

Soviética

Part 1 Dublin

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... 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 'prosperous' 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 past twenty years I've got 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, from movies and books to newspapers and school textbooks, that there is no escaping them anywhere. And it is not just a one-sided view of the Soviet reality. If that were the case, it would be half the trouble. But, paraphrasing the Russian saying, 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 qualified as rank falsehood. I cite examples of this on many occasions in my book.

For 20 years now I've read, watched and listened to all this - and I have not recognised my native country in what I read, saw and heard. I have not recognised it at all. And these lies are not only about us, they are also about our parents, grandparents, even great-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 got 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 excuses 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 the Soviet life as described by only an extremely small number, a marginal

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minority: by the so-called 'dissidents', whose 'dissent' is based primarily on personal egoism, opposition to the majority of the people, belief in their own 'exclusiveness', primacy of their worldview and their personal 'human rights' over the basic economic, social and political rights of the majority of the nation, contempt for others and for their own country. In the Soviet times, these people were considered traitors.

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 the description of their lives. And then they will finally realise they are a majority (which they are!) and will no longer stay inactive, tolerating the endless slander, spitting and jeering of the traitors, calling themselves 'reformers' and 'innovators.'

More than 20 years of my life in exile also gives me the right to compare in full the so-called 'free' world and our Soviet reality. And this comparison isn't in favour of 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 capitalist 'rivers of milk and honey.' Few people are actually interested in how we feel there, what we think about the system, and how we got there 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 mentors - the so-called 'developed' countries.

If I were asked to describe socialism in one word, I would choose the word 'inspiration.' That is what we experienced during the Soviet era very often, if not every day.

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

...If you look at the comments on my articles, for and against the USSR, you will notice something remarkable. 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

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main argument is? It's 'sausage.' All they talk about is the lack of 'sausage' and of foreign-brand 'stuff' (exactly 'stuff', not things, for things we had). And also about 'queues.' One of them remembered how he got imported chewing gum and 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,' - as my reader Rita Shevchenko wrote.

I am also positive, that 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 hot air. I am deeply convinced that without studying all the facets of our Soviet experience and creative application of this experience in the variety of future practices, it will remain impossible to construct any kind of 'a different world.'

Sovietica is a trilogy; you are holding in your hands its Part 1. The work on the translation of Parts 2 and 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 sausage to read my book. Those who do care how people around them live. Who think about the way the system works. About what can be learned from the historical experience of 'a different world', which, as we, the Soviet people, know, is not just theoretically possible, but really existed and continues to exist on our planet today.

Dedicated to Alisa who would have had a very different life, if she had been born in the USSR

Prologue. Refugee of perestroika

'I'll go around the world in search of a place with room for outraged feeling'

(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 apple tree blossoms. All around our little house nature is raging with blossoms: of apple trees, pear trees, cherry trees, lilacs...

The most wonderful mornings are those of early summer, when you don't have to go to school anymore. When you wake up slowly and can indulge yourself to lying in bed and watching 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 further, a little more, the final battle is the hardest...'¹

May begins with May Day. On the eve of May Day they mend roads, put new asphalt everywhere, and it smells hot tar. People also put lime on tree trunks in the streets, and the very sight of it makes your heart rejoice.

For some reason on the First of May the weather is usually fine, but the next day is always rainy and cold. May Day marks a sharp border between

¹ A line from the war song 'The Last Battle' by the Soviet actor & poet Mikhail Nozhkin

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 a mire, you have to get out your in-between-season boots again, that you are already so fed up wearing, - and the time when 'they come rustling, the sounds of green, the sounds of green, the sounds of spring!'² It seems in just one day young leaves will come out (how nice they smell!), together with 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 on.

The parade is a big event, full of joy - not just for children, but for 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 at home there was no bigger pleasure for me than to watch the celebrations and parade on TV! But May Day demonstrations were something I had never missed. From early morning on - cheerful music, full of the joy of life, played through loudspeakers in the streets. The streets swept clean, the trees lime-washed at the bottom, and my grandfather and all our neighbours would hang out red flags from their houses early in the morning. Nobody forced us to do that - even such a thought would seem ludicrous to us. On that day public transport in towns didn't run in the morning, and people would walk from all directions to the venues, to the accompaniment of cheerful and lively music.

We, the children, would impatiently wait for the adults to blow up holiday balloons for us, which we would tie to spring twigs with new leaves just broken.

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

Those who gobble up beautiful plastic-tasting strawberries from Dutch greenhouses in January 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 plenty of things to look

² Fragment from the poem by the Russian poet N. Nekrasov 'Green Noise' (1863).

forward to and feel happy about. 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 did not, we would all take turns riding it in the street. If you were going to the theatre, you would just buy an extra ticket and offer it to somebody else to come with you. We wanted to share our joy - not to monopolise it, arrogantly boast about it and flaunt it in front of others 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 intended for celebrations. Perhaps, the generation that has 'chosen Pepsi'³ wouldn't understand it, but we were able to do what they are not able to: anticipate and relish things to the fullest!

We were able to enjoy anticipation itself. Not that the slogan 'I want it all and I want it now' was just completely alien to us as something extraterrestrial. It was repulsive to us, though, as it bore strong associations with the Bad Boy sitting on a barrel of jam from Arkady Gaidar's book 'Malchish Kibalchish'...⁴ 'On New Year's Day there will be a Christmas tree (not a month in advance and thrown away the very day after the holiday), and they will show *Melodies and Rhythms of Foreign Pop Music* on TV.' 'Come summer, and we'll have our own apples in the garden' (fresh and natural!). 'When October comes, we'll fire up the furnace and bake potatoes in it' (so different from the microwave any time of the year, where, by the way, potatoes don't taste as they should!) 'In March the snow will begin to melt and I can play with paper boats in the streams' (not in a bath or a pool all the year round). Do you get my meaning? Or maybe already not?

But let's go back to our May First. The brass bands would play in the streets. People would greet their acquaintances cheerfully on the way to the gathering place of their column, congratulating them on the great holiday. Then we would wait impatiently till we could finally begin to walk in a procession. If we, the children, got tired, the adults would put

³ Reference to the early 1990-s slogan 'Our generation chooses Pepsi!' promoted in the former Soviet Union to advertise Coca and Pepsi Cola products as an alternative to Soviet values.

⁴ Bad hero from the 'Tale of the Military Secret, Boy Malchish Kibalchish and His Firm Word' written by Arkady Gaidar in 1935.

us on huge trolleys with 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, perform hearty dances and sing chastooshkas.⁵ Naturally, nobody forced them to do it either. The feeling of festivity was sincere and universal. Just as Great October Socialist Revolution Day (my grandfather called it 'Oktyabrskaya'), this was OUR holiday - not Yeltsin's 'Independence Day'.⁶ Nor was it just 'the day of spring and labour', as it is officially called today. The notion of the International Solidarity of Working People was not unfamiliar to us then!

The closer we approached the central platform opposite the monument of Lenin, the louder the music and holiday slogans sounded. Those slogans were shouted by solemn voices through loudspeakers. This solemnity inspired us. Our 'hurray!' expressed our joy - the joy of life, of knowing that we were all together, united, the joy, which reverberated in this beautiful warm day, the approaching summer! And when the loudspeakers hailed 'Long live the workers of (this or that) factory!', the named workers who were passing by the tribune would answer with such a loud 'hurray!' that the ground trembled from this sound...

After the parade people dispersed slowly. The transport was still not running, and we would walk home unhurriedly treading on the tramway line.

At home my granny plied us with pastry and other tasty food cooked on 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 eight years older than I and at the time I idolized him and held him as an example to emulate. It was flattering for me that

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'.

he always spoke and played with me as his peer, not as a naive young child).

We were always eager to see these relations of ours. 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 into the street to watch them. There were cries of 'hurray!' with each new volley - also whole-hearted and sincere.

Those who do not understand it, simply do not know what it means to enjoy life and how savoury this joy is. And please do not come up with the Philistine 'You were happy with this because you didn't know anything else'. For goodness' sake, what did we not know that was worth knowing? Strip bars, bordellos, narcotics? Glossy periodicals like Playboy? Trash mass media? Stock exchange speculation? 'One-armed gangsters'? Security guards in each store and each school? Such notions as 'racket' and 'gang-war'? The way shots and explosions sound in real life? Some 64 positions of 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 some other Western junk? Oh yeah, knowing it is such great happiness, isn't it?!

...After the 1st of May the 9th of May⁷ came on foot. It was my granddad's day. He never told us much about the war. Only when he drank a shot glass on May 9th, he would say that god forbid us to witness what a meat grinder it was...

'It was a meatgrinder. The human being is the most vicious animal on Earth...' Granddad had miraculously survived a combat in the environs of Leningrad. He was badly wounded in the leg, and they carried him off the battlefield. The splinters remained in his leg for the rest of his life.

⁷ Russian Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945 is celebrated on the 9 May.

Granddad said that in bad weather he felt the splinters move, and I looking at his leg, tried to picture it to myself. My imagination sketched something gray, alive - and evil.

We (my granddad included) did not feel any personal hatred for Germans as a nation. The Germans and the 'Fritzes' (a nickname for the Nazis) 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 the cries of 'Halt', 'Hande hoch', 'Russische Schwein'⁸ and the sound of machine guns. But today I have exactly the same associations with the sound of American English, with its retroflexive 'R' that sounds like the croaking of a frog. And any negative feelings towards the German language are completely gone. This is not the time for them: today mankind has another major enemy...

..Several days before Victory Day they would begin to show films about the war on TV. When I was five, the film 'The Dawns Here Are Quiet...'⁹ came out.

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 went to my granddad and say: 'Granddad, buy me a machine gun, please!'

My granddad was not surprised, but they were surprised at the toy store where we came - a small, shoebox-like building next to the

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.

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 cracks of the gun, her loud singing of the famous romance 'Sweetly he told me: 'Darling, be mine!'' I was the lyrical Lisa Brichkina, but I did not get drowned in the swamp as she did: I managed to fetch 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!

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

There was Janosik, Zorro and the Black Tulip, also the courageous Latvians, who were fighting for their independence from the Swedes (in the Latvian film 'Servants of the Devil'), and Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya.¹⁰

I imagined myself to be Zorro's companion-in-arms, full-fledged, not like Hortensia from the French film with Alain Delon.¹¹ When a colleague of my mother's tried to teach me the old Jewish wisdom 'Get anything given - run being beaten' I was really angered and tried to convince that man, whose hair had already turned grey with age, that when they beat

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.

you, you should not run away, but beat them back! That's what my own granddad was like: never ran away from the enemy, but beat them back in retaliation. He would not have run even if there had been no chance of victory whatever. Women dream about a man like this today - one 'that would not run away' ...¹²

... 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-troglo-dyte' as in the famous book of Kir Bulychev¹³ 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. Yet there was something special, something elusively attractive in that unlikely choir.

In the space under the roof Granddad's sleepy pigeons cooed calmly. They were his love and pride. I knew all their breeds (for some reason it always embarrassed my mother when I displayed this knowledge at school). My favourite ones were those that my granddad called 'lenisty'¹⁴: the white ones with a brown tail and a little brown 'cap' on their heads.

I was especially attached to a pigeon I called Wood Grouse. He earned this name for large bulges over both his eyes, obviously caused by age, that made him look like a wood grouse.

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.

¹⁴ Pigeon race (rus.)

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 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 more than 20 years that I lived in the Soviet Union, in our city with a population of half a million people there were only two murders. A 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. Nobody had any firearms on their hands, and the very thought of possessing them seemed completely weird to us.

The first murder case I heard of in our town, was a mentally ill mother of one of Marussia's classmates, Olya, killing her daughter. I was so morally shaken 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 track near our house (our house was the last one, right next to the railway). It was in winter, and the victim was a married man who had been meeting his mistress in the forest. Apparently he was stabbed by someone from her family (maybe even her husband?), because the murderer did not touch the woman. He only uttered before running away: 'Don't yell, you fool!'

I remember that when I heard this news I climbed under the table with 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 frozen river to the other bank.

But nowadays...¹⁵ Do I need to tell you about it?! My classmate Anton, who after medical school worked in a morgue, could not take it anymore: 'Each night they bring 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 are having now...

... When I was six, mum once took me to Moscow; she managed to buy tickets for the American ice show 'Holiday on Ice'. We returned home after that show with a night stop train.

The carriages were empty; I slept in 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. Such facts are

¹⁵ Author refers to 'post-perestroika' years straight after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

something that is absolutely beyond some today's 'liberated' & 'democratic' troglodytes. They would wonder how one could miss such a chance to rape or rob a woman with a child, if they happened to be in your way alone in the evening. Why did such a change happen to people? As one film critic said, in complete earnest, 'a transition took place in our society, from the Soviet mentality to the norm'!

Oh God, why can't I fall asleep yet? Why does all this filth keeps 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... and how it gradually gets cooler at twilight... about the first mosquitoes... no, it is better not to think about mosquitoes! About the house, then? Yes, our house! A small, wooden house, just one room and a small kitchen, but it was so cosy, so beloved. It is cool the entrance hall in summer; mice sometimes rustle in the store-room. In summer Granny cooks there on a kerosene stove, and in winter she cooks in the kitchen, on a big, warm, real Russian stove.... How tasty were the baked potatoes she made in it, with smoke and a slight 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 came to me especially frequently: I was transformed into a sheet 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 looking 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 old railway 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 on an iron pipe for a 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 a 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 went into a bayonet assault.... I recall a hot day and mum collecting Colorado beetles in a jar on our vegetable plot - I even remember the time they first appeared in our country. I remember a little oak tree that I planted at the far end of the vegetable plot, when I was a first-former. It grew 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 thawing water bubbled in spring, and behind it - a big mound, and on it ran the railway. In 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, dived head first into a pile of snow.... When my relatives came out of the house in response to my cry, they could only see the soles of my felt boots sticking out of the snow pile! Tamarochka (may she rest in peace!) even made up a verse for me - 'Train driver, whistle you not, wake not Zhenya in her cot!' and I liked it very much...

I was afraid of trains my entire life - because I saw how enormous they were, if you stood next to them. The wheels alone were taller than you! Ugh... When you live next to a railroad, you get accustomed to the noise. You even sleep through it without noticing. In 1976, when there was a devastating earthquake in Romania, its echoes reached us, but we didn't even notice it, as our house and everything in it regularly shook with quite the same force!

