I was full of energy, as if the Antillean sun had recharged me. But that month everything suddenly changed...
Sad, depressed letters began to arrive from home: my relatives, as well as millions of Russians, have lost all their life savings in the Yeltsin-Gaidar “experiments”.

Factories began to shut down, salaries weren’t paid for months, people tried to survive by travelling to Turkey and Poland, buying cheap clothes there in bulk and re-selling them back home: this new “freedom of movement” was only undermining our own economy even more. We never had any shopkeepers in our family, and even now, in dire straights, none of my relatives considered joining those “canoeists” even for a second. “To stand on the market” (selling something) in my family had almost the same meaning as to be a streetwalker. My relatives continued to work where they were. Only Shurek, who was unemployed for a while when they closed down his research institute (the “market economy” doesn’t need economists-plan makers), managed to change his profession and became an auditor. I had no idea what that meant.

For those who now shout that the people “deserved” to become poor and miserable if they didn’t start “their own business” of some kind: can you imagine just for a second a life where everybody will keep himself occupied by re-selling the products of somebody else’s labour (because that’s what this “business” stuff is really about)? Who is actually going to do the real work then? Pushkin?

A human being has the right to choose a profession and at the same time the right to live like a human being, no matter what that profession would be, if it is useful for society. We are not obliged to all become programmers or sellers of Herbalife. “All sorts of mothers are needed, all sorts of mothers are important.” - remember that children’s verse?

If everybody sells, who - and with what money - is going to buy it all?

Many things that my relatives wrote me were something abstract. For example, vouchers. In the beginning my mum was even glad that she would own shares of her factory (she even got some for me). “Our factory is a good one, one of the leading factories of that sort: maybe they’ll even pay us some dividends...”

Our naivety was of the level of a pre-school child who got into the claws of an experienced paedophile and sincerely believed that the man would give him a sweet. As if we all didn’t study Marxist political economy, as if we hadn’t read books about the capitalist world: we could at least remember the conmen Miga and Zhulio selling shares in “Dunno on the Moon”! It was very remarkable that one of the first measures of our “fathers of Russian democracy” was the abolishment of the organs of People’s Control!

Hastily and broadly they propagated among the people the idea that to live without working is not only possible (“your money should work for you”), but that this is even the ideal life. Day and night, non-stop, they declared this from TV screens: propaganda took into consideration the fact that our national hero was Yemelya the Lazybones. Hundreds of

507 Prostitute.
508 Sergei Mikhalkov “And what do you have?”
thousands of such Yemelyas across the country dreamt of this sweet life in
the style of “just lie on your stove and eat white kalatch\textsuperscript{509} bread”. Note,
by the way, that even then nobody even mentioned the word “capitalism”! The “reformers” were still afraid to call things by their
proper names.

It seemed to many people that things were really being done
justly: because each citizen got one voucher. This was equality. Sharikovs
to whom Soviet power gave the chance to become human beings\textsuperscript{510} finally
made it into the power echelons. And we still thought that they were
human beings. Sharikovs “take all and divide it” was realized in this
voucher plan. Even though it was all planned by a different kind of mind:
by those who were dreaming back in their childhood of burning their
Soviet school. But they trusted to Sharikovs to make their dream come
true.

It was deep in people’s heads that they were issued a piece of
paper which was worth 10,000 strong Soviet roubles. “According to the
head of Roskomimushchestvo\textsuperscript{511} Chubais, who was leading the
privatization, each voucher was worth 2 “Volga” cars. But as usual, people
didn’t pay attention to the small print: “Privatization cheques may be
bought and sold freely by citizens. The price of the privatization cheques
is defined by an agreement between the both sides”. Having starved for
several months because of unpaid wages, people were glad to get rid of
this piece of paper that became less useful than a toilet roll to them, or
for the price of a bottle of vodka...

I know a family who survived all this time on their granny’s
pension: mother, father, 2 children and granny herself. Despite the fact
that both husband and wife worked. Their daily ration consisted of tea
and bread. Even potatoes they only ate at special occasions. And later on
the granny’s pension stopped being paid for a couple of months... There
were plenty of families like that. People began to eat anything that grew:
things that they could plant on their plot of land around the dacha, in a
garden, in a vegetable plot in the village. In autumn they harvested
potatoes, pickled gherkins and cabbage - and that was it, the food for the
whole year ahead. But not everybody had a piece of land or relatives in a
village. What were they supposed to do? Well, that’s your own business,
dear ladies and gentlemen, compatriots! You are free now, don’t you
see?..

For the first time in her life Little Tamara was happy that she
didn’t have children. And yet, she still tried to share her pension with us:
that’s how kind and generous she was by nature.
- It’s enough for me. I don’t need much. And I already set aside
some money for my funeral. I just eat a bit of porridge and drink some
tea, and that’s it. That’s more than plenty for me.

All of this became a real nightmare.

\textsuperscript{509} Russian traditional sort of bread.
\textsuperscript{510} Sharikov is a character from Bulgakov’s novel “Dog’s Heart”: a man made
out of a dog.
\textsuperscript{511} Committee dealing with privatization in the post-Soviet period.
Irina Malenko

Can you imagine what I was supposed to feel, knowing all this, when another buoyant Dutch “know-it-all” well-wisher clapped me on the shoulder, congratulating me for the “liberation from the horrors of communism” and approving, as the whole West did, the execution of the legitimate parliament of our country by the barefaced Yeltsin? CNN had live coverage of this shooting, almost choking with delight. Here you have it, all this so called “democracy” for you!

But that was still in the future. Many of our fools even then travelled in Moscow by trolleybuses: “to watch the war”. Even my Peruvian friend Pedro, who was in Moscow at that time, managed to end up in their ranks.

I can say one thing: it was at this stage that the my disgust at the cheerful coffee drinking dummies surrounding me in Europe became almost pathological...

- I can not say that I am missing anything
- I have no idea what hunger tastes like...
- If I do not want to cook, then I go to the market and buy some fried fish,
- If I do not want to work tomorrow, I will leave my work until the following day

And if the colours of my house irritate me
That same day, I'll ask my neighbour to paint it for me, -
cheerfully toiling stupid Dutch singer Rene Froger. -

- I can not say that I am missing something.
- I have no idea what a lack of love is,

Today I bought myself a third video recorder,
Now I will not miss a single TV program!\(^{512}\)

Well, what can the majority of mankind talk about with such creatures? They do not even know what love is. They seriously measure the amount of it by orgasms simulated with drugs.

My anger increased because Sonny did not let me tell them directly what I thought of them: that was not acceptable in a “civilized society” that, by the way, applauded Gorbachev's glasnost so loudly.

What was acceptable for them? To become happy at the sight of someone else's misery?

These are the people Sakharov was looking up to, like at some sort of semi-gods?

“In this regard, I believe in the Western man, in his mind, aiming for the great objectives, in his good intentions and in his determination”.\(^{513}\)

I do not want to be part of such a “civilized” society, with visibly obvious signs of mental retardation. I will not be part of those who wilfully call their own small clique “the whole world community.” I am disgusted with small intestinal joys of Rene, implementation of which requires more and more blood from the “non-white” world every year.

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\(^{512}\) Dutch song “Alles kan een man gelukkig maken” (“Everything can make a man happy”).

The more I got fed up with those “aiming for the great goals” (that is, not to miss another sale!), the more I wanted to get away with Sonny, to Curacao, where people at least know the true value of life.

But the more I dreamed out loud about it, the gloomier he became, until he finally told me that he did not want to return home after graduation.

- Why didn’t you tell me this before? - I could only I utter, totally dumbfounded - And what don’t you like at home? After all, you'll surely find work there...

- You do not understand what kind of life it is, when your relatives are all around you all the time, and they all want you to do something for them! - He blurted out - I do not want be bound by anyone or anything. I want to be free.

I tried to imagine what was so terrible if your relatives lived nearby and asked you to help them with something, but honestly I couldn’t. I would only be happy about that!

I felt deeply betrayed. What was next? Would I have to live here for the rest of my life? Why not at least try our luck somewhere else? We were both young, healthy, well-educated... And it was then that I heard for the first time the phrase that later I would hear several times a day:

- You came here yourself, nobody asked you to! You came here yourself, so live here now.

This was the beginning of the end.

That autumn, for the first time ever, I was swept by a deep dark depression. I used to think that a depression was just a fancy synonym for the Russian concept of “the blues”. That people simply “allow” it to overcome them, out of weak character. And that was why I absolutely did not know what to do with this feeling of agony that engulfed my whole being. I did not go to the doctor with it. Meanwhile, it was getting heavier and heavier.

In the morning, I did not want to get up. Life seemed bleak and meaningless. At the sight of autumn leaves I felt like crying: because I knew that there would be no snow to follow them in winter...

I left the house to go to the lectures and just sat passively in the train: I passed my destination station, and continued to travel to the end of the line and back home. Why am I doing all this, why am I studying, what sense does this all have?...

None of my Dutch fellow students knew about my state of mind: I was already clearly given to understand that it was not acceptable here to share your problems with others. And that’s why it became even a hundred times harder.

All my conversations with Sonny started the same way and ended the same way. And that demanded great mental strength. A couple of months later I didn’t have any left. I just wanted to fall into some sort of hibernation and never wake up.

Sonny had his own ideas about what would heal me.

- How about having a baby?

And I, who was always horrified at this idea since reading the second volume of “War and Peace”, where Tolstoy described the death in
childbirth of the Little Princess, finally surrendered. In the end, at least, I would have somebody to talk to!

But is that enough reason for motherhood?...

There was nobody whom I could ask this question. And in November, it was finally so far. I became pregnant...

I can say straight away that it didn’t make me feel any better. Even though Sonny was very caring, attentive and obviously proud of his forthcoming role.

They often speak about post-natal depression, but I have never read anywhere about a pre-natal one. But that was exactly what I had, it was evident to me. All 9 months of my pregnancy my mood was gloomy to the extreme. I pondered about the meaning of life, thinking about how irresponsible it was: to give life to a new human being in such a nightmarish world, and I was especially horrified to imagine what would happen to my child when he or she would go to a Dutch school, where instead of proper academic knowledge he or she would be taught almost from the first grade how to put condoms on cucumbers. Help! I do not want my child to grow up into a cynical *kaaskop*!\(^{514}\) Not believing in good in people, in human dignity, in interest-free friendship, in the fact that another world is possible!

During pregnancy, I again saw the Dutch “*normen en warden*”\(^{515}\) in all their glory: no civilized Dutchman ever gave up his seat to me in public transport, when I was puffing under the weight of my belly. Not even when I was in my 9th month, and my belly took up half a bus or tram. It simply never occurred to them to do such a thing. The only ones who gave up their place for me were Dutch women (apparently knowing from their own experience what it was like to be pregnant among such selfish pigs!) and *allochthonen*\(^{516}\) who were not civilized enough yet. I already felt sorry for Dutch women for a long time: they are so much more beautiful and more intelligent than their men - but after this experience I felt even more so. Those men simply don’t deserve their women. An average Dutch man is a supercilious haughty creature with the psychology of a pimp, greatly overestimating his own importance in society and his own intellectual abilities.

Shortly before due day I was sitting in a park in Rotterdam at the Antilles counter during the Multicultural Festival “Dunya”. Tall like a mile of Kolomna\(^{517}\), Hans Dijkstra\(^{518}\) walked past me (I think he was Minister of Internal Affairs then) and, when I was asked by a journalist to give her an interview about my experiences in Holland, I almost barked at her, because I that’s how bad I felt.

Once again, I realized what a barbaric country it was, where everything revolved around money: despite the fact that you regularly

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514 Cheese head (Dutch).
515 Norms and values (Dutch).
516 Immigrants (Dutch).
517 Russian expression for very tall and skinny people.
paid monthly your health insurance, you could not even give birth in a hospital free of charge if you did not have medical complications. And we didn’t have money to pay for the delivery. I guess the idea behind this is that the poor shouldn’t have any children. I noticed that Malthusianism and social Darwinism are very popular among the Dutch: just read the reader’s letters in the newspaper “De Telegraaf” for couple of days and you will see it for yourself.

If the Dutch assure you that they gladly give birth at home because it is ”natural”, don’t believe them. If that is so, then why not do it somewhere in the woods?

It always comes back to finances. But I couldn’t even imagine such a Stone Age society: what if something happens, and there is no doctor? And what about sterile cleanliness? And to harass your neighbours with screaming for hours, is that “natural” too? In my opinion, it was just the height of selfishness. But to think about other people and to take them into account - That is just not taught in any capitalist society. Holland is no exception. If you meet someone who still cares about others, they must be either a communist, or a survivor of WWII, or a rare gem of a human being here.

...I was “lucky”: I started to have complications. And I was allowed to stay in the maternity ward for free for the entire 24 hours. What an unheard-of generosity!

...Sonny cried when Lisa was born: he was hoping for a boy. I had to comfort him. The first day I felt easy, I wanted to get up and go running: I even went to the shower by myself. Lisa was alright, although the delivery was very long. She looked like a little Chinese, and I seriously thought that it had some influence on her that shortly before her birth I and Sonny went to the cinema to watch a movie about the life of Bruce Lee. But it turned out, they were just the same Zomerberg Indian eyes again...

On the third day I couldn’t get out of bed: long after I had been thrown out of the hospital. When my mother had me, she stayed with me in the maternity ward for 10 days! But such luxury Dutch society cannot afford. Unlike the state subsidy of 350,000 Euros to “be able to discuss homosexuality among migrants”... Well, every society has its own priorities.

...Surprisingly, after Lisa’s birth my depression finally disappeared for some time. She seemed to instil in me a new hope. Maybe I just didn’t have time for the “blues”, with all my newly emerging duties? For example, I had to get used to learn to sleep like Stirlitz519: exactly for 20 minutes, when given the opportunity, and waking up after that without any alarm.

Now, of course, it is amusing to recall how I looked at Lisa’s sleeping face the first few hours of her life and thought that nothing would really change in my everyday life after this; there would be just one person more in the family... Having a child does change your life

dramatically, and there's no getting away from it. Frankly speaking, I was not emotionally ready for motherhood back then: not because I could not carry out my duties, but because at the age of 26 years I still did not feel like a house hostess, the eldest woman in the family who, from now on could be called "mami". I was shaken when Sonny called me that, though my grandfather used to call my grandmother that too, only of course in Russian. Perhaps that was precisely why I was shocked - from the feeling: "That was it? From now on my whole life will be just this?" It made me feel old.

The matter was also that my family back home: my grandmother, mother, Shurek, Little Tamara and even my deceased grandfather - continued to be my real family, as was common for us. A "nuclear" family-cell: wife, husband and child, as is customary in the West (where a husband and children are your family, not your other blood relatives) is just not for us. Such a model if does not cut off, then at least greatly limits your communication with your own older generation. This was deeply alien to me. Sonny was very jealous of my feelings for my family, whom he had never met, and often said:

-I am your family now, not them!

To a Soviet person the very such thought is strange. Our families were so strong, through the connection between generations and their mutual assistance. It's not just that grandmothers helped to care for grandchildren (which is handy not only for their children, but good for the grandchildren in the first place!). I cannot imagine how my grandmother, my favourite Bunny would suddenly say to me:

- I want to live for myself! - And then take off to some resort with the next door granny Niusya.

If that would seem to us strange at least; even more unacceptable would be to send your elderly parents to a nursing home. This for us is almost tantamount to fascism. No matter how difficult life may be, they are your parents, they gave you life, they raised you, they cared about you - and you just throw them out, as if they were some used-up thing? I do not know how these "kids" can sleep peacefully. And it is not because of the nursing home environment: it could even be a material paradise, but people are lonely there, and knowing that they are not wanted by their own children and grandchildren can drive anybody to a premature grave.

Sometimes I do wonder what an average Westerner needs a family for at all. For the sake of a status: "everyone has one, so I should have one too"? Because parents here cannot wait until their children grow up and leave their house - and they make no secret of their joy when that day finally comes. Grandparents do not help with grandchildren, because "they want to live for themselves". And when those who "live for themselves", who almost forcibly threw their own children out of their own house in the past, are sent off to a nursing home in their declining years by their own children, is this not a logical outcome of their own selfishness?

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520 Mother (Papiamento).
Irina Malenko

...I fell in love with Lisa from the beginning and unconditionally - though I know that this feeling does not arise immediately in all mothers. Lisa was a very quiet, calm girl: for the entire first year of her life she cried just once, maybe for an hour.

But when I looked at her, my thoughts were not very common: for example, I thought that from now on I already knew all the mysteries in life. Only one mystery remained unknown: my own death... For some reason it never occurred to me that there are still many mysteries of life that I had not discovered: for example, becoming a grandmother. Or a sense of victory over the enemy...

So, three days after her birth, under the influence of certain processes in my body, which, of course, were completely new for me, I could not get out of bed. I had a fever, my body ached, and I felt terrible.

That very evening, our next-door neighbour - the one who played music loud at night, not a Moroccan, not an Antillean, but a very ordinary Dutchman! - had a party at home... I don’t know what they were doing, but it sounded as if someone was falling down the stairs every 5 minutes or so! This went on and on, ad infinitum. I cried out loud, begging Sonny, since he didn’t want to call the police, to at least call next door and ask them nicely to be a bit quieter because there was a newborn baby trying to sleep next door. But no!

- I'm not going to do that. They have the right.

Well, can you live in such a country or not? Any hoodlum here has his rights. Only normal, ordinary people, who don’t annoy anybody, they don’t have any rights.

Being a student and a mother is not easy in any country. In Holland you must sign children up for a place in a nursery almost before they are born - this is no joke, there are queues. It’s better not even to speak of the cost. Sonny assured me that I would be helped by his relatives, but actually I almost had to beg his mother every time to look after Lisa for a day when I had to go to my lectures...

Sonny’s mother now also settled in Tilburg. From our house to there was little more than an hour by train. I took Lisa by train to her, then went to the university - another hour and a half, and then the same way back to pick up Lisa and another hour to get home. It is not surprising that Lisa fell in love with travelling since childhood: all her early years she spent in a train! And she flew in an airplane for the first time at the age of 7 months... Under these circumstances, naturally, I had to quickly switch to bottle feeding.

When I found out the length of maternity leave to which women in Holland are entitled by law, I almost had a heart attack: in 1993 it was about 3 months! True, one could extend it to 4 months - by working right up to the birth and taking the time of the pre natal leave after. But compare it with the Soviet Union, where maternity leave could be taken for a year and a half, with payment of wages, and if you could afford to, even up to 3 years (another 18 months without pay, but with keeping of your place of work).