Once a girlfriend persuaded me to go and sit on the railway track: a gipsy camp was rumoured to have arrived and parked out 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 mother was coming home from work and saw us from the hill across the street ('the mountain', as we called it). She later said she herself didn't know how she ran to us from so far away! There was no train in the offing, yet she slapped me for the first and only time in my life. I was very hurt: had she actually thought that I would not see the train? But never in my life did I come near a railway track again without an adult.

Behind the railway were a dump and a forest, not a common Russian forest of birch trees and oaks, but an artificially planted one since Khrushchev's time (Nikita Sergeyevich wanted to discourage people from planting potatoes arbitrarily for themselves on river banks, so seedlings of the American maple, which spread rapidly like a jungle, were set on the field).

Once in the past I walked there with my granddad, then I ceased doing it, but he still did - for firewood. Not that he couldn't buy any, of course, but in order to rid the forest of that nasty tree. Behind the artificial forest was our river - slow, medium-wide, calm, which had once been clean, but ceased being so even before my generation. In spring it flooded strongly, and we (only with an adult!) would walk to the railway 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 Tamarochka, and I saw the whole thing as one big adventure! To my granddad it was, of course, not a laughing matter.

In winter people would ski behind the railway and sleigh down 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. It was in the Antilles 15 years ago that I saw security guards in shops for the first time in my life. We in Russia have now 'developed' enough to attain such 'civilization'!

Oh, am I 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 an expectation of miracle. This is what I am really deprived of since the Soviet Union is no more. Do I really expect too much of life? For whom was it such a pain in the neck that I and millions of other people like me would wake up with this tranquil and blissful feeling of happiness?...

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

...Spring, spring... May... after May 9th it was not long before the annual tests at school which always turned my stomach upside down, even though I was a good student. In late May - when bird-cherry trees began to flower - it would suddenly get cold again.... If I close my eyes I can almost feel their cloying sweet smell. And sleep, together with the aroma of blossoming bird-cherry trees of 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, Sonny ¹⁷, 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, covered with cold sweat.

For some time I cannot understand, who I am, where I am, what I am doing here. Where are my lawn and my sunbeam reflections that smell of the bird-cherry tree blossoms?

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

Through the window there comes a pleasant smoky smell of burning peat. I am in Ireland. I recall 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 I, and all of us, take a wrong turn? Why did history take 'an alternative route'?

¹⁶ Heroine's daughter

¹⁷ Heroine's ex-husband

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

Bread will smell like bread again and will get hard on the third day, as it should, rather than mouldy and damp. Roses will smell roses again - not Dutch pesticides. Chocolate will taste chocolate, rather than a strange substance coloured like a baby's poo. Young girls will dream of first love and romantic strolls under the moon, rather than winning a 'Miss Topless' contest. People will not hide their faces and shy away in fear at the sight of hooliganism and caddishness, pretending not to see. There will be no homeless children, nor perverts, now called this fashionable Western word - 'pedophiles', hunting for them. A doctor, called to a very sick child, whose life is measured by the minute, will not ask you: 'So, who's going to pay?'

This feeling has pursued me here for years now. Just hold on a little longer and - and you will wake up, and everything will come back to normal. And all these years I have lived 'out of suitcases' - ready to go any time.

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

Is it ridiculous or sad that everything that people on our planet are fighting for, we already had before? And we were so stupid as to think that all of these weren't the achievements of socialism, but of some mythical 'general human progress' - so natural they came to us. So natural, indeed, that we thought nobody would ever be able to take them away from us. As natural as the air. But here people still think of all these public boons as of something almost unreachable....

I turn on the other side and try to visualise boundless collective farm fields with blooming buckwheat that smells like honey: open, not fenced in by barbed wire, without signs saying 'Private property! Keep out! Trespassing is prosecuted!' That very field is now built over by private cottages...

...Perhaps, I could sleep just a little longer? It's just 4 a.m., 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 out. I don't want to get out of bed, but I have to. It's good that I live so close to my work now. And how lucky I am to have a job at all!

I live, using Mum's expression, 'in somebody else's basement', but it seems a palace to me after other dwellings in which I sojourned during 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 ... No harm in dreaming!

To share a room with another person when you're already thirty is hardly the most pleasant thing in the world. Even if this room is in a new, beautiful house. My first landlady had squashed her tenants into rooms like sardines in a tin: not because she was greedy, but simply because otherwise she wouldn't have afforded to pay her own mortgage. She worked as a stewardess, came home only occasionally and reserved for herself the largest room en-suite. And the other three rooms were rented out to students. I first arrived here as a student too, probably because I was afraid to start a real adult life. There had been severe unemployment in the Netherlands, and for a long time I was simply afraid to graduate to end up on the dole. But in Ireland, thank God, life was quite different. All young Europeans were heading for Dublin because there was so much work there - especially for people with a good command 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 select products at the supermarket: I did not dare to make choices.

Sonny had taught me for a long time that to make choices was always his business. It began at the time when we had to survive on 50 guilders a week: in such conditions you didn'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 was just that way. 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, this is 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 cosy village, permeated with tasty smoke of peat used for 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 had drinks. Students here start to 'celebrate' weekends from Thursday on and quiet down only by Sunday night. At Maynooth there are two major sights - the ruins of FitzGerald's castle and the National University of Ireland, - mysterious ancient buildings scattered around in a park with huge century-old trees. In the same place is St Patrick's College - a Catholic seminary. There is also a couple of small shops, a hotel, where, to my astonishment, local residents often drop in for a meal or drink, by local custom (in my country, people don't stay at hotels of the same town where they live - why would they? A hotel is for tourists, for guests). And these were about all the sights of the town.

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 before on an exchange program. Probably, they had decided to put us up together because I had arrived from the Netherlands, too. The Irish wanted to please my neighbour: they obviously did not know how much the notion of 'allochtoons' mattered to the Dutch.¹⁸

¹⁸Allochtoon (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

However, to Anita's credit, she was nice to me. And in general she was a likeable girl, with moist and kind eyes, as if to confirm the fact that she was Pisces by the Zodiac. A bit too straightforward, like all Dutch - but such is their nature. Once she came home with tears in her eyes: she had had a misfortune to broach the subject of abortion to some young Irish people her age (ten years or so younger than me), which is rather a sensitive issue here.... There are some things you'd better not speak about to the Irish - there are such things for the Dutch too, only the list of forbidden subjects is different with different nations. So why provoke people? Just venture, for example, talking to the Dutch on the subject of betraying Jews during the war (ask who betrayed Anne Frank to the Nazis, for one!). Or on the issue of head scarves and other Muslim attire (though one would think it is none of their business!). Well, that's a sure way to start a brawl!...

She couldn't have been unaware of the general view on this issue in Ireland before she arrived there. But what made her pout was why it wasn't even possible to discuss things. Sure it is, my dear, only you have to face the consequences...

The thing is, in the Dutch mentality, people begin discussions not to change the opinion of their opponents or persuade them, but for the sake of the discussion itself. A person practices the selection of logical arguments; it is some kind of a mental gymnastics. There is usually no result expected and coming from such discussions whatever, but for the Dutch it is not important. Like Lieutenant Rzhevsky¹⁹, they just 'find the discussion itself pleasant'. Whereas both Irish and Russians experience attempts to start a discussion on such hot issues as an endeavour to change their views, their beliefs, as an assault on their way of life. 'Nos ta katoliko, no sigui insisti!'²⁰ - as Mai would say.

and Eastern European countries.

¹⁹ Lieutenant Rzhevsky is a fictional young cavalry officer who appears in popular Russian jokes that poke fun at social sophistication and decorum.

²⁰'We are Catholics; do not continue to insist!' (a door sign meant for Jehovah's Witnesses in Curacao) (Papiamento)

Anita was crying on my shoulder, and I made a discovery. It appeared I understood her, but I also understood the Irish! More than that, I myself held a third, a different point of view!

I did not suspect that I had managed to become Dutch-like to such an extent during these years. My Russian friend from school, Alla, had noticed that something wasn't quite right with me: when she wanted to hold me by the arm, by our old custom, to walk together arm-in-arm along the street, I nearly jumped up and drew back my hand.²¹ It was an involuntary, almost automatic reaction. The silliest thing is that even I myself cannot explain why I did it! (Was it Academician Pavlov's conditioned reflex?) But the Dutch would provide a detailed explanation of all their motives! Just as detailed, as the account of your Dutch colleagues, when, excusing themselves to the bathroom, they tell you what exactly they are going to do there.

Well, luckily I hadn't quite got hollandised that much, but it took me a couple of weeks 'to tune myself in' and adjust to the Irish sense of humour.

I can give you yet another example to illustrate the mental gap 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 about life on the Emerald Isle made by some Dutch journalists. ... 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. 'Aren't you afraid that they will come to arrest you?' - asked him some law-abiding kaaskoppen (cheese-heads) in horror. 'You bet! Of course, I am! For the last 20 years I have been afraid all the time! I have set some money aside for the fine that I'll have to pay when they catch me!' - he answered with a straight 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 me literally and because of this I was often trapped. (Oh, I will tell you about it later!). It went on till I finally understood: if you do not want the Irish to lose their charm for you, try to

²¹ In Holland two girls who walk holding each other by the arm, are usually lesbians

learn not to take their fantasies in earnest. And you'd even better learn to pay them in kind, they will value it! Thank God, unlike the Dutch, you don't have to be taught to fantasize.... 'Slagging', according to the English- Russian dictionary, is translated as 'offending, slandering, discrediting', but in Ireland it is a kind of national sport consisting in an exchange of sharp but harmless jibes at one another. The faster you master it, the faster the Irish will accept you in their company: one of the most valued things here is a good sense of humour. But how can you master slagging if you got used to taking everything literally?

For that reason I pitied Anita so much. 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 had contracted in Holland, as annoying as haemorrhoids.

But then for some reason I told her what had happened to Lisa (and that wasn't necessary, to be honest! Well, who made me 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's got married, and I am glad for her; she deserves a bit of happiness so much!'

I tried to picture this 'deserved happiness' with some bloke, after handing over my little Lisa to some care home - no matter what sort of difficulties I might have with her! - and almost got 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 rejecting your own child.

But Anita was obviously very lonely in Ireland (it was her first long independent stay abroad!), and she still considered me 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 esteem! 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. There came the 'recognition' that was not needed 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. To understand it, one has to bear in mind what Ireland meant to me back then.

I had left behind the idiotic soap opera into which some higher forces unknown had transformed my life in the past 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 forbidden to work, but 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!'

I was fed up with this feeling of being a stranger. Of course, being an immigrant, you do not expect yourself to become 100% accepted in a new society. But at least you wish to feel that you do not disturb people by your presence and that they regard you as a person, a human being, rather than a mere 'native of...!' It does not surprise me now that it was the descendants of the Dutch who invented apartheid: no matter how hard you tried to 'integrate', no matter how well you spoke the Dutch language, you, your children and even grandchildren were doomed to remain 'allochtoon' to them. And when you become aware of it, any desire to be a part of such a society vanishes completely. Yes, you can be different from other people - in my native land I used to be different from most of my coevals in my predilections and choice of interests - but to feel that you are constantly being evaluated not by your personal qualities, but purely on the basis of your ethnic origin, to see that people adjust their estimation of you to fit their cut and dried stereotypes - that's quite another kettle of fish.

... 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 flew into a temper, - Not even close: to Dublin!

... From the moment I found myself among the Irish - having changed 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 sat on one's own, as a mouse on its groats (with the words of a Russian saying), and talking to one's neighbours was viewed as something quite abnormal, on the Irish bus, which we boarded at six o'clock in the morning, the din began at once. An hour later everyone on the bus had already got acquainted with each other, and by the end of the journey - very much in the same way as on trains in my country! - many of us already knew all the life history of our fellow travellers. People exchanged jokes and disclosed personal tragedies; they shared meals and sang songs. No, they were not at all like Russians, these small-statured, freckled, merry fellows and jokers with an implausible gift of speech, but they were simply able to make you feel at home! And owing to that I grew fond of them once and for all, definitively and irrevocably.

When I alighted 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 that dark October evening would be so fateful for me.

... To begin with, I was almost frightened to death by a green double-decker bus (so many things were green there!) that whizzed past me with a whistling noise, missing me by just a couple of inches: I had plain forgotten that the road traffic there was right-hand!

I had a city map with me, and I went looking for a hotel in which Sonny was staying - the posh Burlington Hotel. By the way, Alla Pugacheva²² 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 entered its magnificent lobby, water flowed down from me in streams.

- Are you OK? - the receptionist asked me sympathetically, so 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?' was the Irish equivalent for 'may I help you?'

²² Alla Pugacheva - popular Soviet singer who later changed her creative image in accordance with the new, more Western fashion.

My senses had been pleasantly surprised with what I saw and heard on my way there. Schoolchildren (teenagers!) went along the street in pairs, holding hands. There was no pornography around. The streets were not soiled with dog excrements. People generously gave alms to those who asked for them. They said 'Sorry!' to you, if you accidentally pushed them! Churches were full of people (I can't tell if that was for good or for bad, but what a contrast with Holland where they were open only at weekends, and even then mainly for foreigners!). I was impressed by the dark green and brown tones of the city, its cosy provinciality made me feel bitter-sweet. The city looked so low-built and homelike. I was amazed at the cheerful chaos in its streets - instead of the Good Friday-faced, sour Dutch 'order'. When I saw Dubliners nimbly run across the road near Trinity College against the red light, I almost shouted with glee, 'Hurray! Finally I am among live people again, instead of robots!'

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

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 pooped over by pigeons, and 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 traffic jams in Dublin (he was taken to and from work throughout the city by taxi), at the fact that nobody was there for his arrival, that at work he had to explain to people everything several times, that nothing began on time. That when you ask for tea, they added milk without even asking you!

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

While he worked, I wandered about the town all day and soaked up its atmosphere little by little. I liked the conservatism of the local customs and the fact that Ireland was not cosmopolitan - a 'country of the world': it had its own strong distinctive national colouring, wrapping it around, like some homely fog. I was greatly surprised that the Irish youth loved their folk music and dances. I had not seen any European country where multitudes of youth would take immense interest in their own folk music! And where people en masse would be so musically talented. Builders, while constructing buildings, produced such trills of national songs that in my country they would have long 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! Amazingly, my grandfather, who had never been to Ireland and wasn't even interested in it, ate the same things for breakfast as the Irish and also loved his tea with milk. Perhaps we, the Slavs, and the Irish really have common ancestors?...

There was always strong wind here. The same as in Blok's²³ poem - 'The wind, the wind, it lays you low,/ The wind, the wind,/ Across God's world it blows...' Pale children, unfamiliar with sunburns, played in the streets of Dublin - hide-and-seek, run-and-catch, the same games as we played in our childhood. (Dutch children generally do not play in the streets.) On the walls there were only political slogans and innocent, childish scrawls, such as Paddy + Fiona = heart. Not a sign of foul words or graphic pornography.

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

... Far outside of Dublin mysterious mountains loomed green. Not so high, of course, as in some parts of Austria, but to me, who lived for such a long time in the Netherlands, even they were impressive enough. I decided at least to get a glimpse of Ireland outside Dublin and I bought a ticket for a bus tour to the Wicklow Mountains.

²³ 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).

It was an absolutely different world. It was the end of October. Downpours and sunshine alternated in quick turns, within half an hour. Or even occurred simultaneously. The green mountains were especially gorgeous during what we call 'mushroom rain' (sun shower), rain together with sunshine, which in my country happens only in summer, and even then it is very rare. The mountains, bathed in all shades of green that only exist in nature, were especially fascinating when flaky and fleeting shadows of clouds ran across them. All around there were boundless open spaces full of wildness and naturalness, which just does not exist in clean-licked, close-cropped Holland. Along the road wooden electric poles stuck out of the ground, just in my childhood in our small street (where else in Europe would you see anything like this?), real mushrooms grew in the woods, which I had not seen for at least seven years! Old men and women in villages were dressed almost as in our villages, wearing caps with padded jackets and long floral dresses with head scarves. And when the stately view of Killiney Bay opened up in front of me, my imagination simply refused to believe that such beauty actually existed in nature.

Our driver, a joker and willing singer, sang all the way, joked non-stop and told us funny one-liners. 'See that bridge over there? Three years ago an English lady tourist bumped into it headlong. The bridge has never been the same ever 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 alms by credit cards' - and we, listening open-mouthed, believed his every word. He did it so naturally that it looked as if he improvised on the spot. Only when I happened to be in Dublin again a year later, took the same bus and heard all the same jokes, did I understand how they fooled those ninny tourists. 'Do not trust the smiles of kings - you will lose your head!' - a hero from Kir Bulychev's book used to say. Wasn't it about the Irish?.. With my Dutch frankness, I then spoiled the driver's day, telling him I had been on that tour before. After that, his jokes faded and became strained. I had to live in Ireland for some time before I realised that here it is better to pretend sometimes you do not see or do not understand something. This is the Irish lore of human relations.

Most of the Irish were far from handsome by their looks, but they were full of humanity, archness and humour combined with cordiality. And, surprisingly, it made them good-looking. I had never been attracted to

white men (except when I was a teenager), but here my heart gave in. I felt they had a completely different attitude to women there than the Netherlanders. An Irishman can see a woman as his friend, as an equal without any stretch; 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 (one would 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. Nowhere else would you find such beautiful compliments and fairy-tale narratives of one's own life! They were so much unlike Dutchmen, who reminded me of fresh-frozen hakes in a fishmonger's shopwindow; the Dutch even had to open special courses so that 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 would they land on this planet at all, such a 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 those few days in Ireland, I could feel how much happier people were there than the Dutch and even than us, the Russians: simply because they looked at life differently. It was not just life itself that mattered, it was also one's attitude to it, I understood. 'If you wish to be happy, be.' The Irish do not bring all the stress from work back home with them every night. They do not worry in vain about things they cannot change anyway. They experience life easier and in a more carefree way; they do not take all the bad things so close to heart and do not read everything so 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 against the grain of life. 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 had been tormented for years by severe depression, which receded a bit in summer, but invariably came back sharply as September approached (before emigration I hadn't known such a thing!).

And I understood that the only way for me to get rid of it was to adopt the Irish style 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 town for a weekend, so that his opinion of Ireland would not only be based on traffic jams, but, being more interested in shopping, he refused.

... When we returned to Amsterdam, I was almost in mourning. We were waiting at Schiphol airport for our suitcases. A ginger-haired young man looked around perplexedly, as if he was searching for someone in the crowd. Then he singled me out of all the people, came up 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*, the famous play by E. Schwartz, who only read books about bears²⁴, from that moment on I only read about the Irish. I searched for an Aran jumper everywhere. I still did not know that in Ireland those jumpers distinguished tourists from local residents, who rarely wore them. When I finally found such a jumper - grey-brown, smelling heavily of 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 - it was so unlike me, a fan of disco, reggae and bubbling. Sonny only laughed at my 'eccentricities.' When I saw the film *Michael Collins* in a small cinema in Amsterdam (they wouldn't show it in a big cinema in Holland: by the

²⁴ 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 kisses him.

Dutch standards, that film was not a box office hit), it looked and felt so much like a Soviet film that I, who lived in a place where even the word 'revolution' was regarded as something very indecent, literally tread on air walking from the cinema...

I had a secret! I gained life inspiration, which I had not had for so long! It felt as if I was back in childhood, when I had fallen in love with Alain Delon's Zorro. There appeared light 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 needed full-time people very urgently. 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 grimaced when I involuntarily disturbed her sleep in the morning, getting ready to travel to 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 a.m.!). 'What do you need this for?' - she asked squeamishly, as if work was something beneath her dignity (though she did work part-time herself at a local pub two nights a week and sometimes disturbed my sleep, too).

For what? To be able 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 2,000 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...

I went to work by train. A small green train whose doors opened with great difficulty, pleasantly smelling of smoke, so fully packed in the morning that it was not easy to even find a place to stand. Sometimes I took a bus, but it took longer to get to Dublin by bus. I was awfully proud of my first job - customer service agent at a call centre of a big hotel

chain, or rather, a switchboard operator used to make hotel reservations. But I did not yet realise then that I was a mere telephonist. My colleagues were all young graduates of various universities: for them, as well as for me, it was the first job position, and all of us thought that we had achieved something very important. Probably also because during the training our instructors constantly told us with very important faces that we would be the face of that company and other usual corporate rubbish.

I did not understand back then why, at 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, of course! I did not know that 10,000 pounds a year was 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 yuppie, a young professional. And when I got off the train at Connolly Station of a frosty morning, I would proudly walk 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! I was 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 was final. And despite all my feelings for Sonny (I did not hate him at all, to the surprise of those who knew our story - to me it was most painful and it was such a pity that it had all turned out like that), I felt relieved.

Soon I found myself a room in Dublin: I was fed up with travelling from Maynooth every day, it cost me too much time and energy. To find a place in Dublin appeared 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 the counter'.²⁵

²⁵ Dutch expression 'als warme broodjes over de toonbank gaan' - to sell very quickly

The room in an old Georgian house in Ranelagh²⁶ 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 a room: by the time appointed for the viewing five people had come to see it. Three did not wait for the owner, who, as a true Irishman, was almost an hour late, and the fourth, an American who probably imagined himself worth something more decent than 'this dump,' felt sorry for me and conceded the room to me.

The house had three floors and a converted roof space; I glimpsed at least ten other tenants in it: we shared the main entrance door and a common telephone next to the staircase. Each Monday the owner - an elderly scruffy little man - came and made a round of all the rooms collecting rent. Each week he received from us more than the average monthly salary of a good programmer. He could kick any of us out into the street at any moment, at only a month's notice. Unlike in Holland, where the rights of a tenant were then 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 and my own shower, which I did not have to share with anybody; it was near my workplace; and that pleasant old Dublin residential quarter was just to my taste. It took me at most twenty minutes to get to work from there - 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, probably after the laborious divorce proceedings with all their complications. I wished to avoid any confrontation, even the most innocent one, with anybody, at any cost. 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 vanished. I took my things from Maynooth under the cover of the night (actually, of the evening, when Anita was working in the pub and the other girls were also out) - to avoid their inquiries...What is happening to me, can anybody tell me? - I kept asking myself....

²⁶ Area in Southern Dublin, mainly with old houses & student population

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 professional woman was looking for a nice small apartment....

... When I first saw that magnificent 'palace' in Rathmines²⁷, behind the 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 a wrong address. To live in such a place would obviously be far too expensive for me! But as it turned out, everything was right. The owners were hospitality itself - a retired English captain of the merchant navy, who looked like a hero of the poem *Post* by Samuil Marshak²⁸ ('Thin as a lath, in Bobkin Street / there walks a postman, Mr. Smith, / he wears a dark blue postman cap, / in his brisk walk his coat flaps'), and his slightly obese but very nice wife who ran a B&B in the main house. The apartment (by local standards, it was really an apartment, not '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 - true, they were elegant, but, nevertheless, bars they remained. The room was modestly furnished and old-fashioned, but cosy. Here absolute silence and peace reigned, and the only window looked into the courtyard enclosed on four sides, which I have already mentioned. Needless to say, I did not deliberate for long and rented that room! And I did the same thing to my Dublin landlord as I did to the landlady from Maynooth. Only this time I didn't feel any pity at all: I knew the old

²⁷ Another area in Southern Dublin, near Ranelagh

²⁸ 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).

Plushkin²⁹ would be quick to find another tenant to make money out of and dispose with!

For the first time in many years I was content with myself. I had been there just for three months, had had no acquaintances when I arrived - and there I was, finding a decent accommodation that I could afford and decent work, which I by and large liked. Apparently, I could do something for myself, without 'jeans and their contents' next to me! I was very afraid of becoming disappointed with Ireland, but it really appeared to be just as I dreamt. I had never regretted coming there.

I quickly learned the Irish attitude to life, even a bit too much. So much so that my own Mum now indignantly called me 'happy-go-lucky': she couldn't stand my manner of taking it easy while she got worked up on the slightest pretext. I became a bit like comrade Sukhov³⁰ who, in reply to jeers of the enemy: 'Would you like us to do you in at once, or would you like to suffer a bit first?' imperturbably answers: 'It is better to suffer, of course.' That is truly Irish sense of humour!

And indeed, I got happier. I would have been absolutely happy, if it weren't for Lisa's illness...

By April I had changed three workplaces in three months. Never in my life had I thought I would become what they called 'a flyer' in the Soviet Union, but the existing possibilities were too seductive: it was so easy to

²⁹ The 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.

³⁰ A reference to the Red Army soldier Fedor Sukhov from the 'White Sun of the Desert' (1969), cult Soviet adventure movie, still popular today.

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change work for a more highly paid one. Not that 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 some improvement in her condition, but not enough to rejoice. And in order to survive and hold on in my everyday life, I tried to block all thoughts of her and put all my energy to work, trying to feel like a young, free and single professional three sheets to the wind...

I have stopped being a tourist there for a long time now. And my jumper that smells of unwashed Irish sheep is now gathering dust in the wardrobe....

Chapter 2. Confession of the Captain of a Spaceship

*'I have dreamt of rustling rain,
And your footsteps in the mist -
Dear memories of the Earth,
Roaming space, I forever you miss.'*

(Song 'I have dreamt of rustling rain', Ye. Doga. V. Lazarev)

... My first memories of childhood (no joking, in earnest!) were of the pale-green walls of the maternity hospital and a feeling of being bound hand and foot. From time to time this feeling was replaced by a feeling of freedom of movement - when they changed my nappies.

It never lasted long, though, and I did not have much time to straighten out my arms and legs properly as they rolled me up again in a cloth cone, tied around with bands - accompanied by the sounds of my loud crying. I have a hunch that if instead of me the author of this book were some dissident 'democrat', she would immediately declare that from infancy she had been deprived of freedom and would see some deep symbolism of 'communist dictatorship' in these memories. This rubbish, though, would have nothing whatsoever to do with reality. To bind babies like this is an ancient Russian tradition: people say in this way a child's legs won't be O-shaped.

I also remember an 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 a zinc washtub warmed up by boiled water; my grandmother bathed me in it. Do any of you know how heated zinc smells? I think very few people do...

My grandmother Sima always radiated calmness and warmth. Not only did she never raise her hand to any of us children - she did not even raise her voice to us, and yet everybody obeyed her, even the Grandfather. Her most disparaging condemnation of a person was 'I despise this man'! If I behaved badly, she would simply give me an upset look. And that was enough. 'There is a heavy stone growing at my heart when you behave like this,' - she said reproachfully, and I aspired to do everything in my childish power that this stone should 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 pity herself like some refined aristocratic ladies: 'Have I graduated from Smolny³¹ 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 shouted, making their 'bad nerves' an excuse, - the grandmother just said calmly: 'It's not bad nerves, it's just loose conduct'!

And we got used to taking her motherly care of all 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 frequently 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 were needed to make pickled gherkins (in Europe for some reason they always put vinegar in pickles, somehow Europeans cannot imagine that gherkins can be perfectly pickled without it!)

In summer Grandmother went to the market and came back short of breath from the heat and fast walk; she had asthma attacks. She sat and tried to recover her breath, and her breath was coming out of her chest with a heavy whizzing 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 cooked, but 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

³¹ 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.

was slowly deepening, the oven made your back warm, it was so good and so quiet...

My Grandmother was born in a family, where several generations had been metal workers. Her father was not only hard-working, but also known in their neighbourhood as a merry fellow and a singer of chastushkas. They even nicknamed him 'Vaska - the record player'. During the week-ends he'd go out for a walk with his daughters Sima and Tamarochka and would start to sing impromptu: 'Eh, there is an apple-tree, yes, with small leaves and petals, and there goes Vassil-the-Player with his little daughters!' On some weekdays he came home from work with a terrible pain in the back that was healed with 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. She had to toil from the age of thirteen as a servant for rich masters; then she got married. They could never have imagined that fifty years later their grandchildren would be engineers. The relationship between Mum and my Grandmother was not easy - probably because Mum by nature was Granny's complete opposite. The Grandmother was modesty itself, did not use cosmetics, did not really follow fashion (though she was an excellent seamstress) and was very strict in private life (even her own children addressed her politely - 'you' instead of familiar 'thou', a usual way of address for relations in Russia). Mum, in contrast, 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 in fact, and a propensity to dump some onerous duties (for example, looking after me) on others, easily and even artistically, with an air as if it 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 Mum that I adopted the belief that all housewives were idlers. Though now, with my own life experience I can tell that it is easier to work six days in a week than to 'have rest' at home like my Grandmother! My Mother also considered my uncle Shurek to be Grandmother's pet, without thinking at all that even if it were true, it was so because he was so easy-going, so good to deal with, and he did not cause any difficulties to others at home by his adventures!