Now some rabid neo-liberal will cry out that "the State shouldn’t look after someone else’s children, and the employer even less so".

447
Darling, listen, you say that your state in general is not obliged to do anything for anyone. So, can you explain to me why do people actually need such a state? Or are they the only ones who are obliged everything to it?

In a bourgeois society there is a mentally abnormal system of values: people are forced to tighten the belt for the sake of a "climate conducive to investment" - which is not designed to improve living for everyone. Our economy was there for the people, jobs were created for them, but here it is exactly the opposite: people here exist for the economy. The economy here is like some ravenous ancient idol, on the altar of which living beings with feelings must be constantly sacrificed...

For me, such economic development is meaningless. I cannot admire it, no matter what was invented under such system, not even if it was a magic wand: what's the point in development if these benefits are not meant to improve everyone’s lives, without exception? If this development is not put at the service of society as a whole, but on the contrary, here people live in order to feed the monster, known as "performance" and "productivity"?

If the result of all this turmoil and humiliation of the people going on in modern Russia should be to build a society like this, it is simply not worth suffering for its sake: not even for one day!

...To the surprise of not just Señor Arturo, but of Sonny and Shantell as well, after Louisa arrived in Holland, she announced to Señor Arturo that she was divorcing him. After 25 years of marriage! I couldn't even look at Señor Arturo: he was a sorry sight. He waited for her such a long time, sent to her in Curacao small gifts bought with his benefits, dreamed so much of reuniting his family... And not once during all that time did Louisa not say a word to him about her plans. It turns out that during his departure and absence forced by economic conditions she found herself a younger lover: he was repairing her house for her. And she arrived in Holland already with her lover... She no longer needed an old and sick man who could no longer provide for her.

Lover Elwin was a full head shorter than she was, with an unburden by intellect face. - He possessed an annoying feature of constantly giggling, without any reason. It seemed that it was enough to show him a finger and he would instantly go down laughing. It was obvious that he was from the breed of those whom my mother referred to as "single-celled". It looks like Louisa respected him not for his intellect, but for some other, less obvious qualities...

Obviously, after this it didn’t take much for me to choose Señor Arturo’s side: I began to dislike Louisa profoundly as I worried about Señor Arturo. But Sonny told me that I did not understand how difficult it was for his mother when he decided to emigrate...

Sonny himself was deeply hurt by the divorce of his parents, though he pretended that he didn’t care. I noticed Sonny’s growing disbelief in women’s fidelity by the deep feeling with which he sang in Curacao a song of a South African singer Lucky Dube “It's not easy”:

“I remember the day I called mama on the telephone
I told her, mama I’m getting married
I could hear her voice on the other side
Of the telephone she was smiling
And she asked me a question
That I proudly answered
She said son did you take time
To know her?
I said mama she is the best
But today it hurts me so to go back to
Mama and say
Mama I'm getting divorced oh
I'm getting divorced..."

The choice I made didn't work out the way
I thought it would
This choice I made, it hurts me so mama
This choice I made didn't work out the
Way I thought it would
This choice of mine oh..."

And another one, his own Antillean song, which was then “in
vogue”:
«Bo por bai unda ku bo ke,
Falta lo bo hasi serka mi...”
("You can go wherever you want
If it's not good enough for you to be with me...")

This song was sung by an old classmate of Omayra. Not knowing
what he looked like, I imagined a tall, slender, proud Antillean - by his
voice. At a party organized by the company in which Sonny was doing his
internship in Curacao, we finally saw him: live! The owner of this magical
voice was quite an ugly-looking and miniscule shabby guy... At least this
explained why he had such hangups. But Sonny was a good looking, young
and smart guy. I could not understand it. After all, it couldn’t be a mere
coincidence that he liked songs on such topics?

And his most favourite song, ever since childhood, was no better
either: "Bohemian Rhapsody" by "Queen":
"I'm just a poor boy
Nobody loves me
He's just a poor boy
From a poor family..."

Sonny meanwhile has gone on to his last year of studies, and in
order to get his diploma he only had to pass one more internship period.

It turned out that there was no place for his internship. Usually in
such cases the school itself helps students to find a place: they have many
contacts with various companies. But for Sonny there was nothing at all,
as time went on...

We both began to panic. Sonny was sure that he was being
discriminated against since he was Antillean, the only one in his group.
Knowing the attitudes in Enschede, I would not be surprised if this were
so. I still remember how a local woman there asked me on the bus,
although I was still quite unable to speak Dutch, pointing her finger at
Sonny as if he was an inanimate object:
We were both very hurt. With the passing of time our negative feelings became only stronger. More and more often I said to him:

- Well, now do you see for yourself that we can’t live in such a country?

Sonny sent almost 5 letters every day to different companies in search of a place - just for 3 months! - but to no avail. What else could he do now? Had he studied so well all these years, despite all the difficulties, for nothing, and now he wouldn’t even get a diploma?

In desperation, I wrote about this situation to my family: it is good that we do not have the habit of hiding the truth from each other and always pretending that everything is in order. My mother answered almost immediately: she arranged with our local agricultural machinery factory, where some engineers were developing wind turbines, that Sonny could apply for an internship there! We were both beside ourselves with happiness, I also because I hadn’t been home for 5 years already...

All this time I was terrified to go home, having heard plenty of "horror stories" from various foreign "voices" and having read our emigrant newspapers. And what if after that I would not be allowed to leave the country? What if I would be thrown into jail for 10 years?

Now I just laugh remembering such nonsense. None of my relatives who worked in "sensitive" places was in any trouble because of me! Perhaps if I had asked for political asylum in the Netherlands, having thrown dirt at my own country in order to “earn” it, things would be slightly different, but it was clear that nobody was going to persecute me for my marriage.

At the end of the day, back at home, in time I gave them enough reason to start prosecuting me “for dissent” - if you believe the criteria of dissent given by most of our home-grown migrants. Wasn’t it I who, in the 10th grade during social science classes, sitting right under the nose of the teacher who was our school’s Party Committee Secretary, expressed aloud my cynicism when she told us about the future merger of the two forms of socialist property?

- Big deal, they’ll just rename the collective farms into state farms, and that will be it!

But she did not run to "call the KGB" and even began to quietly outline, not looking at me personally, why I was wrong!

And the political jokes that we all told: none of us was even touched by a finger?

And my "unauthorized" contacts with foreign students? (Some of them even believed that I was "working for the KGB" myself, because of the freedom I enjoyed.) The KGB probably knew about my contacts, and didn’t reprimand me even once!

The longer I thought about it, the more I came to the conclusion that those who were persecuted in the USSR were pursued not just because of their “different way of thinking”, but surely because they...
were not merely “thinking” but actually doing something directed against the state foundations. And that is quite different from just being a “dissident”. Try to do something against the state in any state, even the most “free” and “democratic” and look where this road will take you!

But in any case, back then I was very excited. Never before had I been away from home for so long. Never in my lifetime had there been such profound changes there. What would I meet in my Motherland? Had it changed my family and friends?

Our departure day fell on Paris Commune Day. Sonny got his visa without any problem: including for Lisa. We had already packed our suitcases. Since the University had no problem with my departure, I only had to take annual leave in my McDonald’s: under the old manager less than a year ago, it would also not be a problem.

But recently we got a new manager - Ed. He immediately disliked me for 3 reasons:

1) because I returned to work in the restaurant after giving birth, unlike his own wife who gave birth at about the same time as I did, but after that humbly remained at home in his own kitchen;
2) because not only was I over 23 years old - that meant paying me the maximum salary - but they also had to pay me something extra for working there for over a year, for the experience;
3) because I did not put on a pasted smile for the whole 8 hour shift.

- How are you? - He asked me dutifully every time we met, and I gave him a completely natural, human response:
  - I am OK.
  - I am OK.
  - Why do you say: "I am OK"? You must say: "Excellent! Fantastic!" - And he showed me how I should smile.

I looked at him with a look that expressed my strong desire to twist a finger at my temple. Who can see in the kitchen that phoney smile? And why do I have to say that everything was “fantastic” if it was just normal - no more and no less?

But the bearers of American culture to the rest of the unenlightened have a special noble mission: to make every teenager smeared with ketchup and smelling of a mixture of onions and mustard, with arms burnt up to the elbows by splashes of boiling fat (some traces of such burns remain for life!) feel that he represents the Great Civilization and that he is a missionary, a participant in the Crusade against that "uncivilized world" that still allows itself to be something different, to speak in other languages and even write its own books and make its own movies that are aimed at a certain intellectual development.

And again I am reminded of our immortal movie "Kindza-dza!": “Patsaks, what are you doing here? And why don’t you wear muzzles? Pe-Zhe ordered to all patsaks to wear muzzles and to smile. Like this”.

522 18th of March. This date was widely known in the USSR.
523 A gesture meaning in Russia craziness of the person you’re talking to.
I had no illusions that I wanted to continue to work there. I just had no choice. In a student’s family every guilder counted. Ed could not just fire me: I didn’t give him any reason to. Holland of the 1990s was still not like America.

It became possible, when I asked for that next annual leave. I had accumulated enough vacation days, and because I only worked two days a week, I could stretch them over a few months (I had already done that a year earlier, when I went to Curacao). But Ed was determined that at last he had found an opportunity to find someone cheaper.

- Write a letter of resignation! - He sang to me in the sweetest possible voice. - And when you come back, you can apply for a job again.

He thought that I was so stupid that I would not understand that there was no way back: after all, “these allochthons, they are so dumb!” But of course I understood that perfectly. Why take back an employee, even a good one, when you can find another, much cheaper one?

The Dutch have a tendency to consider “non-European” peoples to be dumber than they are. Ed offended me deeply when in his arrogant racism he went so far as to offer me... his help in writing a letter of resignation in Dutch. By that time, may I remind you, I was already in my third year at a Dutch university (where Dutch, of course, was the language of all the lectures and all the examinations!), and in the philology department! And even my average marks were higher than those of many Dutch students. This was really too much. I sent him that letter, handwritten in perfect Dutch, as I added, not without sarcasm: by fax, only half an hour before my next shift. So that they didn’t have time to get anyone else to replace me in the kitchen for that evening...

It was a small tempest in a teacup. It made me feel content for a while, but, of course, nothing was really changed in this system.

Sometimes I think about my colleagues. No, not the white managers full of self-importance, softly telling me how interesting yesterday’s television program about Russian prostitutes was, but Carlos and Mario from Curacao, Ahmed from Pakistan, Vasilis from Greece, Nadia and Mohammed from Morocco... How Mohammed showed me once in our back room a volume of Lenin in French and proudly announced that he was reading it... People like Ed do not read anything but comics.

...Around the time of our departure, however, there was one very pleasant, even Earth-shattering event... But it did not begin so pleasantly.

In early February, I heard on the radio a name that brought all the heat back into my soul. Bobby Farrell! My hands began to shake, and a plate that I was washing slipped out of them and crashed onto the floor.

Bobby Farrell was sentenced to suspended imprisonment, for having tried to pour gasoline and set fire to his wife!

So that was why he was not at home when I was asking about him...

I was so excited that could not help it fretting the whole day. This did not change anything in my feelings towards Bobby: after all, I did not have to baptize my children with him...

A few weeks later, right on my birthday, Louisa phoned me:
Tonight they will have your Bobby Farrell and his wife on a TV talk show.

On my birthday, of all the days in the year! How could I not believe in fate after this?...

...I had not seen my idol for many years, and I had no idea what he looked like now. When he appeared on the screen, skinny, with straightened hair, thinning in front and long at the back, my heart ached with pity, but just for a second. Just as quickly was Alyonushka from “The Scarlet Flower” accustomed to the look of the Chudo-Yudo monster. I felt the same way: a second later he was the old Bobby to me!

His wife - the very one whom he was going to burn - was a dazzling beauty, very self-confident but not cocky. I admired her thick, long hair, black as night, and her huge gypsy eyes. No, I would never have been a match for her, not even in the best years of my girlhood!

She spoke Dutch with a strong German accent: apparently because she knew that language before she learned Dutch. And Bobby... now I could clearly hear his Antillean accent: that soft in all weathers” "I": “daddy cool”...

Bobby and his gorgeous wife reconciled and were telling the public what happened between them, and they both believed that this would never happen between them again. I would also like to believe it. It’s good to know that your hero is finally happy! But the Dutch public didn’t believe it, and they sighed and sighed, unable to understand how his wife was no longer afraid of him. But it was Bobby himself, in person!

A few days later, impressed by the program, I wrote a letter to both of them - without knowing the address. Lelystad is not such a big city: it would get to them, I thought. I re-wrote the letter three times: I wanted to tell him so much how much “Boney M” meant to me, with all the ups and downs of my life that you already know.

Except for one thing: of course, I did not confess that I was in love with him for so long...

Not expecting anything special, I wrote our address and phone number at the end of the letter. And I also wrote that my husband was his countryman.

A few days later we were sitting at home; Lisa was asleep, Sonny was playing with the computer, I was watching TV when the phone rang. But it was not an elephant, like in Chukovsky’s fairy tale; it was a young woman with the already familiar accent.

- It’s Bobby’s wife speaking. We received your letter, thank you very much! Now Bobby will talk to you...

You will laugh, but at these words I trembled, trembled as, no doubt, the Soviet military commanders did during the war when they were

524 *The Scarlet Flower* is a fairy-tale written by S. Aksakov, published in 1858. It is somewhat similar to *Beauty and the Beast.*

525 One of the characters in “Carlsson on the Roof” used as a compliment a phrase: “Your nose is so cute... It is cute in all weathers!”

526 Korney Ivanovich Chukovsky (1882 - 1969) was one of the most popular children’s poets in the Russian language. One of his poems begins with “My phone went ringing. “Who is it speaking?” “The elephant!”
Irina Malenko
told that Stalin would speak to them (forgive me for such a comparison - I am only describing my feelings!)

I hardly remember what he said and even less remember what I answered. He told me something about his trips to Russia, about his friends from the Bolshoi, that “we are all in Holland only in order to give a better future to our children!”

Here I wanted to disagree with him - about that “better future” - but I didn’t dare. I just enjoyed the sound of his voice! I couldn’t squeeze out a single word, except for: “Yes... aha... aha... Yeah... Of course!”

I guess, in the end he got tired of this and asked:

- Bo ta papia papiamento? 527

I just got flustered:

- Un tiki... 528

- Give the phone to your husband, will you?

I handed the receiver to Sonny, who by the look on my face already knew who it was, - fearing that he would say something nasty to Bobby, but Sonny was at his best. They spoke in their native language, Sonny joked and laughed, and I did not hear what Bobby was saying. At that time I thought feverishly, what else I can ask him while I have the chance, and what to say. And I finally gained the courage to ask how could I go to his concert when Sonny suddenly said:

- Te aworo! 529 - and hung up!

- What did he tell you? - I pounced on Sonny.

- How lucky I am with my wife: Eastern European women are much less money-hungry than ours in the Caribbean! - Sonny said.

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...On a self-made wall, dedicated to Viktor Tsoi by his fans in my hometown, I saw giant handwritten letters:

“Vitya! Do you remember how we wanted changes? You know what, they finally came, f** them!...”

The scream of the soul of an ordinary resident of central Russia, far from the Moscow tokenism of “chic-gloss-and-glamour”... Tor the residents of my town Muscovites are like aliens. However, in Moscow there are even more miserable people than in our city They’re just not as conspicuous, like bandits, thieves and prostitutes of various sorts: from gangs, “soldiers”, to “oligarchs” and from strippers to broadcasters...

A sense of unreality swept over me when for the first time in my life I was called “Madam”. In Sheremetyevo airport. I remember, I even turned around twice, looking, who was the madam there. I wasn’t pleased: it felt disgusting, as though they had poured a bucket of tar on me. Or as if I was forced to eat a kilogram of plums with pits. What “Madam”? I have no slaves or serfs, and I never have had them!

At home, in my native town, people still laugh if somebody uses those kinds of words. On the streets they call each other as before: “woman”, “man”, “Grandma,” “Grandpa,” “girl”, “guy”. And “comrades”.

527 Do you speak Papiamento? (Papiamento).
528 A little bit (Papiamento).
529 Bye-bye! (Papiamento).
And the streets ... the streets have become as if they have been through a war!

Collapsing balconies of beautiful houses from the era of the “cult of personality” on the main street. Broken glass in the windows of apartment blocks and trams, barely covered by wooden and metal shields. Dust in the air. Kids who have become incredibly thin and pale, a lot fewer (when I grew up, in the “years of stagnation”, we were all chubby-cheeked!). Enticing labels for the street lights of numerous drinking dens: “Vodka! 24 Hours Non-Stop!” (in English as well!) Closed down factories - and one of my first teachers, tipsy, sitting on the ground, trading in some old junk. I walked away - so as not to embarrass her.

Crowds of people aimlessly wandering around in broad day: there is no work! There are practically no buses or trolleys: instead there are many private taxis with boards on the windshield “trolleybus number 5”. Any sort of a car will do for a taxi: from a country “jeep” to mini buses, to second-hand Western BMWs. The drivers seem to have got their driving licenses “for pork”, as we used to say before, meaning for bribes, because they would periodically collide with each other, swearing, while passengers sometimes flew out of those minibuses through the back door... It looks like India. But it doesn’t shock anyone. As it doesn’t shock anyone to see Tajik children begging on the streets. During the Soviet time, I did not see a single Tajik in our town, not even on the market: Tajikistan was too far away. And now, having become independent, these poor people obviously have such a "good" life that they have no options left but to drag their whole families such a distance...

The town has become flooded by “people of Caucasian nationality”\(^{530}\); previously there were only men in the market, but now they bring with them women and children. Locals refer to it quite calmly.

- When we were told to guard our apartment blocks from the Chechens at night, - recalls a neighbour, Galya – we circled the block all night long. And right under our windows we have a mini market. It was like a circus: we were guarding our house from them, and they were guarding their melons from us!

There is a complete and utter mix-up in the minds of people: grannies in the kitchen into whose brains Radio Russia is dripping its poison all day, came to the conclusion that in the 1940s we attacked Hitler, not that he had attacked us!

- But Tamara, you lived that time yourself; don’t you remember who attacked whom?
- Aye, you’re right... I remember! But on the radio they said that...
  You don’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Sometimes you can see utterly wild scenes: for example, women urinating in a city park, while their boyfriends tenderly hold their hand... Or kids of about 10 years old busily discussing whether they were right in America to imprison Mike Tyson when he raped somebody. One of my friends tried to get her 9-year-old son out of the room when the television was broadcasting porn in broad daylight. He wisely stated to his mother:

\(^{530}\) Common term for people from the Caucasus in the post-Soviet Russia.
- What’s on, is it sex or something? I will soon be doing that myself, and you’re still afraid that I’ll see it!...

...On radio and on TV screens - a mere delusion: presenters of news programms, literally translated from the Western broadcasters (there is no money left for Russia to have their own, proper journalists!), who remind me of a magic phrase from the novel that Shurek wrote for me in my childhood: “And then the chepurysla’s began to chooh...” They all speak much too fast and with a look as if they themselves don’t understand what they are saying. I wouldn’t be surprised if it were true.

It feels like everything that you loved, everything that was dear to you, has been desecrated and soiled by strangers - no, not Caucasians or other compatriots of some other ethnicity, but by ourselves, by moral mutants among us!

It reminded me of the hero of the Jamaican film, “The Lunatic”, Busha McIntosh, who worried that his parent’s grave in the village cemetery is being defecated on by local street goats and cows... It was exactly same feeling that I had in today’s Russia! Only those “goats” and “cows” here are called “business people”...

From a local newspaper: “On Tuesday there were four suicides in town. All those who committed suicide were men aged 35 to 65 years...”

The only way to survive here without falling into a depression - even in the short time that I was here! - was to lock yourself up within four walls, among friends and relatives, and stay out of the streets as much as possible and especially, God forbid, don’t go to Moscow!

But that’s not the solution.

All this is not going to go away by closing our eyes and imagining that we still live in the Soviet Union. That is what some of my relatives and friends do. For example, one former colleague of my uncle lost at least 30 kilo and became a vegetarian and follower of Tolstoy, speaking out for “a world without violence”. My God, but they are destroying us right in front of our own eyes like flies, even without any violence!

So, for what were we born?

To drink “24-hours non-stop” under some fence?

So that the Berezovskys of all nations would be able to party on the Cote d’Azur at our expense?

To repeat, like the kid from the movie “Mama” - “what could we have done?"\(^{531}\)

No!

...All of a sudden I woke up in cold sweat. The three of us: Lisa, Sonny and I were sleeping in the room. It was quite small for all of us, though as a matter of fact my mother’s flat has never been meant for so many dwellers.

Mum’s snoring could be heard from the kitchen where she sleeps. She has to go to work in the morning.

We have already been here two months. Two weeks after our arrival Sonny started attending his practical courses. Until then he was

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trying to get adjusted to the local climate, getting used to wearing a winter hat and walking through the icy street. Though it was already the middle of March, Moscow met us with a thick snowfall and on our way home from the Sheremetyevo airport I had time to explain to Sonny the whole meaning of the ancient popular advice that wisely suggested that at this time of the year one should put on "three pairs of socks" instead of the usual one. This referred to the really unpredictable weather when all of a sudden days of thaw may be followed by a really severe Winter "come back" over and over again.

My mother, uncle Shurek and his company-driver Arkadiy - all in the familiar "Volga" company car, met us at the airport.

The first thing that really impressed me after those 5 years of being away was how much older all those faces of both close relatives and previously familiar speakers and actors on TV seemed to me now. Only after that I realized that I myself might look older too. Five years after all are 5 years, nothing one can do about that...

Arkadiy, the driver, was not much older than I was. He was a true native inhabitant of the town, something that one did not find for quite some time. A very intelligent person, who spent much of his spare time reading or "swallowing up" books, as they say here, mostly in history and politics. All the way he was discussing with my mother and me Yeltsin's personality and policies. He did not do it very loud but so bitingly and skilfully that sometimes it seemed that my ears would simply burst.

More than that, in the Soviet days Arkadiy, like my mother, was a certified engineer, and obviously to him the idea of "serving a master" and an "owner" had remained as alien to him as to me. He lost his job when the Technological Research Institute in which he worked had been shut down. It turned out to be very hard to even find the employment as a driver that he had at the moment. For a while he tried to work as a non-licensed illegal taxi driver in his private car, but this turned out to be a very risky undertaking indeed. Many of his fellow drivers of this kind would even have an axe ready under their seat in view of the really suspicious and sometimes even scary customers they sometimes had to take. I could hardly believe my ears when I listened to such things!

Arkadiy showed due respect while talking to Shurek but in no way was he either obsequious or servile. He would speak his opinion even if he were not asked for it. He felt himself Shurek's equal and after some time I was shocked to realize that Shurek did not like that at all. It obviously irritated him and made him angry. I simply failed to understand how my beloved uncle Shurek, whom I always knew as an extremely kind, down-to-earth and immediately responsive fellow, could all of a sudden start feeling like a kind of a master who would be displeased that Arkadiy did not realize it as well.

- You should read less and take better care of the car! - He angrily said to Arkadiy. This was so unexpected that I almost failed to hear it. Was it possible that Shurek, who at the age of 17 had spoiled his own eyes reading secretly under the blankets during the night while the others were sleeping, could ever say such a thing? In the Soviet days when he was a
general economist of a big factory, he would not talk in such a way even to a cleaner.

Indeed, what had happened to the people during all those years?
Arkadiy wouldn't even look at him, pretending that he hadn't heard anything and simply continued his narrative about things he had read.

Very much like most of the non-foolish and reasoning men in the post-Soviet era who were inclined to thinking, Arkady was also killing himself by softly indulging in alcohol. No, he never drank when he was driving but every day off he got totally drunk in an effort to forget and not to think, at least for a while, about everything that was going on around him the rest of the time. Otherwise thoughts of this kind tortured him practically all day and night. For example he repeatedly remembered business trips to Azerbaijan or Estonia in Soviet times, the wonderful people there with whom he worked on applying various kinds of electronic machines and other hi-tech devices. What a true miracle that life seemed nowadays and how all of us just could not fully appreciate it earlier.

To tell the truth, thoughts of this kind could well have made me start drinking as well, had I not developed a certain capacity of "plugging out" and deliberately keeping them away from time to time.

Sonny, of course, had no idea whatsoever of all those really stormy emotions and feelings that were "blowing up" around us. Instead, he was looking with all the curiosity imaginable at everything he could see on both sides of the highway. I myself still remembered it as a kind of a desolate and beautiful landscape, stretching almost all the way from the airport to our town. Now however one could see a really endless row of all sorts of sheds, huts, small houses, tents, sometimes, even heaps of ruins. The former big modern milch-cow farm by the road had been turned into a spare-parts shop. God knows only where the cows had gone... All around one could see numerous sign-boards all boldly advertising, sometimes even in Latin script, this or that "supermarket". Sometimes they were placed over peasant houses and households and in other cases were merely hanging down from tree branches in the forest. A more absurd view could hardly be seen or even imagined anywhere else. To top it all off, a most incredible mix of "new Russian" brands of pop-music and "classical prison-lyrics" were lavishly reproduced at incredibly high volume by a number of coffee houses on both sides of the highway. The lyrics of most of those pieces of "fine art" were made up in such a way that any person of more or less normal common sense would simply feel terribly ashamed when hearing them.

Their content ranged from "I got busted; she promised to wait for me, but didn’t” to "I escaped and fixed them all for good!"

Sonny, judging by his face, liked what he saw: it was little different from what he grew up with on his own native island, except for the weather. He didn't know any other life and could not imagine anything different. I could only sympathize with him.

And still, we had a lot of stuff that to Sonny was a novelty.

At the market the first thing he was horrified by was the tomato of the Kuban variety "Bull’s Heart" - huge, red and sweet. He was
accustomed to the Dutch tomatoes: grown in a greenhouse, small and almost green.

- Nadya! Why are these tomatoes like THAT? Chernobyl? - He exclaimed, turning to my mother as if she was personally responsible for the discrepancy between the Kuban tomatoes and the accepted standard in the Netherlands.

- They are like what? They are as they should be: natural! Forget already about your Dutch chemistry!

The taste of our tomatoes pleased Sonny so much that after that he wouldn’t even look at the Dutch ones.

The day before the start of his internship Sonny for some reason decided to try our vodka. Maybe in order to get some courage? Mum was not at home; he walked into the kitchen, took a bottle out of the refrigerator and poured himself a full glass. I was busy with Lisa, but I saw out of the corner of my eye what was happening, and warned him not to drink without starters: in Russia, no one does.

Sonny gulped his glass empty and proudly looked at me:

- And people say: vodka, vodka... I don’t even feel it!

And he reached for a second glass.

- Do not say later on that I didn’t warn you - I just said. In the end, a Western man is accustomed to freedom, and I will not disturb his free spirit with my communist restrictions.

I walked out of the kitchen. Two minutes later there was a terrible crash. I rushed back. Sonny was lying on the floor and groaning.

Terrified, I somehow managed to drag him to the bathroom. He could not even sit up. I filled the bathtub with warm water and, swearing at him for not listening to me, pulled him into the bath with great difficulty. He lay there, soaking and groaning.

Meanwhile, my mother returned from work.

- What is going on here? The place looks as if Mamai\(^532\) has passed through! - She asked, noticing the traces of Sonny’s feat on the kitchen floor.

I started to explain to her what happened, while Sonny was groaning from the bathroom:

- Do not speak in Russian, you're irritating me...

After that, he never even touched vodka. Even when my aunt’s husband poured it into his glass, with our traditional “Do you respect me?”

...When I arrived home, for the first time in 5 years, all sorts of people began to drop by. Even the employees of OVIR, where Sonny went for registration: they immediately ran to our house - they wanted to see how “wealthy” we were! Friends and strangers all believed that I had "made it in life"; they were interested in seeing someone who came from this "free" West. And maybe it could be useful for them in some way too...

\(^532\) Mamai (? - 1380) was a powerful Mongolian military commander of the Blue Horde in the 1370s which is now the Southern Ukrainian Steppes and the Crimean Peninsula. This expression in Russian means “a complete mess”, “as if after a whole Horde passed through this place with its horses”.

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However, their perceptions of life in the West were quite strange, to put it mildly...

– Well, what about people there, surely they are all believers? – my second cousin Grisha (one of those who hung “crosses with gymnasts” on his neck\footnote{A Russian joke: a New Russian comes into a jewelry store to choose a golden cross for his golden chain necklace. He wants the biggest one possible. At the end he sees a cross on top of the nearby church: “Take off \textit{that} gymnast; I am buyng this one!” (meaning Jesus).}) asked me about the Dutch with some respect in his voice.

– What? - I didn’t understand. And when I realized, my eyes grew wide: I remembered empty Dutch churches, their doors opening barely once a week, for the Dutch elderly and for foreigners.

– Well, but we were told...

…Today, they don’t come any more. They lost interest when what I was telling them didn’t confirm the tales which they wanted to believe (well, one must believe in something!).

However, the “new Russian” Grisha was not the only one suffering from such mistakes. There were many more of the real victims of the “free market” who shared his illusions. They were shocked when I told them frankly that life under capitalism is like the child’s verse: “\textit{If you pull out the tail, the beak gets stuck; if you pull out the beak, the tail gets stuck}” (all strikes in “free” societies are like squirrels running in a wheel: the growth of wages does not keep pace and never will keep pace with ever rising prices, and these people will have to continue to strike until the end of their lives). And I’m not slandering this way of life; I just described it to them as it is: not with rivers of milk flowing among shores made of custard, but with endless bills coming through the post: you barely had time to pay one, when another one was already coming through the door! (We in the USSR had only 2 bills: rent and electricity, and they were so minuscule that no one had to fear that they couldn’t pay all the bills this month!) And what about the churches that provide drug addicts with drugs? But hearing this, those robbed by Gaidar and Chubais only wanted to close their ears and began to stamp their feet: “Shut up! It can’t be like that!”

Because if that was true, it would mean that they wasted all this time tightening up their belts hoping for the 500 days promised by Yavlinsky to pass…

– Maybe there was something that you just didn’t understand there… Because they show us here on TV that…

Oh yeah, and on the radio they tell you here that we began the war against Hitler first… and that all Moscow schoolgirls dream of being a prostitute… And even Aum Shinrikyo\footnote{Aum Shinrikyo is a Japanese \textit{"new religious movement"} and cult. The group was founded by Shoko Asahara in 1984. The group gained international notoriety in 1995, when it carried out the Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. It really did have a daily radio broadcast on the Russian state radio in the early 1990s.} has his own hour-long prime time transmission on that radio of yours!
Later I noticed in the West exactly the same ostrich-like reaction among people, when you tell them about something that is not reported in their own media.

It is not true that Tsvangirai did not participate in the second round of elections in Zimbabwe because Zimbabwean Electoral Commission refused to withdraw his name from the second round of the elections. It is true that the Yeltsin camp intimidated and bribed voters in 1996. And in the West, not even one word was ever said about it, and they claimed that his re-election was fully legitimate… “Ah-ah-ah! Shut up! I do not want to hear you! It can’t be true!”

...And I still see that thin little soldier who rang the bell at my mother’s door in 1996: he came to collect signatures for the nomination of Yeltsin for the presidency. He was sent by his superiors.

- Excuse me, young man, I won’t sign it, because I’m not going to vote for Yeltsin, - my mom said to him in the doorway.
- Suddenly the soldier began to cry, wiping tears from his half-childish face.
- I was told to collect 200 signatures today, and not come back without them. At any cost. They said they won’t give me lunch or dinner if I don’t get them. And I have had nothing to eat all day...
- My mother could not bear the tears of this defender of the Motherland.
- Gosh, give it here… There you go! They’ll nominate that Herod anyway...!

And how the head of the district administration summoned all his workers, showed them his big fist and said:
- Make sure that you and all your relatives vote for Yeltsin! I’ll find out who didn’t, and I’ll kick them out of their job immediately!
- How could he know? Well, for example, at our polling stations all ballots have been numbered in pencil...
- What, your BBC did not tell you about this? And CNN also didn’t? No? Strange, strange...

No Mugabe could even dream about such elections. But the West didn’t give a damn about these “irregularities”. Probably because Yeltsin was a politician of Tsvangirai type. He was also going to hide in Western embassies in case of need. As early as back in 1991...

Sonny did not care about all this. His soul didn’t ache for our country. He just came there for his practice.

Sonny felt himself in Russia probably like Gedevan Alexandrovich of “Kindza-dza!” felt himself on the planet Pluk: he, too, could not help thinking that he was “the first Georgian cosmonaut”. Every day, Sonny wanted to walk around the city, and his favorite place was just a thing that I hated: the local market, cluttering with Chinese and Turkish junk of dubious quality. And I, frankly, did not want to go out at all, and not just because I was tired because of our young child and I always wanted to sleep. I also did not want to see what became of my town.

535 Morgan Tsvangirai (b.1952)- pro-Western Prime-Minister of Zimbabwe.
536 In the sense that Sonny was the first man from Curacao in Russia.
There was no feeling of freedom in the town: there was only a sense of anarchy, like during the Civil War. And the sort of anarchy, where anything was allowed, but not to all. And the people looked like if they still seemed to paint the town red: just in order not to think about the terrible future. Yeltsin’s Russia was like a perfect illustration of what would become out of our country, if in the past popular rebel hero Stenka Razin\(^{537}\) would have managed to come to power. The one that used to say: “I came to give you freedom”, while scattering princesses into rivers.\(^{538}\) “Wave, my hand! Itch, my shoulder!” Maybe this comparison is really an insult to the Ataman Razin: after all, he robbed the merchants, not the elderly, children and workers...

My feelings at home, which I missed so much, were mixed. When I was in the house, among family and did not turn on any television or radio, I felt like I was really at home. But as soon as I went out of the door, and my face was hit with the dust of the un-swept for ages streets, with klaxons of anti-theft devices on cars, resembling the sounds of amusements at the Dutch funfairs, emanating from a parking lot, in order to make which they felled the nearby park, and the sounds “umpa-pa” of the domestic pop music reminding me full “of Chemistry and Life”\(^{539}\) caramel “Chupa Chups: from the tent camps where they sold all sorts of rubbish in bright wrappers (this place was suitably named by the people “Field of Miracles”\(^{540}\)), I felt sick. Goats grazing on the graves of my ancestors, came into my mind again...

But Sonny did not understand, and how could I possibly explain it to him? He could not understand why I felt so disgusted about numerous kiosks, referred to as “supermarkets”, with their tasteless names like “Lady Madonna” or “Deimos”\(^{541}\) (interesting, did its owners know that in translation that meant “horror”?). They reminded me of the post-war co-op store in the countryside, where women’s panties, canned herring and fresh fruit laid on the shelves side by side. Indeed, what a horror!.. But in the Antilles and in Jamaica people were used to the miserable existence of “street vendors” that now suddenly became a role model for us.

Sonny did not understand what irritated me so much about roaming the streets where around us were teenagers with their empty, like zombies, eyes, drinking from beer cans on the go, and why I felt so much pain looking at the old people who were selling on the street their awards and medals, and burrowing in trash bins: early in the morning, so that no one could see it, because they were ashamed. Although they weren’t the ones who should have been ashamed...

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\(^{537}\) Stepan (Stenka) Razin (1630 – 1671) was a Cossack leader who led a major uprising against the nobility and Tsar's bureaucracy in South Russia.

\(^{538}\) Stenka Razin is the hero of a popular Russian folk song, better known by the words Volga, Volga. In this song he throws a Persian princes into the river.

\(^{539}\) Chemistry & Life – popular scientific magazine in the USSR. Here it refers to all sorts of chemical additives to these sweets.

\(^{540}\) Field of Miracles – Russian name for “Wheel of Fortune” TV game.

\(^{541}\) One of 2 Mars’ moons.
Sonny did not know that a few years ago these same old people were resting on park benches during the day, reading newspapers and playing chess and dominoes, and in the evenings they leisurely strolled along the quiet, yes, quiet - and clean! - town park, enjoying their well-deserved rest. For him all what he saw around him in Russia now, was normal state of affairs: if you are old and didn’t save enough money; and his own father was an example of that. He did not know that only recently retired people could have a very decent life in USSR without any savings. And that many of these people actually did have savings, but those savings were stolen from them overnight, not in those “500 days promised by reformers” like Gaidar & Co.