True, 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 got grown up. But she was still young and, of course, had another life apart from me. She came home from work with a paper cone full of sweets (she shared Granddad's habit of spending a lot on gifts on a 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 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 most 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 traits of my character.

For too long in life had I tried to resemble Mum and live up to 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. And I thought all those wise saws I heard from her were just our national, traditional proverbs and sayings. In fact, my Grandmother in her youth was a member of 'The League of Militant Atheists'³². And she considered her 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, unwilling to sleep, they put me to sleep by lullabies, singing them in turns at home. Mum and Grandmother, Grandfather and Uncle. When one

³² '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.

of them got tired, the duty was transferred to another. Each of them had his or her own repertoire.

‘I am the Earth,
I am bidding farewell to my nurslings,
Go, my daughters and sons,
Soar to faraway stars, farthest corners,

And come back to your Motherland soon!’³³ - The Grandfather sang in a deep voice after coming back from an evening shift at his factory.

My first lessons in our history also came from lullabies.

‘Soldiers on the river bank,
Oh, they’re far from home.
Walking under the banner red
With their commander Shchors.
Oh, his head is bandaged,
His shirt is sleek with blood,
And the blood is trailing
O’er the dew-wet grass.

‘Boys, whose soldiers are you?
Under whom d’you fight?
Who’s that walking there,
Who’s that wounded man?’

‘We are sons of labourers,
We’re for a new world,
Walking under the banner red

Is Red Commander Shchors’³⁴ - My Uncle Shurek sang to me quietly.

It was the 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 carrying blazing scarlet banners. I did not know yet what it meant - ‘sons of labourers’, but I already felt in this song that they were ‘friends’!

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

³³ Refrain from the 60-s Soviet song ‘I am the Earth’ devoted to pilots.

³⁴ ‘Song About Shchors’(1935). Nikolai Shchors (1895-1919) Red Army Commander during Civil War in Russia renowned for his personal courage.

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 'Nights in Narrow Small Streets of Riga' and 'There a Swarthy Moldovan Girl Gathered Vine' to Belarusian 'From a Bag Take a Potato and Eat It'. From Georgian 'Suliko' to Azerbaijani 'All My Love for You, Azerbaijan'. She even tried to sing some songs to me in the languages of the peoples of these republics, picking up by ear their sounding after hearing them on the radio.

When somebody says to me now, 'The USSR was an empire', I try to picture a British mum singing to her children as lullabies Indian, African or at the very least Irish songs - and I cannot. One would need to have the imagination of a science fiction writer for that, and even that might not help. 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 of these peoples, at the expense of whom they have lived and continue to live even today, in the twenty-first century, is well described by the words of a hero of an old play about Charley's Brazilian aunt: 'So, the name 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, even though she had finished singing songs of all the fifteen republics of the USSR, Grandmother came to Mum's help. In her repertoire there was a 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 shivering...
'My God', the baby speaks,
I am cold and hungry...'

It goes on to say that there is nobody to shelter and warm the orphan and he will have to freeze in the street. But even the prospect that, probably, somebody would pity the child and 'feed and warm him up', did

not calm me. I imagined that infant (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 had taken cover beside their warm hearths - and literally all my being began to sob.

'Mum, why do you sing such a song to a child?' - Mum could not stand it. But the Grandmother was wiser. She was fostering in me 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. Antiquity. In our time children 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 that disgusting, prehistoric past would return - moreover, not just return, but it would 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 have temporarily dropped out, when our children - 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 songs 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 parents says nothing about how they can put to a child 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 that the room temperature is normal. Occasionally, you can leave the night light on - and leave. After all, the parents ought to spend some time together without it, 'some quality time' as they call it - that is, with a cup of tea at the TV-set, 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.) Why would anyone be diverted from anything so fascinating for the sake of some little shouter? And as a general rule, let it 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 - so teach us the Western experts - you may approach the door and check upon it, whether everything is in order. But under no circumstances take it out of bed and avoid any eye contact. Otherwise it will never become silent!

It should understand from an early age that it will not receive any reward for crying.

Perhaps this is why these kiddies grow up into adults, who find sadistic pleasure in torturing captives in Iraq, etc. today? Perhaps, their parents thought simple expressions of love for a child, such as holding him in their hands, hugging him, stroking him, giving him a kiss, calming him down - were not only a waste of their own precious time, but a 'harmful' business, 'a reward for crying'? Perhaps from an 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 from the time my granny swung me in a blanket, without any thoughts of soap operas, or the colour of urine, or how to leave herself more free time having sent all of us as far away as possible?

Perhaps for this reason mothers of our soldiers feel pain at the sight of all human suffering, 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 at the service of 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 their own children, they too, probably grew falling asleep to the monotonous sounds of clockwork musical toys attached to cradles, designed to relieve the 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 comes a Bulgarian girl on the Danube,
Throwing a flower awash...
Slovaks then see this fair gift there a-floating,
From their banks faraway
They begin throwing awash scarlet poppies,
Sweetly received by the stream.

Danube, Danube, please, guess, our friend,
Which gift is whose?

Flower to flower the diadem's plaited,
By all of us, fair 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...'

Even before school I had known by heart little poems like:
'When one says the name of Motherland,
In your mind's eye you can see
Your old house, currant orchard,
At the gate - a poplar-tree...'

I did not yet know then how lucky I was. Lucky that we weren't 'civilised.' Where I grew up, everything was living and breathing the spirit of times, there were fast ties between generations, the connection between the past and the present: my grandfather still wore the padded jacket in the late 1920s' style, similar to the one they now show in the film *Dog's Heart*, and on our table there still stood the glass jug my grandparents had owned, and the clock we had hanging on the wall had once belonged even to Grandad's parents, and every morning the mother of my friend, Katya, passed by our windows on her way back from the water pump with buckets full of water hanging on a shoulder yoke.... And high over our house, on the '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 final leap - and my Motherland with its black currants in the orchard whose smell I still remember, will finally become 'civilised.' Will finally enter the world where children actually do not have grandmothers and granddads, there are no fairy tales before sleep, there are no outdoor games in the streets - and that's probably why there is also no compassion towards street children or to anybody else. 'Burn, you motherfucker, burn!' - cries out an American soldier from his tank in Iraq, shooting civilians at close range, to the sounds of hard rock music coming from his earphones: a fellow who has grown up with a joystick in his hand...

Do we really want this? The world where housewives do not cook home-made jam ('We will break the habit of Russian women to make 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 the 'Smokey', Afric Simone and 'Boney M' are - and we still love them! The world where people put their feet on a seat in public transport right next to a special sign saying that it is forbidden to do so (in the USSR we never even needed such signs - 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 your place in public transport to elderly 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, the less he learns to think and feel, the better.

Lullabies remain to him something abnormal, associated with 'the underdeveloped' (bad) countries: recently in the West some 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 turn, and none of us would even get an inkling that there might be anything 'indecent' in it. 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 of 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 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 at such moments heroically blocked his way, and he then went and lay down on a trestle 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!'....

Like many men, Grandfather Ilya didn't mind a drink, - and, because he had an easy access to spirits at his work, at some stage that problem had grown to grave proportions. In those days men were punished strictly for bingeing at work, up to a few days' imprisonment - so Ilya 'gulped in' 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, while he could 'contain his drink.' By the time he approached home, it had already got the better of him...

Grandmother and Grandfather got acquainted at the factory where they worked together at a chemical-galvanic laboratory. Grandfather was a galvaniser by profession. Having only completed seven forms at school, he could not always express himself accurately in writing or put his thoughts clearly on paper, - and that's where Grandmother came to his aid. After her editing, his thoughts took a legible and lucid form, and the Grandfather proposed many an innovation and improvement and received many an award for them at his factory.

However, time had chastened the Grandfather. Before the retirement he drank only on big holidays and only in a 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: he would work at home and in the garden non-stop, both in summer and in winter. He found himself something to do all the time: bringing firewood from the forest, fixing something, digging the garden, banking up potatoes, running in the mornings with his milk can to buy some milk... He told me stories made up by himself - about sixteen little girls who lived by themselves, without parents in a house in Metalworkers Street (I even 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 to those girls, a favourite of his was one about different little animals - from a rabbit to a squirrel - getting into their backpacks when they went to the forest to pick some mushrooms.

'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, whom he brought his leftover pancakes from the factory canteen at his work in the time of dearth, and the cat knew precisely at what time he came home 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 the accordion in the street, and knocked down with his snout a neighbour whom it disliked for some reason.

Grandfather sang to me his own version of the folk song *'In a Field there Stood a Birch Tree'* in which he included a mysterious derry: 'choovil na choovil, choovil na vil-vil-vil-vill' (we never found out what those words meant!), he took me with him to pick mushrooms in the forest and to fish, he made me a swing in the vegetable garden, together we went along the railway to get some spring water and to swim in the river. And he pulled me on a sledge in winter for my enjoyment. From Grandfather I learned, even before I started school, the names of various trees and plants. This constantly amazed my Western acquaintances ('how have you learned the names of all these trees?'). I also learned from him

which mushrooms are edible and which are not (Sonny was horrified when I brought some ceps - the best mushrooms in the world!- from the Dutch woods 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 course of time, more and more migrants from the countryside started to appear in our quarters, whom the Grandfather, born and bred city man, could not stand. It was their different way of life, their different conduct: constant nibbling sunflower seeds in the street, petty-bourgeois love of material things (often tasteless) and of 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 that 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 wouldn't let even a crumb go to waste. 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 spoilt Westerners throw out still 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 drafted him into the army, because he was a father of many children, but some merchant son had bought himself off out of service, 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 of 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 her high pitched voice in a very comical way). Once in childhood he also saw 'the saint' Nikolay Romanov whom he recalled

rather scornfully ('He looked rather bedraggled, 'like a plucked hen', in his plain military coat, sitting on a horse... You wouldn't even notice him next to our stately Governor!'). He was the only one of all my relatives who still remembered 'the old world' (at the time of the Revolution he was ten) - and he didn't have good remembrances of it....

For two years Ilya went to a pre-revolutionary grammar school and still remembered such prehistoric - to us - 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 (being just a teenager), took desperately dangerous trips to Ukraine: to exchange things for bread. He told us how he had travelled underneath train cars, and how once during such a trip of his he was whipped by *Batka* (father) Ataman Makhno³⁵.

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

Grandfather had never been a Communist. He had never joined the Party. On the other hand, almost all the family of his future wife were active members of the 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 at a metal plant when he was nine (!) years old and joined the party in 1917 at the age of 17. This fact happened to result in the Pozdnyakov family going through much hardship in the 1930s. Ilya and his brother Vladimir were arrested as 'enemies of the people.' Ilya by then had worked in Leningrad close to Sergey Mironovich Kirov. Tamarochka (we'll hear about her later on) had also been 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

³⁵ 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](#).

then). Great was her surprise when she was summoned to the Communist Party Committee even before she was 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 sometimes did occur. But human meanness has nothing to do with communism. And they all knew it, Tamarochka and my Grandmother, and their brothers.

The Grandmother's brother had forever remained a convinced communist. He settled in the Ural Mountains, eventually became the Honorary Citizen³⁶ of a small town there and sometimes came to us on a visit. I remember how he, already elderly and absolutely bald, remarkably sang in a young, strong voice. And how he laughingly recollected his prison years: 'Hoisted by our own petard!'

He had neither umbrage, nor hard feelings for Stalin. (I wonder, has anybody ever collected memoirs of ordinary people living at the time of the reforms of Peter the Great? I am sure, there were not less and maybe even more of 'the offended ones' then, than during Stalin's times!)

...The Pozdnyakovs shared the fate of many: the brothers were resettled to the Ural for twenty years, where they developed new lands and raised industries valourously, and the sisters found other jobs. Tamarochka had worked after that for over forty years at a regional sports committee as a secretary. Rather than her arrest, she liked to recollect how she had written a letter to Stalin, complaining of injustice, and Stalin sorted it all out, understood it all and 'gave her a permit for an all-expenses-paid trip to a resort'³⁷ (putyovka) on the Black Sea.' As for Sima,

³⁶ 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-fascist aggressors during the Great Patriotic war, had special merits in the field of industrial, economic and cultural construction.

³⁷ 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

her future husband helped her to get a new job. They had known each other from her old workplace. All their life he joked at her and her sister: 'Pretty Komsomol girls, in red kerchiefs!' And when Grandfather wanted to tease them about their having been accused of Trotskyism, he made a serious face and began like this: 'Lev Davydovich (Trotsky) was such a wise head... And what an orator, you know!' - and glanced at them cunningly out of the corner of his eye.

In 1941 Grandfather departed to the frontline. Before that he had asked my Grandmother to wait for him. The battles near Leningrad were so severe that he survived only by chance: he was wounded and carried to hospital. According to him, nobody else from his detachment survived. I remember him claim that the anaesthetic they had used for his operation 'cut my life short by seven years.' But if Grandfather had lived for seven more years, he would have lived through the dissolution of the Soviet Union, through the Gaidar-Chubais³⁸ robbery of our people, through all our today's life reality that is worth the pen of Gorky and Gogol³⁹... Knowing

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.

³⁸ 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 plaguing 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.

³⁹ 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.

his character, I can certainly say he wouldn't have kept quiet and just borne it all humbly. And that means he would have worn himself in fighting: maybe it is even better that he hadn't seen any of it?

Sima possessed the character traits, which were particularly valued in those times - very modest and clever ('Your Mother's a headful!' - Ilya always said about her proudly), calm, forbearing, hard-working. These Komsomol comrades were not callow youths when they got acquainted, and when they got married in 1944, Ilya was 37 and Sima - 30.