- Why are you worrying? They're not your relatives! - He said with amazement. He could not get it into his head that in our Soviet way of life we all were not strangers to each other, and that I grew up with this idea. He just did not understand how it could be. And I was more and more hurt that he was so insensitive. That’s not what I imagined my husband to be like...

Later, when we divorced I accidentally came upon some kind of his diary of that time, where he wrote: “In Russia she did not want to go anywhere with me because she was ashamed that I was black!”

Me? Ashamed that he was black? It’s difficult to imagine a greater absurd than this. Do you think I would have married him if I was somebody “ashamed” of such things?

It was very sad that he had such a strong inferiority complex. If Sonny even hinted to me on how he felt, if he only even asked me about it! But Sonny was silent and kept it all within himself.

Since we began to speak about the skin color, then frankly, I was a little afraid of how our people will meet him.

To my surprise, people treated us perfectly. Of course, he caused some inevitable interest in the streets (if you remember, in my town people were not accustomed to foreigners), but nobody was ever rude to us: on the contrary - people were attentive and polite with him and tried to do everything for him as good as they could. Almost like during the Moscow Festival of 1957! Only once he was approached by a policeman on the street: to check his documents. With a triumphant face (“I'll get that African!”), hoping that something would be wrong with Sonny’s registration, the policeman was already expecting to get something “as a reward”. But once Sonny’s Dutch passport was in his hands, his jaw dropped: he did not expect this! - And he almost saluted to Sonny, returning his passport to him. Oh, how we were laughing!

Just then we heard that in Russia there was an African called Jimmy G., who was performing hip-hop music in Russian. He had a very well suited for this occasion song: "I am the district policeman... Did they already come to you? Then come with me!", which created such a realistic image of the post-perestroika “guardian of order”, that it seemed he was about to jump out of the tape recorder and turn to you:

“Where are your papers? Do you have a Russian Visa? Please show me your registration. This, in my opinion, is a fake one... Yeah, this one has already expired!... Where do you come from? You have a very familiar
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face... I’ve already heard that... Do you think I am a bad person? I am just doing my job!"

This song became Sonny’s favorite.

People have tried, of course, to guess who he was. Sometimes they took him for an Indian, sometimes for an African American. Every time when he went to the local park with me, as soon as he entered it, the DJ immediately began to play on the park radio Leonid Agutin’s\(^{542}\) song “Dark skinned guy”. At first I thought it was a coincidence. But no, it was repeated consistently every time: just as we set foot on the territory of the park!

“He doesn’t look like you, he doesn’t look like me,
Just a passerby, this dark skinned guy
He doesn’t look like you, he doesn’t look like me,
Just a passerby, this dark skinned guy
You’re afraid of everything, but there is nothing terrible here:
It’s an ordinary guy, just a little bit darkish
And somewhere in the South they have one darker than another,
In the place where they have palm trees and bananas, and agate
And there is nothing strange here, this is not a dream or a delirium:

Do not worry, he is a nice guy, even though he doesn’t look like us!”

...The plant was at the other end of the town, and in order to get there one had to go by tram till the very last stop. I remembered our city's factories: lively, crowded, with workers waking up and getting into the streets early - in time for the beginning of the first shift, and at around 7 AM streets were already full of people, just as full as in the evening, after work. In some plants they even had 3 shifts. But now the streets were full of people all day long, and the plants themselves were almost dead. Officially this one was still working, but the wages were now so low, and even these low wages were delayed for many months, and all the young people had left the factory. Only the veterans living out their working days until retirement and working pensioners remained there.

The Design department, where Sonny was going to have his internship, consisted exactly from such old, good Soviet people. They treated him there like a mother would: brought him tea, took him to the canteen, which also still existed, as an oasis of the Soviet times, against the background of dirty and expensive private street cafes, with their “non-stop alcohol”: in the workers canteen you could still order a full meal for a ridiculously small sum. They were cooked out of farm products from a plot that belonged to the plant: it was also just barely, but alive (in use)...

For Sonny everything was new, everything was interesting. The only thing that shocked him was the factory’s toilet. Frankly, even I, an experienced person, became slightly dizzy at the sight of it... Apparently, for the sake of savings, they now scrapped all the cleaners jobs in the plant...

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\(^{542}\) Leonid Agutin (b.1968) – popular Russian pop-singer.
It was so gratifying to meet people who were still interested in his own profession, and not in how to make a quick buck by buying foreign cars on the cheap and re-selling them. It seemed as if the time stood still within these walls. After talking with the older engineers I did not want to go back into the streets, where dilapidated stalls were selling cigarettes out of a pack, per one - to children... Those engineers sat at their factory premises quietly and without complaint, and worked on the new inventions. Not even knowing whether these inventions will be implemented. Not counting on getting big fees for it. Sometimes even without knowing whether they would be paid this month at all. They just could not live without working! For them, it would be unworthy of a human being.

I had, of course, acted as Sonny's interpreter, but I was not very familiar with all kinds of electrical terms. We had to carry with us a heavy technical dictionary. Me and Sonny at the time talked not in pure English, but in a strange mix of English and Dutch words and phrases with some disseminations of Papiamento. So, my brother Petrusha even had to ask:

- What language are you speaking?

I got to know now them for the first time then - Petrusha and Andryusha, my half-brothers by father’s side. I do not know who told them that I have arrived, but they came to us with a huge bouquet of roses - and that was in spring! I even felt embarrassed.

Petrusha made the speech I already mentioned: about the nature, constitution and history of neighbouring to Curacao Venezuela, which unspeakably surprised Sonny. But Andrei said little, only smiled, most probably to himself. Petrusha was 22 years old, and he just enrolled into post - graduate school: the same one, where our father studied at his time. And Andryusha was 20 and still a student. They were both well-read, cultural, old - fashionable, in a good sense of the word, guys.

At first I felt very shy: both with them, and even more so when they invited me to their house. After all, in fact, my father and I spoke properly only once in our lives. He evidently felt the same way as I did and, moreover, could not get used to being a grandfather. I felt quite sorry for him. With Sonny he tried to speak in Spanish: he learnt it some time ago when he was preparing to go to work in Nicaragua, but that never materialized...

Having talked with my father’s wife, mother of Petrusha and Andryusha, I quickly realized why my father and her were still married and why he and my mum had divorced. My mother is a volcano of a human being! And Alexandra Semenovna was quiet: so quiet that it seemed simply impossible to imagine that she could ever get angry and lose her temper. With her I immediately felt at ease.

She and my father lived in separate rooms, but the boys were sharing a bedroom. Father’s family was living in a large and bright co-operative apartment from the Soviet era, which he bought for his family, saving money received for summer work in a construction crew with his students. With a glazed loggia at the 9th floor, the apartment had a nice panorama of the town.
- Help yourself! - Said Alexandra Semenovna. – Today it’s too hot, and I thought that you probably won’t particularly want to eat, that’s why we have only fruits here.

On the table there were really only watermelons. Quite unexpected! How unlike an average Russian family.

I asked how was my Granny, Dad’s mother. She lived out of the town, and to get there was not so easy.

- Granny is still working! - Responded enthusiastically Petrusha. We felt that out the two of them he was the Grandma’s pet - We'll go to visit her when it will get just a little warmer and the roads will dry out.

All my relatives on my mother’s side of the family just fell in love with Sonny at once. He instantly became their favourite, and they quickly stopped paying any attention to his skin colour completely. My granny was captivated by the fact that he did not protest changing Lisa's nappies. "It's hard to find fathers like him here!" My mum was charmed by his childish directness, his intelligence and his language abilities: once she didn't like something he was doing, and she blurted out, confident that he still does not understand Russian:

- What a sh*** of a yellow chicken!

To which Sonny suddenly, quite unexpectedly for her replied in Russian, with a pleasant accent:

- No, Nadya, I am not a sh***!

He managed to find even the key to the heart of Glafira, our “Russian real estate”.

- What a brilliant guy! - She kept repeating. Maybe she liked him so much because they were of the same star sign?

We were just going from one party to another: from one family of my relatives to another, and everybody wanted to put all the best at the table for us. Even despite the economic situation.

Most of all Sonny loved to visit my second cousin: the already known to you Grisha and his parents, those who have always come to visit us for the holidays, when I was a little girl. Now, however, Grisha was a “new Russian”, and Sonny really liked to be in the company of such an “important” person. He looked at Grisha slightly upward. I still referred to him the same way as back in my childhood.

I did not realize how much Grisha has changed as a person. Maybe he has not changed, but was just finally showing his true face, just like many people, including film directors, writers and actors, whom we adored so much just recently... But I originally thought that he had only changed his material status. Most probably because I thought that I knew him inside out, since childhood, and I always loved him very much. To me, he was a real elder brother that I never had, and that’s how I really felt about him.

Aunt Zhenya I also loved since childhood: no wonder I was named in her honor! But she didn’t change a bit, just got retired. Aunt Zhenya was a simple, good woman, but with a fiery character. That was typical for my granddad’s family. "I’ll whack you properly!" - in her mouth it was not an empty threat, as was well known to her husband. I guess Zhenya
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Komalova from the film would have become the same type, if she wasn’t killed when she was just 19 years old during the war.

Aunt Zhenya’s mother, the sister of my grandfather, died young, and her husband, a Don Cossack (a Cossack again!) abandoned Zhenya and her two brothers and had gone off. His traces were lost. The children were taken by their stern granny, my great-grandmother. Then the war started. Aunt Zhenya’s older brother went to the front and was reported missing in combat, her middle brother passed through the war unharmed and settled down in Belarus, and my great-grandmother died in 1942. Aunt Zhenya was left an orphan at the age of 13, but then her uncle, my granddad, returned from the front after being wounded and began to look after her. And soon he got married to my granny...

Aunt Zhenya went to work at my grandfather’s factory after school and had worked there all her life. In her youth she was very beautiful, tanned: whether because her father was a Cossack, or because she was born in Uzbekistan, where her parents worked before the war. And she loved fashion, what our grandfather could not stand. He even curtained with newspapers our large mirror from her.

She had however got married: only when she was almost 30. I always cited the example of her husband as a reason, if people asked me why I did not go to the dance hall in the park.

- Because only there you can only meet such men as Uncle Tolik!

Uncle Tolik was not a bad person, just a terrible downer. He was born in a town dwellers family of Russified Nogai Tatars\footnote{Nogai people live in modern Dagestan.}, like Prince Calaf in a fairy tale “Turandot” by Carlo Gozzi.\footnote{Turandot (1762) is a \textit{commedia dell’arte} play by Carlo Gozzi after a story from the Persian collection \textit{The Book of One Thousand and One Days}. Carlo, Count Gozzi (13 December 1720 – April 4, 1806) was an Italian \textit{dramatist} from Venice, known for his fairy tale plays. Turandot is well-known in Russia in the version played in Vakhtangov theater in Moscow.} It was one of those families in which they all had the talent for playing accordion, and so he pestered Grisha in childhood, forcing him to attend a musical school. Grisha started with an accordion and then switched to a guitar, and then... - to the boxing, and then - to the karate...

Uncle Tolik did not like his son’s hobbies. He wanted Grisha to graduate, to become engineer and teased him for every “C” day and night. Uncle Tolik himself was working at the plumbing factory. At one time he served in the Army in Germany, but he knew only two words in German: “schnaps” and “frolein”.\footnote{Vodka and girls (German).} He was very attached to my grandfather and always looked forward to the following holidays: when they will once again get together for a drink.

When I arrived with Sonny to our town, my grandfather was already gone and Uncle Tolik was looking for a new suitable drinking partner on holidays. Introduced to Sonny, he immediately decided that he has finally found such a man! But Sonny already tasted our vodka once, and did not yield to the provocations...
When Uncle Tolik drinks, he becomes like Popandopulo from "Weddings in Malinovka"546:

- And why am I in love with you so much? - And he attempts to kiss everyone who is in his way, including those of the same sex. We all know this his feature and try to keep away from him at such moments. And Sonny grew up in a society where not just kissing, and hugging but sometimes even friendships between men were interpreted unequivocally. If you could only see the speed at which Sonny fled from my uncle, hoping to escape from his kiss in the toilet!

Ever since my childhood I felt that there was some sort of an undercurrent in uncle Tolik, something bad. It just did not manifest itself, didn’t come out because he himself did not know about it. And now suddenly I discovered that I was right: it turned out, the old man was now locking himself for hours in Grisha’s room, looking at all the porn videos, he could get hold of, and sighed:

- Oh, I am so sorry that I did not know all of this in my youth! What I could have done to you, mother… - he was turning to Aunt Zhenya. Who immediately gave him a whack: our Aunt Zhenya would not tolerate such “experiments”!

It is good that he lived his whole life in the USSR! I am deeply convinced that the less dirt a man is facing in his immediate life, the less dirty inclinations he discovers in himself, the less he begin to think about all kinds of rubbish. When a man is spiritually pure in his upbringing, he simply would not get in his mind many mental distortions that “freedom” is helpfully literally shoving people into their noses, under the slogan of “join us!” Join the circle of maniacs, rapists, paedophiles and other perverts! Of those who see in other human beings only things to meet their own needs! Paedophilia in Britain already seems to have become a national sport, along with cricket.

I do not agree with those who say that all these “new converts” supposedly “still would have been like that” without having learnt all these things. It’s just like talking about a drug addict, that he would still become a drug addict, even if nobody would have ever given a drug to him. Yes, life is not perfect, but we must always strive for the ideals. Yes, there will always be weeds in the garden, but this does not mean that we should all give up, hang our hoe on the wall and stop pulling them out: because they supposedly “will grow again anyway”, because “it’s the natural state of the garden”…

…When Grisha was a kid, they lived on a nearby street close to our old house. Mum in the morning went to school past their yard, and Grisha flew out to meet her - a swarthy, plump, sleepy little boy, with Asian black eyes - and joyfully shouted down the street:

- Nadya! Nadya is here!

He loved her and Shurek a lot. He was sincere, kind, sympathetic… Who then could ever think that he would grow up into a “tough guy”? Such a one that if someone is bothering me in the streets of my hometown,

546 “Wedding in Malinovka” - Soviet musical about life in the Ukraine during the Civil War. Film version of it was produced in the 1960s.
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only one mention of his name would be enough to make the intruder pale in the face and utter something like the hero of Andrei Mironov in "Ordinary Miracle": "It was wrong from my part... but I just flared up. Please consider my proposal to be an ugly mistake..."547 etc.

I remember him as a teenager: he was the same dark-eyed, energetic, and he always spoke to me as to his equal, not like to some silly baby, even though I was 8 years younger. We exchanged records of pop bands, and I was admiring his Korean friends and karate. The only thing I did not like about Grisha was that his tastes were changing too often: there was no permanence, no respect for his own yesterday’s idols. Now I think that this is probably a very important character trait in order to become a “new Russian”.

…My Mum has her personal theory of the “new Russians” origin. As well as that of other self-styled “elite” gentlemen in untidy but expensive pants, who sometimes wipe their noses with the sleeves of their slapping Armani suits.

She believes that everything comes from their childhood. From those days when the later-to-become “masters of this life” were teased for awkwardness, or stupidity, or just for having red hair.

- Look, - Mum said to me. - There is no single normal person among them. Everyone suffers from some deformation: he may either have an ugly appearance like Berezovsky, or be an un-spotsman-like sissy boy with a pretty face like Nemtzov. It may also be just a bunch of former school-losers and goons, who were rejected by teachers and peers: the last ones simply did not realize that the poor things were not able to study better and believed them just to be lazy. However, if you look at those who devoted all their lives to other people, usually you’ll see ones without any psychological complications caused by their defects. Look at the handsome and intelligent men like Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. Just look at the high forehead of Lenin...

Sometimes I feel like she exaggerates: the childhood injuries can’t run so deep, can they? And why should one feel the hurt just because something was not granted to him by Nature? However, the more I look around, the more I’m about to agree with her...

For example, let me present Grisha. He is a “tough guy” - with a “gymnast” on his neck. Grisha was an idol of my childhood: he was so beautiful and athletic. Well, he was not a great intellectual, but not everyone should grow into a professor!

Grisha was a normal, nice person, with a difficult temper though. That is how I remember him since my childhood (he is 8 years older than me). But now I can hardly recognize him.

I saw an arrant fatty in front of me: Grisha has turned three times thicker. Well, I’d not blame him: a couple of years ago he was shot at his stomach and since that time he has problems with digestion. I don’t think I should explain why they shot at him - I’d just mention that he owns a casino and that “his” guys were “sheltering” a number of local

547 Words of Minister-Administrator from this play by Ye. Schwartz.
“businesses”. He even offered discounts to his friends and relatives. A really big heart!

Once Grisha used to study to become an engineer. He did not complete the course. They kicked him out of the university because of his poor results (he failed the state exam in English). And he was mobilized to the army. Gosh, it was a real tragedy for his mother, and for me and Sonia (his cousin from the other side) - for the two chick girls. However, aunt Zhenya managed to rescue him from being sent to Afganistan and he served in the engineering units near Moscow. The “demobs”\textsuperscript{548} didn’t bother him - he was a famous karate guy. Karate was just prohibited in our country (one more drama for the two girls in their teens, who never thought about the reasons for this prohibition!), but Grisha was just in time to learn everything before and he was about to become a well-known couch himself when he was mobilized.

His “sensei”\textsuperscript{549}, by the way, also got involved into a dirty story in his time - he was convicted for polygamy and for mistreating his “harem”, which he kept all in the same apartment. He was also found guilty of receiving bribes from his students. I was surprised later to see his name... in the Amnesty International’s lists of the political “prisoners of the conscience” in “the horrible USSR”. Since his mother worked together with one of my relatives, all of us knew pretty well what kind of a bird he was. After that I lost all confidence in anything what “Amnesty” writes - including that about other countries.

Grisha returned home from the army - in spite of getting an offer to become a policeman in Moscow. He attempted to work at the factory (they accepted him as an engineer, although his degree hadn’t been completed), but it seemed too boring to him... He didn’t want to go on in his studies either. Well, everyone has his own way in life.... But Grisha’s father - an old-fashioned man - kept scolding him: in his opinion, a guy without a university degree was not a human being indeed!...

Later Grisha finally managed to obtain a degree. In Physical Education. He was kind of lucky - the new society of “sharks vs. small fish” provided him with the opportunity to “grow to the full extend” and to become one of the richest people (at his level, of course) in our region. All this happened just because the Communist Party of the Gorbachev era had a demand for the former sportsmen to build up the “mafia squads” and to squeeze the dough from the new-formed cooperatives...

That is how his “initial capital” was obtained. By the way, many former sportsmen didn’t want to enter this monkey-business, but they had little choice.

I already knew all this about Grisha in theory, but I was still thinking of him as of a nice guy. After all, we were growing up together and I had never shown off because of being an A-student, while he was a low-achiever: we had never discussed school at all. I had never thought of myself as of being “better” or “more smart” comparing to him. It had simply never come to my mind that those things had being so important

\textsuperscript{548} Older soldiers from the 1980s onwards were often bullying the younger ones.
\textsuperscript{549} Sensei – teacher (Japanese).
for him and that the psychological trauma of his childhood was so deep. But he was still trying to revenge, “to show himself” to his former university mates, whom he was calling “woeful little engineers”.

Grisha-the-fatty was the first visitor rushing joyfully to see me when I came back to “my sweet home” after staying away for 5 years. Even more - he was not alone, but with his friend, whom I only knew a little. He must have thought that I had become “one of them” - “the successful people” as these apes call themselves. He started to list all his purchases from the past years and to specify how much did each of them cost. But I didn’t ask him about all that - I was simply glad to see him.

He was surprised to see how little impression all his boasting made on me: I was more interested to know about his feelings, about our common friends, about the non-material news of his life. Then he started in a different way: he listed the countries he had visited as a tourist. Since I had always been fond of travelling, I was happy for him and asked Grisha about the remarkable things he must had seen in Dubai, at the Rio carnival, in Thailand… His maximum was something like “after a cool beer-party we rode camels with guys”. And he preferred not to tell me at all about his Thailand relaxations - it must had been something not for the ears of his “little cousin”...

- How did you communicate with locals? I guess your English is brilliant now! - I asked without thinking much. And immediately I figured from his face that I had “salted his wound”.

- Not really… just the same... - he mumbled.

In his turn he started to ferret out about my life “there”: whether I own a house, a car? As you know, at that time I was a student. Thus I tried to explain to him that students did not buy houses in Nederland (except, maybe, the princes - the members of the royal family) and that I had no need in a car. On business days students can travel in Nederland for free and at the weekends they have a 40 % discount (however, they have to refund it from their fellowship), while the public transportations are quite developed in that country. But he got it in his way and classified me as a “poor”. So he lost any “commercial interest” in me.

I call it “commercial”, but maybe I should explain that by that time Grisha already had no other interests - the personal ones. It was boring for him to talk to those, who were not “helpful for business”, he didn’t even know what to talk about with those. In the beginning he had viewed me as a “helpful” one just because of my new country of residence - what if he could use me for something? But later he realized that it was a mistake of him. Thus every next visit back home I saw him more and more seldom.

Of course, you won’t call our life with Sonny “rich”. However, for some period we were really happy together. And we were not starving at that time. It would be difficult for us to explain to Grisha that all his “prosperity” we needed for nothing (and besides that it was putting one into a risk of getting a bullet into a stomach any day). Yes, I’d have liked to travel more at that time. But certainly not for racing camels with drunk gangsters! Neither for visiting the Thailand brothels with minors. What about the 2 cars, a dog of an expensive breed, a wife to be kept at home, and 2 apartments - these things were just ridiculous to us.
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But you shouldn’t even attempt to explain all that to people like Grisha. They’ll only conclude that you envy them. I didn’t even try to discuss it with him, because I saw that he’d never understand that.

However, people of that kind have so much of frustrations and hate towards those who are different. Towards ones they would never be able to comprehend because of their poor level of spirituality. The examples are available - just look at the pages of the “new Russian” mass-media:

“The woman that has never existed.

Lyubov Orlova [a famous Soviet actress of the 30-s, one of the legends of our cinema] played a young lady, who found her love and married. A bridal dress was necessary as a utility, but a yashmak would have fit her better.

Well, in those days there were really talented and beautiful actresses. But why Lyubov Orlova - a very ordinary one, appeared to be so appreciated and famous?.. She had honest eyes, her voice was weak but pleasant though, but she had not a hint of sexuality. ...It looked as if Orlova had nothing below her waist - just an empty spot. You would be able to imagine her as a bride, if you exert every effort, but you’d never be able to think of the first conjugal night with her! That was exactly the must for the official star of the 30-s. As well as for the women pictured in the propagandist Soviet posters”.

We don’t need any comments here, do we?

I don’t even mention how much these ones are pissed up about Vladimir Ilyich Lenin - even now that he is dead. They disgrace themselves by calling him “a full idiot” when he was seriously sick after apoplexy. And the same time they accept the fact that for so many years our country was ruled by Yeltsin who was much worse kind of “an idiot”. Plus it was because of his own free choice, because of alcohol. I’m pretty sure that they had been the ones to re-elect him just because Yeltsin was “one of them” and the years of his ruling allowed the ignoramuses and pipsqueaks to make their way in life.

But Lenin remains a threat for them. They can’t understand him. And they are so scared by his very name that still wet their pants at the sound of it.

People like Grisha are not even aware of the fact that they live off what their fathers and grandfathers have created. It’s simply because such people do not create anything. The only thing to remember them by would be pompous mountain-high tombstones, second in size and aesthetics only to the Statue of Freedom.

Once, however, he spilt the beans and confessed to us what he was so badly frustrated about. We had never discussed his below-average school progress. But in the end he literally exploded and related to us how much he hated those who did well at school, namely, “crammers”; to him, there was no other way to get As, but to cram.

- Just look at them, where are they now? Filthy engineers! And look at me...

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550 This is an actual quote from an article in “Komsomolskaya Pravda”.
551 Tombstones of Russian mobsters are usually huge and very pompous.
I was indeed looking at him, shocked. Mum used to tell me that C-students do “envy” us, but I’d never realize how really traumatizing this school experience was for them. I had no habit of drawing the line according to this principle; besides, by best school friend Alla was not an A-student either... The thing is, I was simply bored in the company of most of my classmates, as we - in all honesty! - had nothing to talk about. So, these poor things turned out to have been considering me just “arrogant” all these years? And now they think it’s time for us to pay for that?

- Look at you? Why, you are a poor sight. You still live off only what those “filthy engineers” have created. Soon you’ll hardly be able to squeeze into doors. So what? Happy? - said I.

It was at that very moment that I confessed to myself what I pretended not to have noticed all these years: my Grisha, open, kind, sympathetic, ready to help anyone anytime, was gone. A total stranger was sitting there before me, a monument to his own idolized ego. He was so alien that if, God forbid, civil war broke out, and we’d have turned enemies (undoubtedly!), I’d have finished him off there and then in cold blood.

I felt tears well in my eyes. Where, in what fairy-tale, had I lost my kind, mature, strong and handsome brother? What monster had possessed him? When, how did that happen?

Future generations will probably turn my story into a lesson, small, but important: do not ever bully those who get bad marks at school, who are red-haired, or have some other “faults”. As Leonid Yengibarov552 once put it with all his humanity: “People, do not offend anyone. ...You'll hurt someone, but what if it's a future Mozart? Because of your offence, he won't compose anything”.

“Grishas” are definitely no Mozarts. But if nobody had hurt them in their childhood, they would probably be less haughty now.

Sometimes, looking at today's Russia, one can't help wondering: where have all those highly-educated and well-read intellectuals gone? Is it possible for a people to turn so “dumb” just in 10-15 years?

It's all simpler. Those educated ones have always been out there, and still are; it's just that their places have been occupied by an army of “Grishas”, finally getting where they would have never been let to in the Soviet times, and not because of the nationality, or something like that, but because they misfit PROFESSIONALLY, and yet, they are not fit for the job they've taken on now.

...We didn't break up with Grisha even after that talk of ours. We visited him at his cottage, but mostly because of Sonny: I brought him there because he enjoyed the place, and Grisha couldn't help showing off before the Dutchman.

Aunt Zhenya complained quietly that Grisha’s friends "exchange girlfriends" just outside of his cottage. "But that's so humiliating for those women!" she would say now and again. I understood her quite well, but Dutchwomen have already forgotten this very word...

552 Leonid Georgievich Yengibarov (1935 – 1972) was a Soviet clown and actor. He also wrote short stories.
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Grisha, however, did not participate in this swinging parties, for he had his own sort of fun: for example, snowmobile wolf-hunt. He tried hard to make Sonny join him, but the latter was wise enough to refuse. Then one day, sitting at home in the kitchen, I heard something I’d NEVER heard in my country before: shots. I ran up to the window. Next to the bank just opposite the house there stood my “gangsta bro” shooting pigeons, obviously bored to death. It was daytime, there were people in the street, children were playing around, but everybody behaved as if nothing was happening. No sign of distress or irritation, or even surprise, for that matter – none of my feelings. It was only then that I finally began to understand into what abyss my country had slid, what my people turned into.

As I was leaving the USSR, Grisha in his 30s was still single. I still remember us pitying his future wife, because even then he referred to her as his “little slave”.

- I need the one to sit in the kitchen busy cooking borsch, minding her own business.

In that Grisha was like most Dutchmen, the only difference being his sincerity as he spoke out. When I returned, he had been married for 2 or 3 years. His wife Kira, a thick-lipped blonde from a Ryazan village was just the kind. She was quite content where she was – minding her own business and staying at home was quite all right for her. All she needed was money. No questions, no asking to take him along as he went on a trip abroad with his “gang”. Grisha was lucky – he found what he had been looking for. I’d have smashed a plate on his stupid head on the third day after the wedding. They still had no children – to aunt Zhenya’s utter distress – but Kira would console her saying, there was time for everything.

- I’m a late child as well.

Kira would also tell us stories of her grandma, saying their barin (landlord) before the revolution was exceptionally good. He even let them cut woods in his forest.

- In his forest? Wow, how nice of him! Was it he who planted it? – I wondered.

“The old barin had been sick all summer,
And died in the dead of the night.
Never shouted or yelled for no reason,
Always tried to keep us pleased.
For the Easter, we were having a cake,
And he’d give us good presents all.
We’d call him “our Kuzmich”,
But now we’ve got a different one.
Oh, the life’s turned bad,
Let’s have some more vodka
And a pickle, please, pass on to me,
Let’s drink for the one that’s dead,
Let’s drink for the new who’s come,
Let’s make a few dance steps
And talk of life some more...”553
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I guess, Yeltsin was also brought up by such a grandma with a slave mentality. Such grandmas also voted for him "from the heart"554, as one of them explained it on a bus:

- Americans knows Yeltsin, maybe they'll gives him something. But that Zyuganov they don't knows. And they'll not gives him anything.
  
  So, it means that such election is better than the single-party one, right? I wonder, how...

  Something I kept wondering about was, where all those ignorant people came from, and where they had been hiding till then. Why hadn't I met them before? And how did they manage to preserve their ignorance even though there had been every condition for education and self-development? They must have avoided reading books, listening to the radio (not the newly-made Radio of Russia, but the Soviet one, with its operas and performances, with its classical music concerts and "At Noon on a Weekday"555). Never watched "Global Perspective" with Kaverznev and Ovsyannikov, "Documentary on Air" with Robert Rozhdestvenskiy556...

  Where had they been all the time?

  My friends and I studied at the same Soviets schools as Chechen Wahabbits (almost all their leaders were our peers), - and as Kostya, who didn't know who Che Guevara was.

  How did they manage to become like that? In what dugout had they been sitting all those years? It was the time when all the ways to the knowledge were open, but those Kostya-like individuals worried about just one thing: they, like Alla Pugacheva, were not aloud to publicly swear.

  Uncle Tolik was one of such people. It was the Soviet government that gave him a free apartment; his salary was bigger than that of those engineers, yet he wished his son to become one; he had free leg surgery performed several times; his son, attending a free musical school in his childhood, finally got higher education for free (with the second try)... And now, as a retiree, uncle Tolik stayed at home, watching Western porno, having imported beer and crayfish, bought with the money his son got for racketeering, and cursed the Communists with all his might. Really, what beasts! They dared to conceal such vitally important information, such cultural treasure from him... And now life is so much better - just look at all that caviar and fish he's got for dinner!

  Uncle Tolik was sure that the beer, crayfish and caviar were bought with his pension money; aunt Zhenya did not have the heart to tell him that there had been no pension for 4 months already. Surely, not everybody's son is a don in this kingdom of democracy to be able to eat well...

  As I came for a visit then, we had lots of such fools. People still refused to give in to despair; most of them still believed they would become millionaires in no time, taking boxes of frozen chicken legs, known then as "Bush's legs"557, from one corner to another, and would then

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553 “Old Barin”, song of the group “Lyube”.
554 That was the slogan of Yeltsin’s election campaign – “Vote with your heart”.
555 This was a request concert for Soviet worker’s lunch break.
556 Popular Soviet TV program.
go on a vacation to the Canaries. From rags to riches overnight... This box-carrying was proudly called "doing business", the very word-combination striking many as quite foreign. Almost like Sanka Brovkina in the book about Peter the Great with her pseudo-French dialect, "presanté my younger brother Artamosha" and "the coiffeur is such a problem": "It's so boring here in Moscow!... Wish I could run abroad... A Frenchman stays at Tsaritsa Praskovya Fyodorovna's, teaches them politesse, and me too. Tells so many things! Every night I see myself dressed in a crimson bostroka dancing a minuvet, better than anyone, and my head is spinning; then the gentlemen are stepping aside, and King Louis comes up to me and gives me a rose... It's so boring in Moscow!"  

But even among the good hard-working people, who were still producing something, to my surprise there were many who yet didn't understand where it all was heading to. They lived for today, happy that they managed to get some money from renting the factory stores to some "Bush legs carriers". It seemed that those who could snatch something for themselves, did it, ignoring the possible outcome not only for others, but for themselves as well. Those people tried to export everything as soon as possible, and as cheap as possible, only to get the profit fast enough. But it was the power engineering specialists who were a lot more happier than others about the newly-acquired freedom to raise prices, as their profits literally soared.  

To my surprise, my Mum turned out to be among those who lived for today only, even though she knew for sure what Gorbachev was like already 10 years ago, and had always been proud of her ability to foresee the future as any Aquarius.  

- It's all right, as long as Vladislav Andreyevich is the director of our factory, it won't get closed. And I won't get sacked.  
- And then? Vladislav Andreyevich is not that young already...  
- Still, he'll be there till the end!  
Vladislav Andreyevich was one of the so-called "red directors".  

The Soviet Union was dying a long, slow and painful death, suffering from the meanness of the stab it had got in the back like from an inflamed wound. And even dying, it continued to emit light and humanity. It was like dying Eva Saint-Claire, who made farewell presents to those, who needed the human warmth most of all. And the farther you went from Moscow, the more of the remaining life you could see. The collective farms were still working, it was still prohibited to sell the land, it was still possible to hold on to some piece of the Soviet reality, to create your own island and live there the same life as before for a while.  

Some people managed to do it for a couple of month, others - for a few years. Vladislav Andreyevich turned out to be strong enough to uphold his factory - and his workers - for almost 10 years more.

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557 George Bush-Sr. was then the US president.  
558 Quote from A. Tolstoy's novel "Peter the Great".  
559 Little heroine of Harriet Beecher-Stow's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" who died at the age of 5 from tuberculosis.
Factories were closing down, people were becoming retailers or taking on other half-legal jobs, and, while some turned to religion and others ruined themselves by drinking, Vladislav Andreyevich was developing his manufacture. He built new accommodations for his workers, took custody over the bankrupt museums, and even over our long-suffering velodrome (he was a great fan himself!).

The factory still owned a kid club with 10 different sections and a technical creativity centre, an auto club, a sport club for the workers, the museum of the factory’s history, people’s theatre and circus, a choir, two nursery schools, a summer camp, its own medical clinic and a hospital - and even a mini-zoo in the city park.

In the factory club they were still celebrating the Soviet holidays and had regular meetings with the veterans. The needy veterans were getting free hot meals in the factory cafeteria, and those who still lived in cottages were getting free firewood and coal in winter. Under Vladislav Andreyevich, the factory started to cooperate with the collective farm, where the factory’s agro block was located. A new cultural centre, a shopping centre, a new school, a café and a grocery store were built for the collective farm at the factory’s expenses. The new houses were equipped with water-lines and sewerage, gas-stoves were mounted. The factory paid salary to the musical school teacher, hired specially to teach the village kids.

All these things once used to be a normal part of the Soviet environment - like the air to breathe. But now it was all upside down, now at the pick of Yeltsinism, in the era of financial pyramids, newly-made TV commercials, soap operas, people suddenly became wolves to each other, and parents taught their kids to push others away from the goods in a shop. It was the era when the only new establishments were pubs, the cinemas were closed, and the few remaining ones showed such dirt that one couldn't help wondering where it all was coming from, in which gutter they had picked it up.

Now it was all called the "setback of the cursed totalitarian past". But we thought it was all a kind fairy-tale, and Vladislav Andreyevich was a real magician, like the ones from our childhood books and radio performances. Mum was really lucky to have a director like that!

He's come a long way, starting as an apprentice and growing into the director. By then had been a director for 25 years. He had always been a fully committed communist - before the “perestroika” and afterwards as well, and never an apostate. During the “perestroika” and especially during the first Yeltsin’s years in power they often tried to “knock him down” for being too staunch a communist. But the workers of his factory, who deeply respected him, stood up for him: they kept re-electing him to the factory directorate in spite of the attacks of those in power. And he never betrayed them...

The problem was that there was nobody to continue and develop what he had started. People still somehow believed that they had only to endure a little, and then the help would come. Surely, all this madness and robbery simply could not be eternal, surely, the people will rise up to defend their rights of which they were being deprived.
But time passed, there were fewer and fewer rights remaining, Vladislav Andreyevich and the like were getting older, but nobody yet rose up for their rights. The reason was, the people stopped seeing themselves as a people. And so, the Soviet Union was slowly melting, burning out like a candle, together with Vladislav Andreyevich and those like him. That's indeed a great example of the role of a person in history!

...Sonny had finished all he could at the factory quite soon. The old engineers had no idea what task to give him to keep him busy, and besides, they also had their own work to do. So we agreed that they would give him the blueprints of their freshly-invented wind turbine, so that he could study them and make some improvements in order to refer to it in his report on the practice. Surely, nobody mentioned any copyright: we were civilized people, not some cheapskates.

Sonny could now enjoy staying at home and finally thought of taking a tour around Moscow and other cities which had been his dream for years.