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

...When I was still a student, the Grandfather had a brain hemorrhage. He had worried too much about the Grandmother who had been taken to hospital for some time. But while with the Grandmother it appeared to be all right, the Grandfather was left paralysed. With great difficulty did we pull him out of the cellar, where it had all had 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 (it was already later Gorbachev's Perestroika with its disorganisation and burgeoning chaos). The doctors who were already 'restructured' (Perestroika - restructuring), arrived, looked at him and told us: 'Well, what do you expect? That's an old person you are having there...' - and left.

Grandfather still lived for almost two years, without getting up. His mind was generally clear, and it was very embarrassing for him that he caused us 'so much hassle' - to look after him. In a rare minute of blackout he once asked my Grandmother: 'Are you married?' In shocked surprise, she even had to sit down: 'Ilyusha, what are you asking me of? Certainly, I am!' 'It is a pity', - he said. 'Why?' 'I'd love to invite you to the cinema...'

Mum tried to set him up - with various medicines, massages, therapies, - and she nearly succeeded. If it were not for the attending GP, who once came to our house, found my Granddad sitting up in his bed and

exclaimed lightly in astonishment: 'Wow, Ilya Semenyuch! You are sitting up! And I thought you would never get up anymore...' It turned out to be suggestive, and after that Granddad didn't make any attempts to get out of bed anymore.

In November, 1990 my Grandfather died in his sleep. He had never been a Party member, he was critical of many things, but he was a deeply Soviet person by nature, and he died just shortly before our country disappeared from the map.

One can say he was lucky: without suspecting it himself, he left our world along with the whole great era... It was a tragic, but jubilant, heroic and glorious epoch, unlike 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 lost their honour, dignity, health and life itself, every day... An Epoch of Time Lost...

My name is Yevgenia. Yevgenia Kalashnikova. This surname was inherited from my other Grandmother, a Kuban Cossack woman. And my first name was given me in honour of my aunt, my Mother's cousin, my Granddad's niece, whom he had reared.

I was born in the year of the 50th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution, and not only myself, but also my parents did not know any other life except the Soviet one. As I have already said, at that time we did not yet realise the measure of our happiness, of our good luck. To be born in this country and in this particular period of history, if you compare it with the world history of mankind, was a far greater luck than to win some miserable million dollars or euros in a lottery. The life around us - happy, noble, 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 the USSR and Russia. 'Let Moscow remain the capital of the USSR, and let our city be the capital of Russia!' - I used to say to my relatives quite seriously. (It was much the same as, with children's egocentrism, I was perplexed when I met children younger than myself: why have them, if I had already been 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 says that I fell asleep next to the monument of the first printer, Ivan Fedorov⁴⁰ - and then slept almost until we got home. Our small city - green in summer and covered with snow in winter, with vast floods of the river in spring and sweet tasty apples in autumn - consisted of the ancient two-storeyed city centre, a couple of quarters with new high-rise apartment blocks - five to nine storeys (for us they were such a novelty that my friends and I sometimes went there - just to go up and down in an elevator!). And the rest consisted of two ancient working class quarters with one-storeyed small houses with iron-covered roofs, surrounded with gardens and vegetable plots. In some places there was no asphalt yet, and the roadway was paved with cobblestones. When I grew up a bit, it became a huge pleasure for me to tour round our quarter on a bicycle. I knew all the little dents on the road and imagined myself to be a courageous horseman on a fiery horse - a fighter for the people's interests...

My parents got divorced soon. Separated when I was two, officially divorced when I was four. Divorces back then were still rare enough, but 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, there was no stopping her. Sometimes it seems to me that it would have been better, if she, with her character, was born a man, and my father, inasmuch as I can picture his character based on the stories about him, a woman. Then, maybe, their union would have had a chance.

As a matter of fact, I hardly remember what my father was like (save his looks in the photos). Yet 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, Mum's younger brother, whom I even stopped calling Uncle when I was about five: he became simply my best friend. And looking at some fathers of my schoolmates, in those years I was sometimes just glad that my parents had been divorced! So, to feel sorry for me would have been not appropriate at all.

⁴⁰ 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).

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 head of a big factory department, she loved her work and earned good money (and the further, the better!), my daddy regularly paid the alimony and did not show up (I was even grateful to him he didn't. Not only because I would not know how to conduct myself with him and what to talk to him about, but also because he did not intrude upon the joys of my childhood. Nobody dragged me under compulsion to strange houses at week-ends, as it happens with children of divorced parents in the West, no matter whether children want it or not: because 'the father, too, has his rights.' I believe 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 am being cheeky...' - and only at this thought I guessed it was he. He came to wish me a happy birthday and he, too, felt awkward. Both of us, predictably, did not know what to say. He pushed some technical book into my hands: '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 an A pupil in all the subjects, except for PE (I did not take after my dad: he was a regional champion in sprint in his younger days!) 'Well, and what's your character like?' - he asked. I shrugged my shoulders. How can I possibly briefly describe my own character to a stranger?

'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...'

Now I have 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 Cossack grandmother received a nickname from me, 'Stenka' (the Russian for '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, don't you beat little Zhenya!' Then the whole Mum's Cossack family began to call her that name: 'Zhenya, go, Grandma Stenka has come for a visit!' And for me it was each time a bit awkward: from Mum I heard a couple of reprobative stories about that 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 foist on me a rabbit for dinner instead of a chicken, knowing I do not eat rabbit meat!'... If she really was that type of a person, why did I have to keep meeting her? 'It is necessary, Zhenia, it is necessary!' - sighed my relatives and sent me out to see her.

Grandmother Stenka strongly smelt of 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 at 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 stood in awe of her, despite the fact that she was small and thin. The Georgian husband laughed behind her back: 'You know how I've become the real boss in the house? I've never contradicted her, but then I've always done everything my own way! And that's how I've become the real boss in the house...' 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 great-grandfather Vakhtang... Their Georgian daughter-in-law said that when grandma Nastya went to them for a visit, their dog sensed her from the other end of the village, howled and hid!

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) - a tall as a telegraph pole, thin Ukrainian - drove us around the neighbourhood in his white Volga car, to the delight of all my street friends. He too was a frontline soldier - a wartime driver - and he brought from the war a couple of beautiful Hungarian handmade embroideries (which, according to Mum, Grandmother Stenka used to pass as her own needlework at some contest. Even if it were so, did it do anybody harm?) and a ridiculous phrase-book, that taught our soldiers to give refined compliments to Hungarian girls. By the way, it was published by Hungarians themselves, rather than the Soviet command! At home we laughed heartily, 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 to the floor in a funny manner, 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 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! They simply doted on him). As regards the ethnic question, people were innocent and pure: only personal qualities of anyone counted for them. 'Izya, so what's your nationality, a Tatar?' - asked one of Mum's classmates her other classmate, Israel by name, naively. 'I am a Jew, silly!' '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? Let me have a look at it, will you? I have never seen it!'

Once Grandmother and 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 I. 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 Mum.... And Mum did not want any more children. 'Isn't it good indeed: you don't have to share anything with anybody!.' I eventually got used to this idea myself. And I became quite an egoist, like many in my generation...

Soon Grandfather Petro got ill and died, the car was sold, and Grandmother could not come to me anymore. Not that it was absolutely impossible: though she lived quite a long 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 had not seen her (nor Petrusha) - till I waste twenty-seven...

I try to recollect at least something of how we had lived on the eve of the divorce of my parents - but nothing emerges in my memory, except for some latent feeling of anxiety. I remember only that I was taken 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, my stomach started to turn when the tram only approached it. And when Mum had eventually divorced my father 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 - a feeling of being at home!! It is just more than the words can tell. It is such a thing, that even memories of it make you happy - no matter how big your actual house is and what the furnishings there are like...

I do not remember any parental quarrels or wranglings. Only from my grandmother Sima I heard that once Mother came home with a black eye and cried bitterly, but when Grandmother began to soothe her, she said proudly: 'I cry because I feel so sorry for Gagarin!' On that day our first cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin died in a plane crash...

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

Grandmother's sister, Tamarochka was another person in our household, a visiting member of the family. 'Tamara the Medic', as I called her, after Agniya Barto's children's verse 'Me and Tam are thick as peas, we are medics, orderlies.' Tamarochka and Shurek were my best friends. I will tell more about Shurek later, and now some words about Tamarochka.

Tamarochka was quite an eccentric woman - and had 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 an amateur 'restoration' of an old icon which she had at her place: 'I freshened up that icon a bit!' - she told us, showing the brightly painted Holy Mary: 'It became far too faded!'

I always waited with impatience for the weekends: on both Saturdays and Sundays Tamarochka stayed at our place almost all day long. When she was on her annual leave from work, 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 Mum's furniture still stood (there was simply no place to put it in Grandma's house after Mum's divorce). In the backyard, Tamarochka had old cherry- and plum-trees and her old neighbour Tonya - in a separate house (she and Tamarochka had a common backyard). Tamarochka could bake exquisitely 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 knick-knacks which weren't really of any use, but were so great for children to play with: on Saturdays she liked to shop for some amusing souvenirs with marked-down prices. And another thing we liked to do together was walk about the block, observing different cars passing by (trying to guess what colour the next one would be!) and classing chimneys of the houses we passed by by their shape (in our classification, there were about twenty different kinds: from 'candle end in the wind' to my favourite 'old Boyar house'). We also loved to go for rides about the town on trams. The tram ticket cost just three kopecks (the price of a glass of sparkling water with syrup from an automatic machine - very tasty, burning your tongue, beyond comparison with some soap-tasting Coca Cola!) And with that ticket we could go for a ride in circles, on the same tram all 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, a wooden house in Zarechye (over the river), to which the tram passed so close, that it almost touched its fence, and made a full circle around it! I wondered a lot what it was like for people to live in that house. In our quarter there was also another 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... I wondered if it was scary to be there at night. Then one day Mum told me that before the war a girl had lived there, by a strange name of Rufa, for whom once my grandfather had a fancy...

Tamarochka also took me to the amusement park. The park was far away, and I went there not every week. Each visit there was a kind of holiday. To get me ready for this visit, they put huge stiff bows on my head, 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 was awfully afraid of heights, just like my father. You could also drive around on hired little pedal cars, which I loved tremendously. Cheerful music played there the whole day, children ran with balloons, and their enthusiastic squeals 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 as well - on her days off and sometimes in the evenings after work when she went there with her colleagues on a VPW-Voluntary People's Watch⁴¹. 'Druzhinniks' (combatants), as they were called using the old Russian word, walked usually in threes, slowly, as if on a promenade, with red bands around their arms. They were armed with a whistle to call for militia - in case of need. Their task was to keep good order and prevent any hooliganism. But there was nothing to prevent, really. For all the time I was on this watch with Mum I remember only one occasion, when their intervention was required: it was with a drunk

⁴¹ 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 militia 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.

citizen who has sprawled asleep on a lawn. That was serious for those times, a 'state of emergency'! And there was also a district militiaman in our everyday life, whom we all knew by name and patronymic and who also knew everybody 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 your conduct' 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 a thing? Back then, there were neither mass riots yet, nor hooliganism, nor such criminality as today. The sight seemed to me so ridiculous that I simply choked 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, still unaware of the commotion he had caused.

But there was nothing to laugh at... 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, but at least that should have given me food for thought. It appears in order 'to return to the civilised world', to move on to the 'new thinking' and to adopt 'universal human values', it was necessary to arm militiamen with batons in the first place. Nice 'universal values' they are, no doubt about it...

... Just like my Grandfather, Tamarochka 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 the younger sister of a sensible and 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 stayed at the cinema after the end of the film for the following performance and fought with Swedes (Swedes at that

time temporarily became my invented enemy No1, thanks to the Latvian film 'Servants of the Devil on the Devil's Mill')⁴².

Of course, Tamarochka wasn't a widow at all. She did not have a family. In youth they called her 'Tamara -The Trendy' in her street, and, unlike her sister Sima, she had a retinue of boyfriends - in the old, 'non-physical' sense of the word. Especially military were charmed by her. And exactly for this reason she never got married: to marry a military man would mean having to move along with him about the country, and her mother had contracted cancer... So Tamarochka, who by then was the only one of her children still living with her mother, stayed to look after her....

Some picture old spinsters are some kind of evil, frustrated creatures, angry with life, who do not know how to deal with children. Those who do so have never met our Tamarochka. 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 Mum and Shurek to be her children, and me to be her granddaughter. 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. Tamarochka 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 Kulich⁴³. 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

⁴² 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 were 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.

⁴³ 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.

of hard-boiled eggs. I liked two things at Easter: Paskha - white, sweet cheesecakes with raisins (you could eat it only once a year), and that on this day, apparently, you could kiss anybody: with words 'Christ is risen!' (I imagined myself kissing with these words Gojko Mitic⁴⁴ who was kidnapped from the Earth to join the crew of my spaceship!). You had to reply, 'He is risen indeed!' Who was this Christ and why he was risen I knew but vaguely. Probably it was the fellow who was painted in an old icon hanging in the corner of our house (actually, in this icon it wasn't he, but St. Nicholas).

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

To go to her place of work was immensely interesting: and not just because it was possible to meet any local sports celebrity there without ceremony, but also because it was the only place where I could use a 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 at. Tamarochka spent forty-five years at her typewriter...

Tamarochka got us tickets for the velodrome. From time immemorial cycling used to be for our city what football is for Manchester. In this velodrome my grandfather and grandmother spent all the weekends of their young years. My mum and Shurek spent all their childhood and youth there. And I had practically grown up there, too. Though none of us was a cyclist (only Shurek used to cycle on a highway in summer - for pleasure). We were fans!

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

⁴⁴ 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.

Finals usually began towards evening on Sunday. My most beloved part of the programme was sprint. I remember as if it was yesterday, the sprinters frozen in their places on the track-bend, to the reverent silence of the spectators. Light summer evening breeze blows over our heads, cooling the skin. The sprinters are still standing on their marks, their outlined muscles rippling under the suntanned skin of their calves. Then finally, one of them loses nerve and off he darts... I remember the ring of the bell, announcing the last circuit (in everyday life this very bell lay behind the door in Tamarochka's office!). Sprinters showed such miracles of reckless bravery at 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.