Now I was about to have a practicum for my University studies. I had to prepare a project of an educational course “Russian as a second language”.

In fact, this internship was not mandatory for me, but I decided to use it as an option to visit the home country and asked for it.

There were so many changes in the local Pedagogical Institute. The only foreign students who used to come to study there before were from Bulgaria and Cuba. But now - for some obscure reason - they had a new Medical School and there was a whole group of young Cameroonians there.

In the past the Cameroonians had never come to the USSR to study because Cameroon was not a Socialist-oriented country. But then teaching foreign students was also commercialized, and it was a lot cheaper for the Cameroonians to study in Russia than in France. Since our University education was still of high quality, most of the Cameroonians would not return home on getting their diplomas, but immigrate to France, and where they as a rule were able to get the in the local health care system almost at once. They earned a lot less than the French, of course, but were quite content with that. Studying in Russia, then, didn't mean helping their own people, but turned into a cheap ticket to the West...

I was attached to one of those Cameroonian groups: 12 guys and one girl. She had a strange name - Delphine. When my new students learned that my husband was black, they were at the top of their delight. They accepted Sonny not just as one of their own - they also looked at him with respect because he was “our person from the Western World”.

Soon all the 12 students came to visit us. Even though our neighborhood was already used to my exotic guests, they had never seen anything like that before! Elderly women were peeping through the curtains, while and the kids ran after the Cameroonians shouting something about the jungle.

- We-e-ell... Look what you’ve done! - were the only words of my Mom's, who then hastily disappeared in the kitchen to start the tea and to boil potatoes. The cake came along with the Cameroonians.
Out of the whole group we got especially friendly with Delphine and her boyfriend Michel. Michel was a handsome and smart guy, who planned to continue the post-graduate studies but eventually, was going to move to France. He looked at Sonny with admiration, and even tried to copy his gait. Indeed, they had much in common: he treated Delphine almost like Sonny treated me. He kept telling her that she was “stupid” and “good for nothing” without him, etc. Delphine used to get angry and break up with him, but he followed her vowing that he’d change, and that he loved her, but they’d run the same circle over and over again. It’s really beyond my comprehension, why some intelligent and nice people choose this way of self-assertion humiliating and torturing others.

...I was looking everywhere for the USSR traces, and finding them made me very happy. It used to give me the hope that the world had not went completely crazy.

When we went on a Moscow trip with Sonny he was happy about it, but I wasn’t, because Moscow had turned strange and hostile to me, it appeared to have become a kind of occupied territory.

It was not the USSR any more, neither was it Europe, nor even Russia. It was some exotic and glamorous ditch with all modern conveniences, the hellish appearance of which no reconstruction could have ever covered. I looked at seemingly the same streets and people that I had known before - and I was happy that I hadn’t stayed there to work and to live. When you face the dirt in a country you have no connections with - like Holland - it doesn’t hurt you that much as in your own one.

People in Moscow were passing by any human disaster indifferently. There were young children from Tajikistan, begging, illiterate and deprived of any schooling; it was horrible to see them in the country that not so long ago was proud of its 100% literacy and of its most reading citizens in the world.

The elderly, embarrassed, were selling out everything they still owned; the disabled with crutches were begging in the streets like in some Medieval times. Some macho-man was inviting the passers-by to an “unforgettable erotic show”. The air smelled of gutter, both moral and physical. If you’d suddenly faint in the street, those machos and models would simply step over you and continue on their way without any doubt or hesitation, like robots.

I remembered my Grandpa and myself visiting aunt Zhenya and uncle Tolik. I was about 15 years old at that time, Grisha was doing his military service, and aunt Zhenya had our Belorussian relatives staying at her place, so we decided to celebrate their visit. On our way back my Grandpa, tipsy, slipped on ice and I failed to catch him by the elbow; so he fell down and hit his head badly, blacking out. I was standing over him as he lay on the road unmoving, like dead. I didn’t know what to do and burst into tears. Immediately some corpulent elderly woman rushed to me and without saying a word started to help me revitalizing my Grandpa. When he finally came to his senses, she helped me to take him to the tram stop and put us both into the tram in the same calm and confident way, making sure we were both all right.
Of course, that woman must have been a “slave of the soviets” with the matching mentality. But now all I could see were the liberated “civilized people”, ready to step over dead bodies in their race for bucks...

I was looking at this familiar but yet an absolutely strange city and the song from the Soviet movie “Charodei” (“Magicians”)\(^{560}\) came to my mind:

“...But I don’t need, you know, I don’t need
The world where people don’t need each other”.

And no yacht of my own, no helicopter, no football team, either foreign or Russian, would ever substitute the cordiality of the Soviet people.

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...Sonny and I went to Moscow also in order to visit his classmate from Enschede, a Dutchman named Sjaak (Sjaak is a Dutch version of the French name Jacques), who at that time was also going doing his practice in Baumanovka. Sjaak wasn’t going to be free until noon, and in the meantime I tried to reach at least some of my friends and acquaintances. Anechka was in the hospital with appendicitis. Alex, Lyuba's husband was in Moscow - that was the guy who until recently had considered himself a Latvian nationalist. He stayed there with some distant relatives, but at that time they were out of town. During the day Alex was actually busy, but he was very pleased to hear from me and said that we could even stay at his place for the night. That's what we finally agreed on. Others were not at home.

I decided to show to Sonny my alma mater, especially because the Red Square was very close to it (not to mention the GUM, which might be very interesting for Sonny).

I was shocked to see an armed guard standing at the door of my Institute: what and who was he protecting it from? After all, it wasn't a bank or a mansion of Yeltsin’s daughter.

At least he didn’t ask us for the IDs, but it all felt very awkward. I never liked to live under the watchful eye of porters in the hostel, but to study under the protection of a man with a rifle\(^{561}\), that was really too much! So, we have freedom now, as I am assured by the Dutch? Poor souls, they don’t even have a clue what real freedom is like...

Inside, little had changed, except that they had taken off our Party Committee stands. They were replaced by advertising, that on the walls of a Temple of Science!

A group of laughing young men and girls led by one of our teachers burst out of the doors; I barely knew the teacher (he was a reader at another group). But I still was glad to see a familiar face - and even more delighted to see a girl in this crowd who looked like my friend Verochka from Ust’ Kamenogorsk.

- Vera! - I called out to her. The girl turned, and I saw her haughty face.

- Who do you take me for? - she said arrogantly.

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561 “Man with a Rifle” is the name of the classic Soviet film about the Revolution (1938).
- For Vera... - and I uttered Vera’s Russian surname. She gave me a scornful look from head to toes, like a queen observing her maid and said finally:
  - I am of a totally different origin!

Her companions, including our teacher, who also was “of different origin”, laughed. I looked at the whole company with undisguised astonishment. I hadn’t mentioned anybody’s origin, had I? No one was hurt. I simply made a mistake, because this girl looked like my friend. Why be so rude?

Just a few years ago those very same people were beside themselves to be regarded Russians - though for most of us it did not matter what their nationality was according to their passports. What now, did this idea of them being the chosen ones suddenly hit them on the head? And yet I could not believe when people told me about things like these happening... Moscow was turning more and more disgusting for me.

The Red Square really impressed Sonny, unlike the GUM. It wasn’t just that in Moscow the prices were beyond any reasonable limit, compared to my hometown; the thing was, Sonny had made up his mind to buy something really Russian (a $200 balalaika and a fake military hat, which the “business people” would bring to flee markets in unthinkable quantities were out of the question); it must be some high-quality thing for everyday use, which you could easily find in the GUM just a few years ago. But in Moscow now it was absolutely impossible to find anything made in Russia, just anything. Even finding the locally-produced food was a problem, while in our hometown there were a lot of Belorussian-made goods. Besides, Moscow salespeople were even proud of that, asking Sonny to buy the things he wouldn’t have bought even in Holland. The Dutch kaasschaf (cheese-cutter) was defined here as a pancake spatula. When we explained to the saleswoman what it in fact was, she got really surprised:
  - Oh, could you please show me how to use it?

We did.

It wasn’t all without accidents, though. When a wine seller tried to force us into buying a bottle of liquor, named after Sonny’s native island, calling it “Blue Kurako” (with the stress on “a”) insisting, it was exactly how it should be called, Sonny exploded.
  - Cu-ra-cao! Cu-ra-cao! I, - poked his chest, - was born there, I’m a native, you understand? And now you teach me how to call my island! First you learn to pronounce it, then sell it, you fool!

I hardly took him away from there.

Meanwhile, Sjaak finished his work. He came to meet us together with his Russian practice supervisor, an elderly professor.

- So friends, Sjaak told me our Caribbean comrade (yes, that’s what he said, comrade!) is in Moscow for the first time, and I thought, may be I could show it to you? - he offered. I was taken aback, never expecting such an offer.
  - What about the Novodevichiy monastery?

I visited the Novodevichiy cemetery just a few times in my life. Entering the place is not so easy unless some of your relatives are buried there. I remembered that last time I was there I saw a totally neglected
Irina Malenko

grave of a South African communist, who had died in Moscow. Judging by the way it looked, nobody ever came there to take care of it. I indignantly shared this with Eleonora Alexeyevna.

- Can't the Institute of Africa put it in order? I myself can do it, if they let me enter the place!

Eleonora Alexeyevna politely expressed her annoyance, agreed that it was a total neglect, and promised me to inform the Institute administration about it. But nothing changed - why should one care for some dead African communist, while there was a lot more interesting debate going on at the First Congress of People Delegates, mot to mention the news of private plots of land finally given to the Institute employees?

We were walking around the city when Nikolay Sergeyevich - the professor - started his story. Me, a historian, got surprised how really much this professor of Physics knew about his native city! He poured over us dates, names, anecdotes and quotations, and even recited poetry. He seemed to have equally great knowledge of history, architecture, literature and even botany! Nikolay Sergeyevich paid no attention to Mayakovsky’s “Foam”562 which filled the streets of the city. He spoke of Moscow as if it remained unchanged - alive, mighty, invincible, as if it hadn’t turned into a gigantic advertising stand for foreign goods, shielding brothels, casinos and boutiques. The more I listened to him, the lighter my heart got, shaking off the frustrations of what I had seen and heard in the capital on that day.

There he was, the real Soviet man, well-read, educated, questioning, interested in everything, with the great knowledge of his subject, in all details, totally unlike the Western-type “professionals” with no real scope, but great ambition to discuss the spheres they knew nothing about. I felt happy to have met our Soviet intellectual of the pre-perestroika kind, a real encyclopaedist! I was even afraid that I wouldn’t be able to translate all he was talking about for Sonny. (Sjaak already understood Russian well enough.)

We got really tired of walking around the city. Eventually, Nikolay Sergeyevich invited us for tea to his place. He lived in one of the famous 1930 houses at the quay - I had never been inside before. The so-called Soviet elite lived there - scientists, film-directors, artists, diplomats - the people who achieved their high positions in life just by working hard, and not by cheating, robbing or sleeping with the “right person”.

The apartment of our new acquaintance equally surprised us with a head-turning panorama of Moscow, and modesty of furnishing. There were books everywhere. The bathroom tap was leaking, the old furniture was covered with dust. Once a week the professor’s daughter and his grandson came to visit him and bring the apartment in order. He was simply too far from it all.

I understood him quite well about this point. Surely, I do not state that I possess the same deep knowledge on everything, but if I cook potatoes, they can easily get burned if I’m lost in thought about the problems of quite a different scale, like, who will win the election in

562 “Foam” is a satirical play (from the 1920s) by Mayakovsky; the word “foam” here meaning petit-bourgeois public and tastes.
Jamaica, or the public transportation situation on Cuba. Sonny didn’t understand it. Sr. Arturo didn’t understand it. When I started writing my diploma thesis, forgetting to wash the saucepan right after the dinner, he used to quite seriously remark: “Couldn’t you have written it at the weekend?”

Sonny looked over the tattered furniture and very plain curtains, and I understood that Grisha the Bear impressed him a lot more than the professor. The more time passed, the better I understood how little Sonny and I actually had in common. But I wanted him to understand the way we used to live, to understand my nostalgia, to understand - and to appreciate it...

I was totally immune to the capitalist society and its values: the commercials, as I have already said, caused in me nothing but annoyance, which is why I’d very often stop buying exactly the advertised thing. I got especially mad when they advertised sanitary pads, and the like. When I first saw the commercial, I flushed: something so intimate, never mentioned in the presence of men, was impudently put on display! And what for? It was the thing people would buy in any case, not something like a car, a sofa or a fire-insurance. I had the feeling of being stripped in public. I promised myself to NEVER buy any of the advertised brands. And let the liberalism founding fathers shove their “want not - see not” motto! As if you’re being warned when they’re going to show it next time, and what good film to kill in the middle! By the way, I wasn’t the only one even in the civilized tolerant society expressing disgust at this invading of privacy. Many of my Dutch friends change the channel as soon as the pads - either with wings, or without - appear on TV.

Unlike Sonny, I didn’t want to be a millionaire. Brands were nothing for me. (I remember him falling into despair as he sent me out to buy Pringles, for example. “Yeah, but what is it?” - I asked, confused - naturally, I had to know what it was to be able to look for it at the right shelf in the shop!) And, no matter how hard he tried to convince me, I had absolutely NO desire “to start my own business”. You can’t want to turn your life into a business, right?

The very idea never appealed to me. I’d already seen such export/import businessmen, like his friend Wensley, with a stack of shining credit cards, constantly escaping form the tax police, re-naming their “enterprise” with yet another exotic word, and proclaimed bankrupts from time to time...

Why should I necessarily be dying from desire to have my own shop/restaurant/shoe cleaning desk - supposedly “optional, yet necessarily”? Why should it be unworthy not to want it? Does everybody have to learn to play the violin? Should we all be eager to know how to embroider in satin-stitch? Your “business” is no different...

But as I have already said, the feeling that Sonny and I had too little in common would not leave me. Finally, I decided, I have to talk with him about it. Calmly, of course, no scenes. Something had to be done about it all. The happy feeling I when being with him despite all the difficulties of our marriage during our first two years, started to fade away soon after our return from Curacao... Depression would come and go in tides, but happiness
left for once, and never came back... Yet, I didn't know, maybe it was normal? Maybe it was what the marriage is all about?

Having said good-bye to Nikolay Sergeyevich, we went to Alex. He was the one who supported the "perestroika", so I didn't intend to share with him my feelings on what was going on in the country. It simply would not make any sense.

Alex warmly welcomed us. We spoke about our friends from the Institute, who was where doing what. Alex himself, a trained specialist, was selling something, and proudly showed us the "MMM" shares, which, according to him, had to bring him fantastic treasures. I only shrugged. He didn't notice that, however. He was too busy denouncing his former fellow countrymen - the Latvians -whose independence he staunchly defended not so long ago. Even though he was born in Riga and was a fluent Latvian speaker, with a passport reading "Alexejs Kurbatovs", Latvian-style, for them he still remained a stranger...

Having finished off the Latvians, Alex switched to another topic. He told us about taking part in a TV talk-show in Moscow together with his wife, Lyuba. It all started with Lyuba finding an announcement in a newspaper, which invited married couples with "untraditional" views on family life to take part in the talk-show. Lyuba called Alex on the phone (she lived in Kursk region, he lived in Moscow, they saw each other twice a year), and they decided to participate. Their "untraditional" value for the show was that they didn't require fidelity and didn't ask each other about the 6 months during which they hadn't seen each other.

At the talk-show, people started to attack and shame Lyuba. But she is a stubborn girl: if you tell her that two by two is four, she would surely reply it's eight, so, Lyuba went wild... "Challenging the crowd", she talked and talked. And only after she returned home, and started to watch the program, it dawned on her that her friends, colleagues and relatives were also watching it!

- She wouldn't leave the house without dark glasses on for a month!
- Alex laughed. - It's easier for me, though: the parents are in Germany, the brother is in Israel. I even liked people recognizing me in the street.

We stayed up late at his place. But yet I slept well, because I didn't have to get up for Lisa at night. It was great that Mum had taken two days off!

We then visited some other neighbouring towns in our region. We went there by bus. So, it’s not true to that I didn’t take Sonny anywhere in Russia. Small provincial towns looked to us a lot more attractive than Moscow - for different reasons, though. To me, it seemed that life there remained unchanged, and there were a lot more traces of socialism there; to Sonny, because there you could still buy something actually made in Russia. Besides, the farther away from Moscow, the more high-quality interesting things we’d find in the shops. (For example, toys for Lisa - Russian-made, not Chinese. Or the poster wall paper with real Russian landscapes, not palms.) And so, each time we visited, we had to move farther and farther from Moscow with these short day trips...

563 Russian biggest and most notorious Pontzi-scheme company in the 1990s.
Our most favourite town in Russia got to be Kaluga, with its silver rocket pointed at the sky next to the Tsiolkovsky museum at the steep bank of the Oka river, with its so dear, so painfully beautiful Russian landscape.

I don’t know if Sonny shared my sentiment. And not because it was my country, not his, but because he thought patriotism and love for one’s own land are just senseless words. He himself told me about it. Even though he got so mad at hearing his native island being called “Kurako”...

...When we returned from Moscow, Mom happily told us that Lisa made her own first steps. In our town park.

All Gypsies in our town thought Lisa to be their own.

- You just stole our girl! - they told us. Lots of Russians also thought that her father was a Gipsy - before actually seeing him! - because they simply couldn’t think of any other darker-skinned nation.

Vladislav Andreyevich, on the other hand, proudly called her “People’s Friendship”:

- Nadezhda Ilyinichna, how is our People’s friendship?

Lisa was dark-skinned, with curly hair, plump face, and sad almond Indian eyes. Her very serious air, though, would now and then disappear, she would light up and become naughty and mischievous. She was a very sensitive and musical kid. Once, as Lisa was playing next to the TV-set, they showed a Pierre Richard film, where the bad guy threatened the good guy; on seeing this Lisa, who didn’t seem to have been paying attention, gave a loud scream, grabbed a water pistol and, waving it, ran to the TV - to defend Richard.

At the weekend we brought her to the great-grandmother - my Grandma the Wall, whom I hadn’t seen for 20 years.

My father came by car to take us together with my half-brothers; the summer was coming and it was getting hotter every day.

- Is he going to drive?! - said Mum, astounded. - I remember him getting the driver’s license in 1969... Went off with a crate of beer to the local militsia chief... If I were you, I’d take a bus instead.