Tamarochka and Mum knew all our champions personally. Tamarochka and I could easily pass under the tribunes into dark boxes. And the local cyclo-celebrity Uncle Vova with an Estonian surname - blond and ruddy-skinned with sunburn, to my pride, introduced me to everybody as his 'fiancee.' 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 Tamarochka tenderly called 'Omarik.' Cyclists, especially those who compete at velodrome tracks, up to this day seem to me very special people.

In childhood I also enjoyed going to... the polyclinic. Sister Lidochka was my favourite community nurse. 'I'll go have a chat with the doctors!' - I used to say, in an important tone, getting ready to go there. In general, as a child I talked to strangers with pleasure. For example, in a queue in the bathhouse, where we went for a wash because our house didn't have a bathroom. (Washing in a bathhouse is something absolutely different from the house facility bathroom. You come out of doors steamed up literally to the bone and you sleep so well afterwards! The only thing I found awfully unpleasant about the bathhouse was to come out of the bathing-room into the locker-room that was so mercilessly cold!)

Once I quite embarrassed Mum when I started to retell to women in the bathhouse queue one of the dreams she saw: 'Mum was running along the street, and some Georgians pursued her, and she was crying as loud as she

could: Misha! Nozhkin!' The women took my story in good faith and for a long time skewed disapprovingly at Mum.

For a Soviet child to speak to strangers did not in itself import any danger. There was no need of guards 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 within my recollections, neither with me, nor with any of my acquaintances. Under Mum's supervision I even 'chatted up Georgians' in the market (that's how I described it myself, but in fact, it was just an ordinary childish talk with them on my part). Most people were kind, though sometimes a bit grumpy: they often admonished you and gave you advice in the street, without even knowing you - up to what would be better for you to wear. Yet they did not do it maliciously, but because they cared about others. They were not indifferent.

Social control was very strongly developed, 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, but hurried to help. We were taught: do not just pass by! If a hooligan attacked you - offer 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 it is often 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 your rescue, if something happens. (Therefore I can never understand or like the heroes of American films - heroes who always 'play a lone hand.' 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 of being reconciled with it!

We, pre-school children, ran in the streets in very short dresses from under which panties sometimes flashed. Nobody paid any attention to it. It did not 'excite' anyone, nobody considered it to be 'sexy.' Even conversations with children about 'fiances' and 'fiancees' in our environment were considered to be something smacking of backward

feudalism. 'Village people!' - one would say to those who spoke to children of 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, e.g. '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 a ballet to see 'Swan Lake.' The ballet caught my imagination, and all the summer long my friends and I played 'Swan Lake' in the street (from my description of it): we ran around the quarter, swinging hands like 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 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 the GDR, Sonja Morgenstern⁴⁵ (I liked her to such degree that for a long time I seriously demanded from Mum to officially change my name to Sonya!). And, of course, all of us loved our Irochka Rodnina⁴⁶ 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, was watched on TV by whole families. I remember matches of our guys with the Canadian professionals - the long-haired player called Phil Esposito, how the Canadians often started fights

⁴⁵ Sonja Morgenstern (born 1955) is a [German figure skater](#) and figure skating [coach](#).

⁴⁶ 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](#).

on ice and the indignant voice of Nikolay Ozerov⁴⁷: ‘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 skates: 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 made me a snow slide in winter near our house and poured it with water, and then he and I, together with all the neighbourhood's children, went for a slide on it, and slid down at a speed of 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 Tamarochka'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 entire book, of course: it was far too thick for a four-year old, but nevertheless, the fact remains. Now I see a deep symbolism in it...

I learned to read from toy bricks with letters, and my family did not yet know that I already could read, when one day Grandmother suddenly heard me sobbing from under the table.

In panic she looked 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 with my tears.

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

When I was three, I went to a kindergarden, but not for long. The kindergarden belonged to Mum's factory, it was far from our house. Mum brought me there on her way to work and picked me up after work. I had to get up awfully early. Lingering in the entrance hall, I did not want to

⁴⁷ 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.

let 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 (at kindergardens there were three hot meals a day, included in monthly payments for it. The amount of the payment depended on the salary of a parent. Mum paid twelve roubles for me (out of her salary of one hundred and forty roubles). I was in the dumps because other children there were what I called 'backward': I simply did not understand what was so 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 for me that teachers tried to teach me what I already knew without them. As well as the fact that after lunch we had to have a midday nap - 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, paying no 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 was the day when there was my favourite pudding with hot kissel⁴⁸ for supper, and it was precisely on that day that Mum came early from work to collect me, and I had to go home without having eaten it up...

Since I started attending the kindergarden I began to contract the usual children's illnesses. I remember the first time I was raving with fever. I distinctly understood that I was talking nonsense, but my tongue did not obey me, as if it spoke by itself. I remember even what I was saying then: 'Mum, was the Pencil for the Frost?' - and my own thoughts: 'Oh, what kind of rubbish am I saying?!' The Pencil was one of the heroes of a children's magazine *Cheerful Pictures* that I liked very much.

⁴⁸ Kissel or kisel - is a jelly like [fruit soup](#), popular as a dessert in [Eastern](#) and [Northern Europe](#).

Mum's big bed in the daytime served as a place to lay numerous bundles of old clothes and pieces of material from which Grandma from time to time sewed something new. When we made the bed ready for sleeping, we had to remove all of them from it and put them away. 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 the heap and imagined I suffered from thirst in a besieged fortress.... At that time my imagination was captured by Soviet Easterns, so I tried hard to braid my still very thin hair into many, many plaits and wished to be called Zulphia⁴⁹.

While attending kindergarden I fell ill so often that Grandpa felt sorry for me and finally said to Grandma: 'Listen, Mother, we are together at home all day long. Let Nadya (Mum) take Zhenka away from that nursery school for good, the child has had enough.' Grandma tried to tell him that a nursery school was a place where I could do something useful. 'Nonsense!' - Grandfather was, as usual, categorical. - 'What can she learn there? That 'Miron is a snotty dumbhead'? (It was one of teasing songs I picked up from other kids). I did not have to go there anymore, and I was very glad about that. At present I feel remorse that I was too much of an individualist to fit in the collective - while all my life I had always prized being part of a good, steady, healthy collective! But friends of my own age appeared in my life a bit later.

The summer of 1972 was terribly hot. I do not remember any such summer either before or after that year. 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, rather than refreshing one. There was drought, on the outskirts of our city the woods were on fire. One day new neighbours arrived at a nearby house in our street. They had a daughter - my namesake, two years older than me, a dark-complexioned girl with a stern face, deep voice and unusual, slanting 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 I began to socialize with other children. She soon gathered around her all the little girls of our neighbourhood. 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

⁴⁹ Reference to the 1960s popular Soviet adventure film *White Sun of the Desert*. Zulphia is a cameo role in it.

games and taught 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. Quarrels between us became quite a usual thing. Once Zhenya left us for a month (she went on holidays to her native village), and in her absence two other girls, Marusya and Lyusya, and I played together perfectly well without her and never quarrelled with each other. Not even once! There was such harmony between us that I involuntarily recalled how we had 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 lightning: 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 had not noticed that before. We decided unanimously not to play with Zhenya anymore, and that the one who would break our joint decision, would be considered a traitor. I had never regretted that 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, but we usually forgave her, after a little scolding. But in the person of Zhenya I had the first ever enemy in my life... It did not really frighten me. At least, since that time I had never allowed anyone to manipulate me!

...A couple of years later, when all of us began to go to school, I found by accident an old homework book of Zhenya's with grades, lying about in our vegetable plot. Our ringleader and street authority had continuously had C's in the Russian Language! And she finally and definitively ceased to be any authority for me, just miserable and ridiculous in her attempts to show off. I discovered that a leader in the street can be a C-grade pupil at school! So, there is nothing to be surprised about, just look at those who now rule our country and have declared themselves to be our 'elite'! So many C-graders! But all of them - like Zhenya - with so much aplomb. And

trying to manipulate us, too. Aren't we living in such a beastly way now, because we have not cut them down to size in due time?!

...The generation of my Grandmother and Grandfather is amazing. All the difficulties that had fallen to their lot were accepted by them with good grace, as a part of life. They never whined over failures nor blamed anybody for them. And they never asked themselves the question whether they would like to do something or not: if it had to be done, it had to be done. 'You don't know how - we'll teach you, you don't want to - we'll force you; you mustn't discredit the team!' 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 'You mustn't - but if you really want to, what the hell!', 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 only I could have swapped places in time with some speculator or conman, subjected to repressions back in the 1930s! They would become 'respected businessmen' in our time, maybe even 'oligarchs', and I would get the opportunity to live an unselfish life!

How can I explain it? No charity work will ever replace it. Charity is humiliating already as it is (O'Henry expressed it very aptly through one of his characters, Soapy⁵⁰), besides, it serves not so much as to help those who need help, as to calm the conscience of those who are engaged in it. And I did love it to live in the world of selfless collectivism, where, to put it in Mayakovsky's words, 'A '1' is nonsense. A '1' is zero!' Where, if a newspaper writes about any wrong deed or ill, each one feels responsible, and 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 communism - to the point of fully blocking any intellectual ability to ask questions on the subject, - I remember well that such a world is possible... I have lived in it only a little bit. But it was such

⁵⁰ '...to one of Soapy's proud spirit the gifts of charity are encumbered. If not in coin you must pay in humiliation of spirit for every benefit received at the hands of philanthropy. If not in coin you must pay in humiliation of spirit for every benefit at the hands of philanthropy.'

a bright, humanly beautiful world that no artificial neon lights of Coca-Cola advertising would ever be able to eclipse it. I am a human being, not a ruminant or rodent. And I want to live for people, not for dragging nuts into my own nest!

...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! It was actually an unusually quiet today: a stupid company, this! We worked for the Dutch market, but were closed for the Irish holidays, and on the Dutch national holidays were open. Today was just one of them - Queen's Day. Well, who in his senses would call us from Holland on such a day? Clients did not know that they were calling abroad. They dialled a local number - and were unpleasantly surprised, when, for example, on March the 17th⁵¹ the answering machine informed them that the line was closed 'on account of the national holiday!'

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

That's the way I was brought up. Whatever I do in life, I always think how my actions will affect others in the first place. Since childhood it has become such an automatic thing for me, 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, try to count up in advance the sum I will be paying, and find the correct amount so that I will not need the change. That's done in order not to delay others. And nothing irritates me more than not taking into consideration other people! Sometimes I feel as if in Ireland people go to the post-office, to shops and banks just to have a chat with the employees. To share news and gossip. More and more

⁵¹ St. Patrick's Day, national holiday in Ireland

people line up behind them, and all of them have business to attend to, but they just calmly continue their cheerful 'blah-blah' for about ten minutes - about the weather, and how things are with old Mary Doherty who has arthritis, and whether it is a right time to open a new savings account now, or it is better to wait a bit. In Russia people would have long voiced their reprimand, and, probably, not in the politest of ways ('hurry up, lady, you are not the only one here!'), but in Ireland it is unacceptable. Here you cannot 'upset' a person by a reprimand, no matter how they behave, as well as refuse categorically (it is better to promise and then make nothing of it happen). Is that what is called 'cultural differences?'

But the thing is that this quality - the ability to think of others first - appears to be moribund in our country too. Because it was a Soviet human value in the first place.

After I had been away from home for five years and returned to the new Russia that had adopted the so-called 'universal values', I was deeply shocked by a scene in a 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 has happened to our people? Where have all our brave, ubiquitous Grandmothers - keepers of public order - gone?

Myself, I was not going to be silent. When some impudent bloke 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! What was there in it to be as timid as rabbits?

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

I grabbed the phone.

- Shall we have lunch together? - it was my colleague Koen, a short, almost a head lower than me, curly-haired 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 earnestly. - 'Call me Seamus!'). He, too, was divorced. He hardly ever talked about his former wife (and I, of course, did not inquire), but in his tone of voice you could feel some sarcastic bitterness. And he was a very emotional person - just a volcano of passion! If something or someone were not to his liking, all feathers would fly. The Flemish are completely different from the Dutch, though they allegedly speak the same language. They have this sparkly sense of humour. I had felt it before, watching Flemish films. Words fail to describe this sense of humour: it is too refined. I also loved to listen to the Flemish speech with its soft pleasant accent (Mum once told me that the Dutch language in the mouth of the Dutch themselves sounded as if a person is constantly chewing on a raw cabbage leaf). They use pure Dutch words where the Dutch have long got accustomed to using English words instead, sprinkled with occasional French words which, I feel, the Flemish use not for the sake of show-off ('look, I can speak French!'), but when they wish to express certain attitudes to a subject discussed. I often regretted that I learned the Dutch language in Twente, rather than Limburg. The Dutch often took me for a Belgian because of my accent, but the Belgians, of course, could hear from any distance that I wasn't their kin.

Once Koen and I were on duty at the office on Saturday. We were called by a rather annoyed Dutch client. In fact, no happy clients had ever phoned us, but I noticed that Dutch clients were more impatient on the phone and rougher than Belgians in expressing discontent.

When I started to speak to him, he interrupted me in a vexed manner:

- Mevrouw⁵², do you have only Belgians working there? I have just spoken to a Belgian, and now I have you...

- Excuse me, mijnheer⁵³, but I am not Belgian. I am Russian.

-...

⁵² Madam (Dutch)

⁵³ Sir (Dutch)

There was intense silence at the other end of the telephone; and then the client snapped:

- 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)⁵⁴ - Koen humourously used to write in his e-mails 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 baked potatoes. Plain. Koen took potatoes 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 dreamt of taking his elderly mother to Dublin. Only with the salary we were paid, 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 mother had their own house, but his mother, naturally, did not wish to sell it and 'burn her bridges.' Such things you do only when you are young, and even Koen himself was six years older than I. Looking back now at how I ended up in Holland, I am not sure I would dare to repeat this experience at a 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 weeks. A separate canteen wasn't provided in our office. In the smoking-room it was stuffy, and at least twenty people or more were 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,

⁵⁴ Play on words: groetjes -little greetings, groentjes- little vegetables (Dutch)

here very few people knew each other. There was a constant flow of personnel in this office.

- No, of course, not, total hush. 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?' Look, 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 'flung' into the phone work on the third day of training and told I would 'learn everything myself, in the process of working.' Well, that isn't the way to do things, is it? 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 at 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?...

We pictured a stripper dressed as a policeman, red skinned with artificial suntan (the Irish are like Mum: 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?'⁵⁵, she was delighted as if I were her compatriot. She came to Ireland following her Irish boyfriend. Before that they had lived in

⁵⁵ How are you, darling? (Papiamento)

Germany for a long time, where Germans took him for a local and 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 took notice of one of the girls working at a local rural pizzeria, who was obviously not Irish. Back then there were so few immigrants in the depth of the country, that it was simply impossible not to notice one.

- 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 widened, and she cried 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: their reasons don't appeal to me much. (To all rules there are exceptions, but in this case they are so rare that they're not worth attention). 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. I found it hard to explain to them, that when people of the ruined USSR meet a compatriot abroad, one way or another, sooner or later, they start talking about politics and inevitably start engaging in personalities over hot topics, especially if their political views do not coincide. And that I do not find any pleasure in socializing with conmen and crooks hiding from a mafia; with wives of foreigners who begin every phrase with the words 'and my husband..', puffed out with importance over 'their achievement', as though by themselves, without that foreign husband, they were not human beings at all; with deserters, ready to give out any secret and cast any slander on their own country, if only that would provide for them their treasured residence permit (there was a man of that ilk in Dublin - a former Soviet Navy officer). I feel like three Soviet warriors of World War II from Sergey Mikhalkov's verse *Three*

Comrades, who, when caught by the Nazis, were tortured to death, but refused to talk to the enemies⁵⁶:

‘The third comrade couldn’t endure it,
The third one unlocked his tongue.
‘There’s nothing for us to talk about’ -
He said before being hung.’

Before death or not, but there was really nothing for us to talk about. I noticed that in ‘our’ emigrant circles, meeting a new person, people first of all reckoned whether their new acquaintance could be of any benefit to them. The benefit might be understood differently by each of them: from a 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 a desire to set up a ‘joint business venture for the delivery to Holland of our girls of loose morality’, as was offered to me 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 expect, their passionate desire to communicate with you (which I didn’t have from the start), quickly disappears. And thank God, to be honest.

I did not plan to emigrate at all. And when I married Sonny, marriages to foreigners were still, if not a taboo, then at least a phenomenon rather unwelcome. *‘I wouldn’t say it was actually a heroic deed, but there was definitely something heroic about it.’*⁵⁷ In my time, people shunned foreigners like the plague. Probably only very few people remember it now, but ‘to marry a foreigner’ became a status symbol among our women only four years after my romantic acquaintance with Sonny. Today it has become a status symbol, so that they shamelessly offer themselves ‘to the highest bidder’ in large numbers. Try to say to these women that you got married not just for love, but also because you wanted to build a better life with your spouse in his native land, oppressed by colonialism, that you do not want to live in the West, and you weren’t in the slightest interested if your husband had any real estate or cars - and they will have a short circuit in their brains. Their brains will start smoking from overstrain.

⁵⁶ Sergey Mikhalkov (1913-2009) was a popular [Soviet](#) and [Russian author](#) of children’s books and satirical [fables](#).

⁵⁷ ‘That very Munchausen’, play by Grigory Gorin

I also just wanted to see the world. But while I was away, ‘the enemies burnt my house to ashes’⁵⁸, and it appeared there was just nowhere to come back to....

At the office of my new employer there reigned complete chaos. I changed my job not so much because they paid one thousand pounds a year more, but mainly because they promised to make real technical support specialists out of us linguists. But there was not a chance... People came to work here and left at such speed that Abebe Bikila⁵⁹ himself would envy them. Because of such a flow of personnel the company did not have time to train new workers properly for work on the phone, to familiarise them as they should with products and so forth. Instead of that newcomers were flung on the phone lines as on the enemies’ machine-gun. There weren’t many of those whose mentality would sustain such a refined psychological attack, when, for eight hours a day five days a week, unfamiliar people angrily accused you on the phone of complete incompetence, and you didn’t even have the right to tell them what was actually going on! The personnel left - just for that 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 again forced to hire new personnel, who did not have even those few skills that the ‘escapees’ barely managed to acquire with their own effort. And all of this was repeated over and over again! Hey, where are those who had harped in the days of perestroika on ‘the efficiency of private companies?!’ Little did we know....

I managed to stay there a month or two. But my patience was overtaxed, too. Koen was agreeable, but not enough so to suffer for the sake of him the fact that my stomach began to ache badly every morning,

⁵⁸ Reference to a 1945 Soviet war song (lyrics by M. Blanter). It begins with the words: ‘The Nazis burnt his house to ashes,/ they murdered all his family there./ Where shall the soldier home from battle,/ Go now, to whom his sorrow bear?’.

⁵⁹ 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.

just at the sight of our office building. And anyway, I can see him any time in my off-hours. After all, we lived in the same city...

It was Friday, and on Monday I intended to phone to the office and say I was ill. 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 - at the call centre of an equally well-known airline company... I could hardly wait for the end of the working day!

Koen was already waiting for me at the 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. On the bus I usually 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 took front seats, from where we had a wonderful view of the surroundings.

The bus pulled off. We were looking out of the window at how people were going home from work. Many headed for pubs straight from work. Irish women in strict business suits leaving their work places habitually changed their high-heeled shoes for dirty trainers and splotched in them along the streets walking in a manner rather unpleasant to look at, faintly resembling sports walking - with elbows going in large circles. There were plenty of pretty and even beautiful Irish women, however, they were often foul-mouthed. I remember how deeply shocked I was the first time I heard 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, in contrast to which her neck looked 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 any words, except for the variations of the 'f****' word. And she did not seem to be swearing at that - just gently talking to her boy-friend (who was a lot more restrained in his expressions). And when I saw Irish women easily drinking five to seven pints in one evening... (I could never drink more than two, and if I did, I'd probably be sick!). The Irish women are hard-working, independent, strong and wouldn't stand it if anybody (especially the Irish men!) tries to take them for a ride. But at the same time, you couldn't expect from young Irish ladies abundance of

femininity. It is interesting how our girls manage to preserve it, despite the post-perestroika vulgarity, artificially cultivated in them, and the reputation of Russian women widely known from pre-revolutionary times: 'A run-away horse she will master, / Walk straight to a hut that's aflame'⁶⁰

I noticed that Koen, too, looked at them through the bus window and laughed.

- Yes... Just like the Amazons, aren't they? I say, had you known many Irish people before you arrived here?

- None at all, Koen. I only had pen friends. I started to get acquainted with them personally when already here - and during my first month in Ireland I got an impression that people here are either improbably eccentric, or just a little bit crazy!

- Why? Well, well, tell me more about it, it's interesting!

- Oh, go along with you, Koen! You will laugh!

- Have I ever laughed at you? I laugh only at the cheese-heads! That's my cheval de bataille.

- Well, OK then.... Just don't complain afterwards, because I have warned you! For example, the first of my pen pals was a former monk, schoolmaster and Christian Brother who had spent almost 40 years with his church and then somehow got an inkling that that life was not for him, and left it for the worldly life. But, of course, he still smelt of church being miles away from you! The second one was in his fifties, still living with his mum, who 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' - I thought when I first heard his story. But during our next meeting he hinted that he was going again on one of his dangerous expeditions for the delivery of blankets to the long-suffering redskin brothers, that he didn't know, whether he would return from there alive, and that he would like to experience a little bit of female

⁶⁰ 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 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. N. Nekrasov's works are studied in Russian schools. Translated into English by Juliet M. Soskice.

tenderness before his departure, for the first time in his life.... I found it immensely hard to keep a straight face and not roar with laughter! Then there was a boozier from Cork with a romantic name Pierce who assured me that a local lady millionaire had been crazy about him and wished to marry him, but he had stoically resisted her temptations. He presented me with an Irish brooch worth five pounds, and then got soused in a pub to such a degree that he did not have any money left for his 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 that he was an important person in his village. When I informed him that I had arrived in Ireland and sent him my phone number, he did not even bother to phone me, but simply sent me a card: 'I am coming for you Saturday!' I was indignant: what if I had some other plans, and he had not even asked me at all if I was free! So I deliberately went out for the whole day on Saturday. The poor thing dragged along such a distance in his pickup truck and ended up empty-handed!

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

- Oh, those Irish men, mysterious and misunderstood! - 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 'tangible' first!). And how about a farmer who ingenuously says to you he's 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 had just run away, and who self-confidently inquired, if you would like to take her place while it was still vacant? 'Why are you vegetating there, in that Dublin? What's in there for you? You know how nice it is over here!'... And how about a bank clerk without any formal education, who was a big goof when slightly younger, constantly truanting school, until finally his father, who had been fed up with it, took him by the hand and led him to an acquaintance of his in a bank: 'Enough of your stupidities, son. That's where you will now work!' And that's how his career began! Or a red-skinned gardener from Galway, suffering from burns he'd received in a suntan salon, who sincerely believed that that red colour of skin would make him more attractive - offering you his hand, along with his greenhouse, on the first date? There was also a student - named Brendan, I think... I always thought the Irish were talkative people by nature, but that one was silent all the evening, as silent as a guerrilla under interrogation. I thought: well, I'll start speaking myself and hopefully, draw him out, 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 mumbled to himself from time to time: 'Yes, that's right: yes, that's right.' I thought my company was not to his liking, but he was shy to tell me directly about it, and I finally decided to say goodbye. And then he suddenly opened his mouth and blurted out: 'Maybe we could go to my place and have some coffee?' My jaw just drooped at those words... There were also two Englishmen: one was as vapid as unsalted fish, persistently calling the Irish village of Avoca 'Ballykissangel'⁶¹, and the other, a sales manager for Eastern Europe, who considered himself to be a huge expert on Russia, without knowing a word of Russian.

I remember the story of his first trip beyond our two capitals - I think, it was to Chelyabinsk. It was late November. Our 'expert' has gone there in his British winter clothes. He arrives to find out that it is -23 C in Chelyabinsk... Nobody sees him in at the station, nobody speaks English and not a single public phone box in the vicinity! 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

⁶¹ Avoca - a village in county Wicklow where BBC has filmed its soap opera 'Ballykissangel'

hotel and was dying for a bite to eat. He went to a restaurant. At the restaurant there was just only a waitress counting eggs with some unknown purpose. With a bored face. He waited and waited for her to serve on him - but received zero attention. After about ten minutes he couldn't take it anymore. With a phrase book in his hands, he explained at an elementary level that he would like something to eat. The woman looked at him like the Snow Queen: 'We are closed!' He returned back to Moscow barely alive, with tonsillitis. It looked as if he calmed down for a while. But then he started shouting again: 'You had a military dictatorship before! But now at last you have individual freedoms!' Well, once this 'free individual' 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 the sales of his company's mobile phones in Moscow...

It appears the granny was idealistic - a vestige of the times of 'military dictatorship.' If I were her, I would have left this dung to lie in that snow pile - in the hope 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 at 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, what we call 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 Mum about all of them: why are they like that? Are there any normal people at all? And Mum told me one thing about which I had never thought before. 'Well, 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 tried 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 was thrown out of the house by his own friend after that friend had handed over to him 20,000 pounds and Frank lost it all on the stock exchange....

There was a seller of car paints in Cavan called Seamus - cheerful, with an easy temper, resembling Adriano Celentano⁶², 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 were a mixed pair: he was 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 all the men were wearing kilts, but all the women accompanying them were wearing 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, suddenly started to chant in chorus: '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 colourfully related to me how he was a rugby star of a local school in his youth, and I mistrustfully glanced at his thin legs even though they were complemented 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 standards, 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

⁶² Adriano Celentano is an [Italian singer](#), [songwriter](#), [comedian](#), [actor](#), [film director](#) and [TV host](#). His music was incredibly popular in the 1970's Soviet Union.

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 took 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 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 of such defective self-esteem as I had been after my seven-year-long marriage to my Latin macho, your words were simply necessary...

But if I tell about all of this to Koen, he could draw wrong conclusions about me. As Anita drew them once, hastily, still not knowing any real life outside of books. 'There are always some men calling you' - she hemmed disapprovingly, hinting that in my position of a mother of a sick child it was indiscreet and frivolous. But the child was still not with me, despite all my diligence, and I did not know precisely when she would finally be... And the days-off impended regularly, and every time by Friday night, when there was finally nothing to do, melancholy came over me in a mighty wave, so I just felt like sobbing 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 in 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 then like hailstones, without a stop. Naturally, I could not allow myself such behaviour living in the same house with strangers. And that was why, whenever possible, I ran away from them for 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, Evguenia? How could you?'... 'I just could! I could. Will you begin lecturing me now or after the end of the duty?'

Yes, before that time I had not understood Zhenka Komelkova⁶³. Now I do.

I was very lucky that none of my penfriends 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 the so-called 'pan-European progress'... But honestly, I was taking risks, meeting all those 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 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, even though in such a marvellous country.

I felt lonely from realising my huge responsibility for the future of my sick daughter, the responsibility I could not share with anybody. Because nobody really cared about us. 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, would need her now? All of this cannot be explained to a person, who hasn't been in a similar situation themselves. And I also understood for 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 select food in a supermarket, I 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!' - a classmate who wasn't famous for her good behaviour said to me contemptuously, when I was about eighteen... Still, I

⁶³ Zhenka Komelkova - one of the main characters from the Soviet book and film *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* (1972).

gradually ceased to be afraid of people and after a long while at last was becoming myself. Like I was in my pre-school years, still in the Soviet period. Karlsson⁶⁴ 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 anew how to communicate and simultaneously learned a lot new to me about human nature. Sonny reiterated 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 again: maybe, I missed something in life, being so silent all those years, 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! 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 feel like it, we could go to the Aran Islands for the weekend together? - 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 confessed it to me by e-mail: when he was already back in Belgium (because of his Mum) three and a half years later!