But the way she spoke of the father was nothing new for me, so I didn’t get scared.

- It’s all right, it’s all right, it takes only about 40 minutes, not more. We’ll manage somehow.

- Tell him to drive slowly! - Mum was shouting as we descending the steps.

I worried, remembering Mom’s stories of what kind of “liar” and “monster” my Grandma was. I also remembered how much I tried to avoid meeting her as a small girl. What is it going to be like, meeting each other after all these years?

I remembered Grandma’s house vaguely, but when I saw it, I recognized it at once - the garden, the flowers, the cherry trees... My

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564 Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935) - native of Kaluga, was an Imperial Russian and Soviet rocket scientist and pioneer of the astronautic theory. He is considered to be one of the founding fathers of rocketry and astronautics.

565 Pierre Richard (b. 1933) - famous French comedian.
Grandma possessed only half of the house, the other half belonged to other people, who had their own separate entrance and garden. She lived in a small town, the only kind of public transportation connecting to the city was one-track tram and buses. There was a cinema, a school, a sanatorium, some kindergartens, several clubs and shops - and a big metallurgical plant there.

When my Ukrainian Grandpa was alive, he worked at that plant as the director’s driver. They were inseparable during the World War II as well. When the wind came from the plant’s side, the air smelled terribly. But in general, the town was quite nice. Grandma was waiting for us at the porch, the table laid, of course. She almost hadn’t changed, only put on some weight and her hair turned gray. She spoke with the same sweet singing southern accent, and the first thing she did on greeting us, was kissing us three in turn.

- And this is my great-granddaughter! - she raised Lisa in her arms, showing her to all the neighbours. Would a bad person be proud of a mulatto granddaughter? - I wondered.

...In 5 minutes Sonny was already enjoying the dishes cooked by my Grandma: dumplings, stewed cherries, potatoes fried in sour-cream and chicken (is it not a rabbit?..). He loved everything. Mom used to call her lazy and clumsy, so I was really surprised at how delicious everything turned out to be. But when I told Mom about it, she was skeptical:

- Surely, she asked someone to cook for her!

Mom’s attitude is really incorrigible.

I sat at my Grandma’s, slightly dizzy with the self-made fruit wine, feeling sad. She’d just told me one thing - even though I didn’t ask her about it.

- Zhenechka, it doesn’t matter what happened between your parents, you and me are relatives.

I haven’t seen her for so long - and was almost happy about it! But in fact, I didn’t know her at all - never mind Mum’s stories! I would never know Grandpa Perto... Yet, it seemed so easy to give them up - just like I almost did with my native country.

On the wall there was an old portrait of a young handsome Soviet army officer.

- And who is this?
- This is your grandfather, Kolya Stepanov. The one who died at war. Your father’s father.

That was when I felt tears rolling down my cheeks. It was the first time I saw his portrait. Mum used to tell me that my Grandma had so many men, that she didn’t remember whose son my father actually was. Now she would say, of course, that my Grandma just put some nice photo on the wall. But as I was looking at the unfamiliar man in the photo, I marked my father’s cheekbones, forehead and ears. I could see the love with which my Grandma was looking at him. And I started to become slowly aware that I wasn’t the exactly one I had considered myself all my life. Well, I thought myself to be almost Ukranian (because of my other Grandma and Grandpa), even tried to find something more exotic in my origin, but in fact I have Volga region natives blood in me... “Enzi-brenzi,
I’m from Penza…” Grandpa Kolya was looking at me, wondering, with his calm Slavonic eyes.

And Sonny was looking at me from the other side, thinking I just got a bit tipsy...

On our way back I asked my father to bring us to the river - the one where I used to swim with Grandpa Ilya. I hadn’t seen the place for 15 years, no less. But I wanted to make sure that everything was all right there... Bathing bridges at the river could hardly have been an obstacle for any of the reformers, could they?

Grandpa and I would usually leave home at 10, and take a tram to the centre. We would then change to a local bus, praying for it not to turn out too crowded - all people wanted to bathe in such hot weather! The ride took us about an hour. We used to get out of the bus a couple of stations ahead, and walked to the river along the road, on a narrow pavement, up and down the slope. Geese and hen “spoke” on all sides.

Proper houses stood here among summer cottages, and I was a little envious of those who lived there. If I were them, I would spend days and nights in the river during the whole summer!

Just before the bridge over the river there was a bakery where my Grandpa used to buy me a sugar-coated bun. And in front of the bakery there was a barrel with beer, where he bought himself a pint now and then.

Then we would turn to the right before the bridge and go along an almost round bank till “our” bathing bridge. I had my own special favourite place there, and I would never swim in any other. The bathing bridges were a long wooden deck over the pontoon, stepping into the river, with three stairs leading into the water. I loved to immerse myself in water till the neck hanging on to the poles, jumping from step to step. Grandpa would usually sit at the bank and only by the end of the day would he take a couple of swims into the mid-river.

We were taught to swim at school, but it was totally different in a swimming pool. The water smelled of chlorine, and eventually I just stopped going there, all because of one accident that ruined my impression forever. It was the first time we found ourselves really swimming, without the lifebelts on; the coach, however, did not share our pride, and because we dog-paddled, and did not swim with style, he started to hit the water with some long stick.

The water in the river was sweet and soft. You could swim there for 2 months guaranteed, June and July. In August, though, the water used to turn green with algae, and it was very unpleasant to enter it then. Pond skaters were racing along the bank. I have never seen fish there, but there were plenty of dragonflies, flashing above the many people in rented boats. If a motor boat passed, we, the kids, would rush after it into the water - just on time to play with the waves.

- Wouldn’t you like to have a swim? - I lightly pushed Sonny with an elbow. He stared at me as if I was offering him something indecent; he just couldn’t take it in, how was that possible, to swim in a river? There are no rivers as Curacao, and in Europe they are so polluted that trying to swim there would be next to committing suicide...
When the bathing bridges finally appeared from over the turn, I got astonished beyond words. Perestroika got to this place too. To be more accurate, the bridges fell prey to some very practical business people, namely, the scrap-metal collectors. The poles and the stairs were ripped off, and people have started to dismantle the bridges for firewood.

Returning home, as I’ve already said, I dreamed about Sonny seeing, knowing and appreciating what I held so close to heart. He was bound to understand me a lot better after the trip! But Sonny was looking at it all, thinking, I was telling him fairy-tales about the past. That is why it was so difficult for him to imagine how different it all had been. All the things dear to me were either sold out, or broken, or soiled...

When we came back, I felt depressed. At the crossroads Sonny suddenly stopped: he heard someone speaking English. It turned out to be some Protestant-sect missioner who had come to “bring light” to my fellow countrymen. An interpreter, shining with admiration, accompanied him.

- An American! - whispered Sonny to me with so much reverence as it was Michael the Archangel himself. This is how they are brought up: they utterly dislike the Dutch (and are right about it), but they are ready to worship Americans!

- So what!? - I turned away angrily. While Sonny enjoyed his conversation with this foreign professional con-man, I kept silent: I could say nothing good to him, but I decided not to say anything bad either out of respect for Sonny. However, being a typical American, he simply couldn’t stand being ignored! Moreover, he got so much used to the admiring interpreters...

- And why are you so silent? I think, you must be very shy... - he addressed me in that half-familiar half-superior tone of his. I flushed with anger. This asshole was going to tell me when to speak out, and when to remain silent! “Where is the road to Moscow? I want a watermelon... I want a shaver...” - my memory swiftly prompted.

- Well, no, - I said calmly. - Why should I be shy? I am at home. I don’t go to other countries to con people.

And then I felt Sonny filling with anger, and the American - with fear mixed with hatred. You just point a finger at them and they start shouting, “Help! Terrorists!”

- Sonny, let’s go home. The mister isn’t well, - I said.

In a few days Mum started to get ready for her trip to Moscow: she wanted to see the cycling competitions in Krylatskoe. And in another week Volodya Zelinskiy was going to visit our town for the Grand Prix.

I was very confused at the coming meeting. The thing was, I didn’t tell Volodya about my marriage, that is, I asked Mum to keep it a secret. I didn’t have the heart, and I don’t know why. In a couple of months before the wedding, after Sonny proposed, and I was at a loss, I took a risky step: I sent Volodya a letter, stating quite openly, that I liked him (just between you and me, he must have been a total idiot, if he hadn’t

566 Phrases from an English-Russian conversation book for the US Army produced in the early 1980s.
understood my feelings by then!). I also asked him there that if he had just any kind of feeling for me (not more than that!), to send me a post card, just a simple post-card, saying, “hello” and “how are you?” He obviously enjoyed my attention, it was clear! It helped him to achieve success in his sporting career. Would it influence Volodya in such a way, if he didn’t like me? - that’s what I kept telling myself.

With the heart beating wildly, I sent him my naive letter and started to wait... But there was no reply. (Even after the wedding, in all these years, not even a line!) Well, it settled it then, and I was getting married to Sonny with clear conscience. Still, I couldn’t bring myself to telling him about all.

Have you ever noticed that it in all romantic films and books the main character is always single and free? Even Sherlock Holmes. In order not to spoil the story. It was the same here: I simply wanted to extend the beautiful fairy-tale in my imagination, at least, for some time... But it lasted for 5 long years. Surely, I ought to have done it earlier...

During all these years I was following Volodya’s success by Mum’s letters. I knew that he became the last USSR champion, that thanks to Mum’s director Vladislav Andreyevich the old velodrome was revived, and Volodya signed the contract in which the factory was announced his sponsor. It was my Mum who introduced Vladislav Andreyevich to Volodya.

Volodya had to do it mostly because of his parents, who had to leave Doudayev’s Chechnya, already pregnant with war. Having sold the apartment where they had lived all their life, leaving grandfather’s grave behind forever, Volodya’s elderly parents together with the grandmother, Alyosha and Volodya’s sister (she worked in Sverdlovsk) came to our town, of which Volodya spoke so well. He really liked it here, with us. They couldn’t afford buying an apartment, even though Volodya’s father found job quite soon: he was a qualified welder. His sister got the job of a tram driver, even though she was a trained engineer. She was given a room at the hostel. It was when their elder son came to help them: having signed the contract with him, the factory gave his family a 3-room apartment in the factory-owned house, on the main street... And they paid him well.

Mum grew very fond of Alyosha, and he and the rest of Volodya’s family took to her. Besides, Mum took a fancy to Volodya’s coach, himself a famous racer in the past. (His former coach from Odessa, had by that time emigrated to the USA, closer to his sisters.)

The boys spent the summer with her, and she would come and stay at our velodrome after work, never missing any of their trainings. For more or less notable competitions she would definitely go to Moscow.

In the meantime, she had come to know Volodya better, and stopped telling me: “What a nice guy! Just look!” But it seemed natural to me, as I was already married.

Mum started to tell me not only of Volodya’s hard work at the trainings, but also about how annoying he was, switching the TV channels non-stop, once he came to visit her, and into what materialist he had grown - in capitalist, not philosophical sense of the word. How much he wanted to buy himself a foreign car (“inomarka” - yet another new word for me), and about his friendship with some masseur, who’d take him to a
bathhouse with “girls”… I ignored this last point. Volodya for me was still a noble horseman riding a white steed.

So, as Mum left for Krylatskoe, I told her to tell Volodya everything as it was, even though my heart was heavy. But after all, it was he who hadn’t replied to my letter, when it wasn’t too late yet to change everything, right?

That night Sonny and I went to bed early, because we both were very tired. I fell asleep immediately and slept like a log. Mum had to come back at 11 p.m., but I was too tired to wait for her.

...When I woke up, Mum was at the doorstep, the light on in the corridor. Her eyebrow was split, blood streaming out.

- Don’t turn on the light, - she said. - Look out of the window: where did he go?

I, too sleepy to think, got up and went up to the window, even without asking her, who this “he” was. There was nobody outside.

- He who? What happened? - I was still trying to wake up.
- And didn’t you hear me screaming?
- No, we got so tired during the day...

Sonny and Lisa were softly snuffling in their sleep.

It turned out Mum had got so involved in conversation with Volodya and his coach that she missed all but the last train from Moscow. The road from the station to our house took about 20 minutes, not more. And so, Mum decided to walk, as we all used to do. Some man was following her right from the train station, but she didn’t care about that much. She thought they were simply going in the same direction. They even started to talk. He was quite all right and calm till they reached the entrance door... Then Mum told me in whisper what he offered her there.

- And I told him: *let Yeltsin and Gorbachev suck it for you!* And I started to scream at the top of my voice. He hit me with his forehead, as a real criminal, and ran away. Split my eye-brow, see?

Nothing of that sort has ever happened in all those 23 years I spent in the USSR, and not only with any of my relatives, but also with any of my acquaintances! Never!

So, Mr. Giorbachev, “erotica is art”? “A part of world culture” we’ve got to take in? May your granddaughters learn this “art” somewhere in a dark alley!

Mum didn’t want to call the police:

- What for? What’s the point? They’ll tell me, why did you walk down the street alone at night? Why, are our streets reserved for some knife-brandishing gangsters at night? Are we the masters of our town or not? I’ll tell Grisha, he’ll sort him out... I didn’t see which way he went. He just said, he didn’t live far from here.
- And the doctor? You eyebrow needs stitching, if not, it will get infected, blood poisoning may set in...
- It’ll be all right... I’ll wash it off with peroxide...

So, she didn’t go to the doctor. By the next morning, her eye got swollen and wouldn’t open. And in two more days, it started to ooze yellow pus.
- Please, squeeze it out for me! – Mom asked, wincing. – I can’t do it myself, it’s too painful. So, I, scolding her, talking of blood poisoning, and wincing back, squeezed the pus out and washed the wound with peroxide. It wouldn’t close up for a long time, but fortunately, the infection did not occur. This accident turned out to be the first morale-crushing blow for Mum.

Volodya got very upset on learning what happened to her. He even thought himself guilty, because it was he whom she visited in Moscow.

My first meeting with him was generally calm, even though we both felt a little confused.

- So, you’ve got an accent now, an accent, - he laughed unnaturally.

God, have I really changed so much? It seemed to me that Volodya changed a lot more than I did...

Volodya put on some weight, but the main change was not even this. It wasn’t that he turned from boy to man, either. It’s just that his shyness, his best charm, disappeared completely. I guess the post-perestroika bathhouse wash-ups were not without their impact. In any case, meeting him brought back the memories about the not-so-distant past, the time which you could still touch… The time, when life was so different from this kingdom of gangsters, each day where was like sledgehammer blow on the head.

Sonny and I visited his parents. Sonny knew about Volodya, but, not all that, of course. How could I admit to him what I haven’t admitted even to myself yet? And what was there to admit, if there was nothing between us, not even a most innocent kiss on a cheek?

Volodya’s parents turned out to be simple, easy-going people, especially his mum. She liked me very much too. She almost openly regretted that I and Volodya didn’t get along. But his father was somewhat despotic. Alyosha, on the other hand, quite soon turned into my little brother. He soon felt my moral turmoil, so I could be quite frank with him, even without words. Even Volodya’s small and awfully-smelling dog Arnold, whose flat face resembled that of his master’s, recognized me as his own.

As Volodya was seeing us off that evening, he squeezed my hand so hard that it almost made me scream; then he suddenly moved his thumb across my palm, at the same time hugging me from behind. I, who already was getting used to the thought that we would just be good friends as we always had been, almost fainted there and then: "Where have you been all this time?.."567

It was dark, Sonny was cheerful, and a little tipsy, so he didn’t notice anything.

Totally distressed, I told Mum about it all. She just shrugged, advised me not to take him too seriously; besides, nothing really bad

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567 Words from the same-named song, sang by Valentina Tolkunova (1948-2010) where a woman turns down a man she used to love, because he came too late to her.
happened, and not to go to the velodrome because of this small incident would be just stupid: it would be so interesting there!

Mum never took other people's feelings too seriously. In this case, not Volodya's feelings, of course (he had none, for he was simply a *revanchist* by nature), but mine.

...In two days I clearly understood that it would be better for me not to see Volodya anymore. Even from a distant seat at the stand above the velodrome. But Mum wouldn't listen and brought Sonny and me there almost by force. Sonny was interested - as he always was, encountering something new. But I had pangs of remorse. And, as it turned out, not without reason...

...Volodya and I had "our song". This song was played out at the velodrome at all trainings exactly when he was entering the highway area. It was called "A Guy with a Guitar":\(^{568}\)

> "The night started with a serenade -
> It is him, it is him, it is him.
> And a note dropped from the balcony, slides
> To the ground, to the ground, to the ground.
> Who is this, who is this, who is this guy with a guitar?
> Whose song is it burning in my blood?
> Who is this, who is this, who is this guy with a guitar?
> it is I, it is I, it is I, talking to you of my love".  

On hearing this song, my heart would start racing.

And now imagine, 5 years on, and not just some 5 years - after a whole epoch within these 5 years - everything was suddenly as it was before. This very same song was played out - as if the vulgar perestroika-type new hits never appeared. He was circling the track to this song again, and it was summer again, and the stands were decorated with red mottos, just like in the very good old days...

It was the last blow for me. The last emotional shield which took me so much effort to build up and preserve, was suddenly down, and the heart-wrecking yearning for all the kind, the good, the humane, so thoughtlessly traded for *small mirrors and glass beads*, came out in a flood, threatening to drown everything around me. A thought flashed: *what if I never went abroad? Would the USSR then still have existed? If those like me never left it, thus betraying it?*

But I didn't know that it needed me, I tried to justify myself. And my inner voice would reply at once, no, the Soviet Union did need you, it was only Gorbachev, Yeltsin and the like who didn't!

...Probably because of the annoyance - and the desire to show off - Volodya was at his very best. Seeing such fantastic sophisticated skill, even hard-to-impress Vladislav Andreyevich, whose aunt was a many-time country champion and everybody's favourite, applauded to Volodya till his palms hurt. Even though there were plenty of evil-wishers, whispering him bad things about Volodya (mostly because of the apartment which his family had received, and which they wanted for themselves), he never listened to anyone, and that victory gave him the ground to simply tell

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\(^{568}\) Song of Igor Sarukhanov from 1988.
them: "What have I told you?" Volodya was honestly working up to his salary. And that year he got so angry that even entered the top eight at the World Championship!

Seeing my state, but knowing nothing of the reasons, Mum tried to tell me that Volodya was not "what he used to be", that he, like my many peers, was morally and physically corrupted by the Yeltsinism and perestroika.

But it was just that Volodya (or he as I remembered him) for me symbolized the Soviet era. A reminder of the time and place where men treated women quite differently from their present-day counterparts. You were not just given the seat in a bus, or helped out with the coat, they wouldn't just hold the door open for you - they would feel shy if they liked you, never thinking of putting a hand into your blouse or offering you anything indecent. At work, they treated you as their colleague and discussed business with you, without any staring into your décolleté. Then they sang such songs, with the words like, "if there is God in this world, He must be a woman, not a man"; then the 8th of March was not that pretty sweetish holiday of "spring and love", but the day of the Working Woman, the human-being. (The Day of Love, by the way, was the name of the blasphemous film about mass rapes in "new" Russia, which didn't even surprise anyone among the new "reformed" Russians.)

Gorbachev and Yeltsin managed to restore the Domostroy in the country, yet combining it with the lowest and the dirtiest Western attitudes. The woman turned into a thing, a product - just as in the West (Engels was absolutely right!), only on a greater scale.

Mum, it's not about Volodya, it's about the USSR! What would life be like today if all that never happened?

Sonny couldn't understand my worries. All that he saw in front of himself was the half-ruined houses and dirty, unpaved streets littered with beer cans. Even if he saw my city at its highest, in the best years of my life, would he be able to understand us, what we lived by, what kept us going, what norms and values we had?

Sonny had a terrible habit of using swearing words at the most private moments of our life. This excited him, you see! And no matter how many times I told him how disgusting and degrading it was for me, he didn't care. I even tried to convince myself that it was a trait of his temper. But having touched the still glimmering Soviet reality, buried alive, I couldn't stand it anymore. As well as many other things - like, you couldn't be yourself anymore, speak out even at home, which you quite safely did in the "totalitarian" society. That your "breadwinner" decides on your future, that all that is important and all that you do, is met with the same reaction: "Shut up, I don't want to know about it!" or "That wouldn't bring the profit..."

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569 Domostroy is a 16th century Russian set of household rules, instructions and advices pertaining to various religious, social, domestic, and family matters of the Russian society. Core Domostroi values tended to reinforce obedience and submission to God, Tsar and Church (and husbands/fathers).
I finally told Sonny about it. I wanted him so much to understand me, to see, how serious it all was, so that we both could find the way to continue living together.

- I'm not happy with you, - said I to him quietly. (I've just made this discovery: before this, I used to think all marriages were more or less the same, like Gogol's "why not to live somehow?"). But Sonny, of course, only got offended. He wasn't mature enough to give this point a thought, and what we both could change. Instead, his inferiority complex overpowered him. I think, I should have simply said nothing. If I had a little more knowledge of human nature and character, and were less sincere I'd probably simply have kept silent.

- You are all lunatics! And your country is just a madhouse! - he said in rage.

I think, I couldn't really object to that. Our country indeed stopped being normal a good few years ago!

Soon after that Sonny started to get things packed to go back to Holland. He had to write the graduation thesis, but here it was impossible due to technical reasons. But I didn't want to leave at all. Just the very thought that I'd have to stay in Holland for the whole summer - the best months of the year! - when I basically had nothing to do there, made me panicking. I haven't yet had enough of my native land. Then it even seemed to me that if I came back home to stay, everything will be as it used to be - and I was dying to return again! - right till the election of 1996...

By then I still naively believed the election had the potential. It was yet absolutely clear that one "couldn't live like this" anymore. Even though as I saw Sonny off to Moscow, two years before that, the Varshavskoye highway was lined with kilometres of people standing: the conned investors of the financial pyramid of AO "MMM"... Sonny thought those were spectators trying to get a ticket to some rock-concert...

In these two years the number of such people multiplied. Banks and the pyramiding firms went bankrupt in a flick. The people who used to trust the state banks, trusted all those firms in the same way, simply because they were "advertised on TV"; they just overlooked one thing: the state which kept them safe from all those cheats and conmen, checking the information before publishing it did not exist anymore. From now on, the media was allowed to publish all kinds of false promises - if only the advertisers paid them well enough for it.

I saw a note at the door of our post-office: "The December 1995 children welfare payment starts tomorrow". It was in summer 1996! What normal person in all his sobriety and reason, would "vote with the heart" for Yeltsin, convulsing in agonizing boogie-woogie on every TV screen in the country?

And I was so sure that we had a lot more normal people!

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570 Reference to a documentary film of that time, “We can’t live like that” by S. Govorukhin.
I didn't know then that the election in a "free democratic society" was the private business of money-bags, in both literary and figurative senses of the word. I've already given a couple of examples above.

All my acquaintances unanimously voted for Zyuganov. The only person I knew who voted for Yeltsin was Anyuta - an albino-rat like girl, originally from Leningrad, who married a Dutchman and moved to Schiedam. She worked together with Sonny at his very first job. As she put it, she specially returned home for the election, "so that the cursed past would never come back".

I then looked at Anyuta enjoying her fantastic present - wearing her husband's sister's old clothes and complaining constantly, that there isn't enough money even to take a good hot shower.

- Surely, Anyuta, you would vote for him. You won't have to live there...

With time my desire to come back slowly but steadily evaporated. On my each next visit my home city looked more and more worn-out. Now, after this election, even the hope was gone, which, as Volodya Zelinskiy tried to convince me, was "the last to die"... Inside the blocks of flats those who could afford it made themselves iron doors and some even put bars in front of their apartments, thus turning the place into some kind of zoo. The cracked walls were all tagged with four-letter words addressed to the newly-elected "guarantor of constitution" who had shot at the Russian parliament ("YeBN", as the walls named him); "Put Yeltsin on the rails!" - a reminder of one of his unfulfilled promises. The city administration tried hard to get rid of the tags, and they were painted over every day, but at night they would re-appear.

My first reaction after that election was strong disappointment in people. Were my Soviet people, my compatriots really such masochistic kamikazes? To vote for Yeltsin and his policy - after all that he and his gang had done to the people - for lots of voters equaled a hara-kiri! It was possible not to understand it only if you locked yourself up in some Soviet-studies centre abroad. (Well, after all, that's what they are getting paid for!)

This election was, in fact, a license to Jack the Ripper. Many of those who "voted with the heart" died before the next election took place - exactly because of their choice. This is when I totally abandoned the hope of returning back home, having become an eternal refugee. Well, my dear compatriots, we'd better part our ways now if you are so blind...

On the other hand, remembering the tense heavy feeling in my home city - a typical Russian place - in those black days, I would never believe that Yeltsin had really won the election. That's possible only if the vote of each New Russian don and Anyuta-the-second-hand counted as ten votes of normal people.

But back to the 1994... Then Sonny went back, and I stayed at home for another month. I was resting, sleeping and eating - for the whole year ahead, thinking, where we both had made the wrong step, and how to go on living together. When I returned, Sonny even didn't come to pick me up at the airport, and spoke to me through clenched teeth.
Irina Malenko

Still, we went together to his graduation ceremony in Enschede. The dean was calling out the surnames of graduates, alphabetically, and they came on the stage to get their diplomas with friends and relatives applauding. Sonny was at the very end of the list.

- The electrician engineer diploma goes to Hans Kloss! - proclaimed the dean suddenly. I couldn't help giggling. But tell me, what Soviet person wouldn't?

Sonny stared at me indignantly across the hall. “Haven't I said, you're all mad?” - his look said.

There is a place in my home city, where I would return in my best, my most cherished dreams. But I never go there as I come to visit. It's too painful to see what's remained of it...

This is the place where our old house stood, where I grew up and spent the first happiest 17 years of my life, and 5 seasons of summer holidays.

...I was already in Holland when my Grandma and Shurek finally got the apartment, still under the Soviet laws, but probably among the last ones. Grandma was happy because as she grew older, it was more and more difficult for her to bring in the water from the water pump and to take out the trash.

According to the law, once you get the apartment, you have to demolish the old house as soon as possible (I remember Little Tamara looking for a bulldozer operator); but by the time Grandma and Shurek got their apartment, there was nobody to enforce that law - “do whatever you want” was the new motto of the society. So, none of our relatives could bring themselves to taking down the house. Me neither. It was like one of us, a member of the family.

Aunt Zhenya, for whom it was also very dear, would come every day (!) all the long way from Zarechye. Every morning she'd open the shutters, and in the evening she'd close them - as long as the people thought that someone was living there, it would remain untouched. But finally, even she grew tired of doing it - she wasn't young either - and the house was simply locked with the shutters closed...

Our neighbours at that time were retired circus performers, who had a kind of mini-zoo in their garden, even monkeys. The garden smelled, of course, that's why they were looking for a way to extend their property.

They even visited my Grandma a few times in her new apartment, asking her to sell them the house and the garden, but she refused - I would, too. If you saw the film White Dewdrops, you’d understand her: its elderly characters had the same attitude to their old house, which they

571 Hans Kloss was the name of the main character from the film “Stawka wieksza niz zycie” (“More Than Life at Stake”), a very successful Polish black and white TV series about the adventures of a Polish secret agent, Hans Kloss (real name, Stanisław Kolicki, codename J-23), who acts as a double agent in the Abwehr during Second World War in occupied Poland.

572 Soviet comedy film from the early 1980s about life of 2 Belarussian veterans and their families.
refused to sell as firewood. *Even if you cannot preserve your old home, you wouldn't bring yourself to selling it.* It's difficult to put in words. I think, it's a very deep feeling one takes in with the mother's milk, prohibiting you such deals, like the biblical commandment "thou shall not steal" and "thou shall not kill".

This is *our* commandment, not the capitalist one, do you understand? A capitalist would sell his own mother if the price is high enough, and not to suffer the remorse, if he still had one, he would convince himself that it would be even better *for her*... For Sonny not only my home, his own one didn't mean anything - he would happily exchange it for the one in some "prestigious" neighbourhood... And if you could sell it, the only thing that would worry him would be not selling it too cheap! When he saw the photos of our old house, the only thing that interested him was how the five of us could live there all together.

But in all my dreams about the house, we all were there: Grandma, Little Tamara, Grandpa, and even though the whole world might be falling apart, even though there is perpetual *construction* and *re-construction* going on, we'd stay there forever.

If I were a believer, I'd pray to go there after death instead of Heaven, for no paradise apples are tastier than those from *our* garden!

I think, I'd never have the heart to go there - but for my school friend Alla Kolesnikova. I haven't seen her for many years. In the meantime, she got married, gave birth to a son and... turned a widow. Her mum, whom I remembered a stout cheerful woman, was now like a living skeleton, clearly living her last, even though she wasn't old. Alla herself had to leave her favourite job in the nursery school and take up the job of counter-controller at the same company where her husband used to work as an electrician. All that only not to be thrown out of the company's hostel together with her son, who was just a few months older than Lisa after her husband's suicide.

Despite all these tragedies, Alla remained the same calm and steady person I used to know. The only thing which drove her mad was mentioning Yeltsin's name...

- Come on, let's walk as we used to... - she told me having spoken her heart out. It was exactly that summer evening, when I almost jumped with surprise (the cursed Dutch influence!) when Alla took my arm as we walked - this is how we used to walk, arm-in-arm.

And so, we went.

The closer we got to the house, the heavier my heart grew, even though I tried not to show this to her. But when I saw the wooden gate grown into the ground, the dear, familiar contours, two-meter high nettle jungle at the place where my Grandpa used to plant potatoes, our neighbour's heavy trucks parked at my favourite lawn and... *monkeys jumping all around our garden*, I swayed. I don't know what I looked like at that moment, but Alla got scared.

- Zhenya, what happened? Are you all right? - and she held my arm tighter. - Oh, I shouldn't have brought you here. Let's go... please!
- No, no, I'm all right, - I forced myself into saying, even though I wanted to cry out. Next to our house, in the half-visible ditch, I saw
something metallic, dimly glistening. It turned out to be the old oven door, ripped up from the stove, which I could never even open in my whole life. As a child, I literally used to hang holding on to its metallic chain over the stove-bench, but it would never give in. I used to draw my profile with a pencil, squeezing my cheek to it - and wondered, why Grandma had to wipe off the drawing all the time, it looked so beautiful! Who and why had to rip off this door? Were they looking for a treasure there, idiots? I was blacking-out. Memories flashed - here's me carefully taking down the old stove with a hammer when Grandpa decided that we needed a new one, smaller. How difficult was it to find a stove-maker then - it was a dying-out profession... The sweet taste of Grandma's pies, cooked in this stove. Us, having to burn the fire twice a day when the frost was too severe in winter... And now, monkeys were getting warm next to it? Eating our apples and pears? How ironic! And what I saw there, at my dearest place on Earth, actually marked my country's destiny, where circus monkeys now reigned and ruled...

I sat down at the remains of chicory, which used to flourish all over the lawn. Do not to touch what is not yours - even if it looks abandoned - this is my principle of defining a civilized person, and not the number of foreign cars and estate he owns. Not to break any item of public property - even uncared of - just because it's "nobody's".

I simply have no desire to burn or crash the buttons and tag a lift, or break the windows in somebody's house - just because there's no light there in the evening, or to rip the planks off park benches for my own "home needs".

And it's all not even because of what the "freed individuals" did to our ground at the end of the block, which we called "the Blue Benches", where Grandmas with prams used to walk and children used to play, the real playground with benches, stage, see-saws and a walking beam. The thing is, our people still had the illusion that "there", in the West, things were somehow different... Is it really so, when even the Irish PM says that "In my end of Dublin, if you park things too long, they usually get vandalized!"? It could be different only in the USSR! And could have been different today: for communism to "work", each of us had to change from the inside, to become a new human, and to stop pointing the finger at others. Is that so plain impossible? What do district councils and Politburo have to do with it? Have you ever tried living as a real communist - before asking anything from socialism for yourself?

I took the brass stove door out of the dirt. Alla didn't understand what it actually was, but looking at my face she guessed that it was something very important. I had no more patience to watch the monkeys occupying my house, so I turned away. At the end of the abandoned vegetable-garden, close to the railroad, a young strong oak tree was growing over the nettles, thistle and agrimony. The oak tree, which I had planted, grown out of the acorn I had found in the forest as a primary

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573 Words of Bertie Ahern.
school pupil... The proof that nothing you plant gets wasted! And really, how beautiful was it, compared to what surrounded it!

Looking at it brought me back to life. No, it’s not over yet, but we’ll survive, we’ll fight, we’ll put the monkeys back to their cages! If we don’t, then our children and grandchildren would. The main thing is to pass on to them the baton, to tell them the truth about the Soviet Union.

Long time ago, in my 2nd year as a student, quite ignorant of what my relationship with Said has led to, I was going back home from Moscow for a holiday weekend. The train was so crowded that I was literally standing on one foot on the train’s platform: the other foot simply had not enough place. I was squeezed from all sides. I didn’t even feel I was fainting, but the people around me suddenly shouted:
- The girl is unwell! Comrades, please, step aside!
- What’s wrong, dear? - somebody’s worried face asked, looking over me, - please, give her some water...

But nobody had any water with them. And then one of the people took out a fresh cucumber, clearly bought in Moscow specially for the holidays - the rare and expensive thing at that time of the year - and broke it in two, giving me half:
- Eat this, it’s 98 percent pure water.

This is what we lost forever. This is what the “free democratic society” doesn’t have: there it’s a norm to faint and die, and asking you if you need help is considered almost a violation of your freedom. Such wonderful humane relations, and such care for each other simply don’t exist there. And no vacation at the Bahamas can replace this.

...Yes, it’s all about comparison! Have you noticed that the attitude to Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev now is quite different from that at the beginning of “perestroika”? No matter how loudly the democrats might proclaim that we “have forgotten all the horrors of the stagnation”, “queues for bread” (excuse me?? Where have you seen such queues in the 1970s?), the fact that a “trip abroad had to be confirmed by the party district council”, and that there was no “caviar for sale”. People now seem to have grown immune to these formerly hypnotizing hysterical claims.

Why is that not so long ago Leonid Ilyich and other Lenin-type leaders574 made us so indignant, but now we are grateful to them for the best years of our lives?

It’s not that we have grown old and are so fond of remembering our childhood, it’s not that we have forgotten of the (minor) difficulties of that period. The thing is, before we used to compare Brezhnev with the ideal communist leader, and now we compare him with the present-day capitalist-style politicians. So, you see the difference...

When the current owners of “plants, media and yachts”575 blame the former leader of the great country for having just a quite modest

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574 This term was used in the 1970s for the Politbureau members.
575 From S. Marshak’s “Mister Twister” children poem.
Irina Malenko
cottage (that remained property of the state) and enjoying a bit of perks
with his job, it makes me want to laugh sardonically into their faces.

Just a few years ago many people were still afraid to openly
express their opinions on the life in the socialist period compared to the
present-day conditions of "market economy": because of the fear to be
ostacized. The people were convinced that it was some "bad taste",
namely, if you liked the life in the "stagnation period", it meant that you
"lacked the motivation and initiative", that you were "lazy", that you still
preserved the "Soviet slave mentality", etc., etc.

But today we can no longer be contained. We are not going to hide
our feelings, no matter what the "world's most influential people" would
say. They remind me of Yefim Kopelyan's character from The Elusive
Avengers movie, angrily scolding the "unreformed" peasant who refused to
give him her only cow - in return for his promise of giving her twenty (but
later).

Our peer's heart cry: "But suddenly a horrible thing happened: it
turned out that our time has nothing to offer in order to oppose the
stagnation period, except the winged sanitary pads and chewing gum..."

That's exactly right, you have nothing to offer in order to oppose
it, except the sanitary pads! And was it really worth it, to destroy the
country and to humiliate its people in such a way for that?!

What was I thinking when I was leaving Moscow? I remembered the
words of that fiery-spirited Friend of the People, Jean-Paul Marat, stating
that "five to six hundred of decapitated bodies would have brought you
calmness, freedom and happiness. The false humanity kept you from
striking the blow, but because of that millions of your brothers and
sisters will pay with their lives".

...Oh, God, if there is Heaven after death, and if I deserve it, may it
be like the USSR!

The Soviet Union was a precious pearl, which we cast into dirt to
the swines. Thinking, we'd have plenty of those pearls - in other shells.
But they all turned out to be empty...

Yeltsin is said to have avenged his grandfather.
Isn't it just the time for us to avenge ours?

(To be continued in Part 2, BELFAST & Part 3, WILLEMSTAD)