⁶⁴ Karlsson-on-the-Roof is a fictional character in a series of children's books created by the [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 reply to him: what I could reply? 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, it brought tears to 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 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 most 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 delicate facial features that pointed to Viking genes. His face was the colour of red brick, the same as that of the majority of those Irish who had a misfortune to sunbathe, only in his case it wasn't temporary sunburn anymore, but a result of his 20-years' stay in Sydney, so Conor was like the fir-tree in our children's riddle: 'same colour in winter and summer.'

Like many Irish men, Conor believed 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 haranguing on abstract subjects. He 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 dumbos they must have been in the first place, to need an Australian to point it out to them!

Conor surprised me first of all by the fact that he persistently offered me help - if I just even hinted, for example, that I should be in some place at a certain time, he suggested straight away taking me there in his car (I still lived in Maynooth at the time). Or he offered to repair something for me when it broke down. Surprised, I agreed: who would refuse, if the person 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, and he would start to shout that everybody exploited his kindness, was sitting on his back, because he couldn't say No to people (not only to me, to his relatives, for example, too!). And he should be really sitting with his computer, and all of us were only disturbing him... I would take offence - excuse me, sir, may I remind you that I had not asked of you any help at all, it was you who had very much forced it on me! - and leave. But 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 or you'll end up an alcoholic there, in that Ireland, God forbid!' - Mum expressed her worries to me on the phone.

Things got derailed when Anita's boyfriend came to visit her for five days from Holland. She asked me 'to move somewhere from our mutual room for this time...' 'You have so many friends here!' - was her argument. Friends?! Of course, but I couldn't ask any of them for something like putting me up... Except for Conor. He had three bedrooms in his house, he lived alone, treated me politely and friendly, besides, 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 girlfriend 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 mere 16!

He blushed and for some reason began to convince me with great passion how important it was to be 'liberated' in that field. Well, you know what, Conor, I will make mincemeat 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 is so persistently 'recommended' by some idiotic magazines 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 was just struck 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, 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 sounded sincerely surprised, as if his professional pride was hurt. But I could hardly help bursting out laughing. It just felt awfully tickly. - What about that?...

- All the same... Listen, when is it going to finish?

I must say, Conor was not disagreeable to me - if he was, I would probably 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 didn'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 had 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 on my part: first of all, with respect to Lisa. Not to mention that I was emotionally incapable of such relations at that stage of my life. I simply would that there were a person with me - and the main thing, not under the same roof! -, 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 got obsessed with the thought that I might want a serious relationship with him. I listened to the sheer delirium that he spun out, and kept wondering whether he was convincing himself that what he wished was for real, or he was just ego-tripping through it in his own head: by firstly 'taming' women through imposing his help on them, and then, when they really wanted something more (and let's face it, we, women, easily get used to a man!..), he would proudly reject them. When I let him know that I accepted everything the way it was, it must have just ruined his little plan, worked out in such detail, to achieve the experience of nirvana through the humiliation of another victim... And thus he tried to convince (not only himself, but me, too!) 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 strange inferiority complexes, vented profusely by him on the opposite sex? And what do I really have to do about him: cry or laugh?

...It was Friday again, but I did not go anywhere. I've had enough. 'You need a respite, and the chest needs its cover to be shut',- as a saying from a Turkmen fairy-tale goes. At last I had a self-contained flat, and now I finally had a chance of getting drunk and lamenting for week-ends at home - properly and 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 had happened at home with Lisa? I jumped up and rushed to the phone, seeing nothing, half asleep, bumping into furniture headlong. But the receiver was silent, then I heard some far faint sound similar to weeping. And they hung up. While I was trying to figure out what was going on, and who it could be, they called again. A female voice with a 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 asked me unexpectedly.
- Will who?
- Will Sharkey from Roscommon.

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 had not even had time to meet that one yet. Will Sharkey from Roscommon wrote poems, played, as he claimed, a guitar and was of romantic nature. An unsuccessful poet at 40+ - probably half of Ireland are like this!

- No, of course not. I haven't even met him in real life yet. I saw him only in a photo.

- Is it true?

- Listen, young lady, excuse me, I do not know your name, why would I lie to you?

And then at the other end of the phone the dam burst. The unknown Frenchwoman began to sob. She told me that her name was Amandine. She began to say how madly she was in love with Will Sharkey and how, until recently, she had not even suspected that, apart from her, he also wrote to other women, and that the letters were almost identical, like

carbon copies. She accidentally found one of my letters among his papers too, with my phone number, and decided to phone me in order to expose that Irish bastard. Bastard or not, she was, apparently, really completely mad about that bloke: because a second after some angry charges against him, she started to tell me how wonderful he really was. I did not argue, I listened more than I spoke. I felt pity for her.

- What can I do for you, Amandine? If you wish, I will stop writing to him altogether, and all his letters I have, well, I can send them to you.

- Really? - she gave a sob once again and 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, got dressed 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 at a charity shop for 50 pence. We'll teach these Irish men to break hearts of poor foreign girls!

As my former spouse Sonny Zomerberg used to say, 'don't you mess with me!'

Chapter 3. 'Why did you come to us?'

*'I have dreamed of seas, of seaweed and corals,
I have yearned to eat turtle soup and anchovies,
I have stepped on board a ship, but the shiplot
Crumpled and limpened, made of yesterday's paper.'*
(Shiplot song)⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Shiplot 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 full of romancing, spiritual highness and idealistic aspirations, typical of the late Soviet art.

...Saturday. Not to wake up in the middle of the night - that's the most important thing. Because if I do, different thoughts start creeping into my head, which can last for hours. And memories, from which it's impossible to escape, the ones into which you want to plunge and never ever emerge back again. The same feeling haunts me when I watch old Soviet films - the bitter-sweet feeling. I often burst into tears, inconceivable to anybody who hasn't come from the Soviet Union, at the end of even most light and cheerful of these films, precisely because they are over, and that world has gone for ever and aye, and I, like Ivan Vasilyevich from the movie *Ivan Vasilyevich Changes Profession*⁶⁶, am suddenly pierced by the thought: 'Gosh, I really forgot where I am now! I forgot!'. And at the same time I feel happy from the thought that I have experienced that kind of life myself - not just learnt of it from hearsay! 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 one can ever prove to me that *Little Vera*⁶⁷ is truth and *The Tigers on Ice*⁶⁸ is fiction. If someone has had a misfortune to be reared 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 not only open foes, but also traitors. How could The Bad Guy from Arkady Gaidar's *Malchish Kibalchish*⁶⁹ ever properly understand the Soviet reality, sitting on his box of biscuit, hugging a jar of jam? How could a turncoat 'pioneer' ever defend his country and his people, if he voluntarily warmed sauna water for the Nazi occupiers in his village, grazed chickens for them and

⁶⁶Ivan Vasliyevich Changes Profession is a Soviet comedy film produced by the state film company Mosfilm. Full of sprightly humour, it was one of the most attended movies in the Soviet Union in 1973 with more than 60 million tickets sold. In it, Ivan IV 'the Terrible' exchanges places in time with a modest Soviet officer Ivan Vasilyevich.

⁶⁷ Little Vera is a sample of 'all-is-black', mocking and heart-lacerating art and journalism ('чернуха'), implanted in the USSR in the times of Perestroika and post-Perestroika. The film was released in 1988. It was one of the first Soviet movies with explicit sexual scenes.

⁶⁸Tigers 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.

⁶⁹ see ref. on Arkady Gaidar and his works.

probably was secretly dreaming all his conscious life that people would stop calling him 'Comrade' and began calling him 'Herr' or 'Sir?'

... Well, I am certainly awake now. I feel 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, followed by a layer of sugar, then again a layer of black currants, and so on, in a five-liter jar that she left to stand for a few months before the filling was ready. A few spoonfuls of that tasty and sugary filling in a metal cup that would leave a strange taste in one's mouth was diluted 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 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, to keep it from overflowing, 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 to drink before the water calmed down and began to have a 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 would be more or less like in Zhvanetsky's⁷⁰ story: 'You can serve yourself coffee in bed. But for that

⁷⁰ Mikhail Zhvanetsky (born [1934](#)) is a popular [Soviet](#) and [Russian satiric](#) writer and a [stand-up comedian](#).

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 here I could share this feeling with. Even if there was somebody, I simply have no common past with these people. I've 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 IV that he wasn't a demon.⁷¹ 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, Cheburashka⁷²? - as Guena the Crocodile would say...

... Well, and now, of course, I'll spend hours tossing and turning from side to side. At such moments it's particularly sickening to remember precisely all those things that usually help me here to forget myself. It's sickening to remember all these Conors and Seamuses. All this is trivial, so trivial that I want to erase it from my memory like a dirty spot from the table. And also to disinfect it properly!

⁷¹ Shurik - a character from a Soviet comedy Ivan Vasilyevich Changes Profession.

⁷² 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, 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.

Today, intergirls and interboys⁷³ of all sorts and shapes bandy about the unfortunate joke that ‘there was no sex in the USSR’ (alleging the overly chastity of the Soviet people), but they say nothing about **what there actually was there** and what they themselves totally lack: spirituality, purity, adoration, self-denial, romanticism, palpitation, deep respect for one’s beloved. To explain these to them is like trying to explain the fragrance of a rose to a person with chronic congestion. For instance, in an article or TV programme on the subject of ‘love during war’ (concubinage with the enemies, rape, etc.) they quite seriously (and with open relish!) discuss something that decent people should classify as war crimes, if anything. The ideologues of our time and their tools, who had been trying so hard to force on the Soviet people the bestial way of life for over two decades now, resemble a freak from one of the books by Yuri Bondarev⁷⁴: ‘someone shining bald, hunched in an ugly way, also naked, peeped out of the bushes and maliciously, filthily laughed, fidgeting his hairy legs...’

⁷³ 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 late 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.

⁷⁴ Yuri Bondarev (born 1924) is a Soviet writer. In his idiom, he leans to realism and national Russian traditionalism. Apart from masterly expression, he is remarkable for his singing of the superlative morality of the Soviet person, their will-power and ability for self-sacrifice for the sake of others. He is well-known for his staunchness in opposing Gorbachev and his entourage’s policy of laxity and over-compromising, bordering on direct sabotage and high treason, as well as their swerve from socialism.

One can only feel sorry for the people manipulated by these ideologues. For them, love is lust. For them, passion is just physical desire. For them, 'you'll have sex with anyone you choose, if you use our medication to increase your penis size.' For them 'erotic is part of world culture.' How about the culture of feelings? Do you know what it is? How about the notion that love is best expressed by the Armenian word 'tsavatanem' ('I'll take your pain on me'), rather than by some stupid panting and sweating under a blanket? That love is not when he 'fires' his 'giant love gun' and she moans in every manner, like Karlsson pretending to be a ghost: he may suspect that she didn't quite like it, God forbid! Have they ever heard of 'Die but don't ever give a kiss without love!' (a phrase from Chernyshevsky's⁷⁵ *What Is to Be Done*), an appeal to fight for one's right to love? These poor prostitutes of the soul can't imagine anything like this, even in their dreams.

In the Soviet Union the concepts of love and hate were viewed in a totally different way: they were regarded as spiritual entities, largely intertwined. Nikolay Nekrasov wrote: 'The heart that is reluctant to detest / Will never learn to love, so don't you tire.' And I never tired: I had been brought up in such way that for me, love itself could be defined only on the background of its opposite. You can only truly love people by hating all that and all those who don't permit them 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

⁷⁵ 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.

that there are no homeless and hungry people on the streets. That those whose proper place is on a prison bunk never become masters of our streets after darkness. That no mothers abandon their babies in the streets because they can't feed them. That no human beings are ever sold like cattle on the market. That no one is afraid of losing their job and of being left without a livelihood. That there is never a need for parents of critically ill children to throw themselves at some 'sponsors' feet to beg for money for a life-saving operation. That the pensioners do 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 prison, with pimps and killers, couldn't waste on yachts and villas all the wealth of our country, created by decades and centenaries of labour of the robbed people.

I feel like laughing when intergirls and interboys allege that this hate for rascals results from the 'envy' for them. Envy implies you would like to step into the shoes of the person you are jealous of. And you can hardly suspect that I would like to end up in the company of ordinary thieves, even though on a large scale, in some exclusive bar or castle, from which they promptly chased away its former British owners, quickly replacing those owners' portraits on the walls with their own? One may envy Svetlana Savitskaya⁷⁶, Yuri Gagarin, Che Guevara, Fidel, Amilcar Cabral⁷⁷, Yegorov and Kantaria⁷⁸, Dean Reed⁷⁹, the builders of the BAM⁸⁰, or, at

⁷⁶ 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.

⁷⁷ Amílcar Lopes da Costa Cabral was a Guinea-Bissauian 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 Guinea-native agents of the Portuguese colonial authorities

⁷⁸ 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.

⁷⁹ 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.

⁸⁰ 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 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.

least, those who attended a concert of Boney M in Moscow in 1978 and those who had the chance to see and hear Kola Beldy⁸¹ live.

There are just people in this world who are enemies: not my personal ones, but enemies of all the honestly 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 wish 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... I won't even hesitate to burn the mattresses, if need be. Hatred could be sacred, as 'The Sacred War'⁸². The main thing is that it has to be ultimately aimed at something positive, at creation, not just let fruitlessly corrode you on the inside like nitric acid. And the riddance of humanity of parasites, not necessarily getting rid of them physically (some can eventually be re-educated), is also a creative work, paving the way for a better life!

⁸¹ Kola Beldy (1929-1993) was a pop singer from Siberia, the Soviet Union, who had a number of Soviet-era hits, most famously 'Уведу тебя я в тундру' ('I Will Take You to the Tundra').

⁸² 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 of the defenders of the Motherland.

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 wonderful secret, not some letter to a tabloid newspaper with a question 'how can I get him into bed?' It is the joy and sadness of your life, rather than pondering 'Well now, and where shall we put our wardrobe?.'

Apart from a slight fancy for the clown Oleg Popov that I experienced at the age of three, my first great love in childhood was the French actor Jean Marais. I mean, not Jean Marais himself, of course, but his character Fandor from the films about Fantomas. Children under sixteen weren't allowed to see this film (so that such a hooligan as Fantomas wouldn't set a bad example: a bad example is contagious, as we all know), but Mum convinced the ushers at the cinema to let me in, because I wasn't even seven years old yet: what kind of 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 sink strangely and begin to beat 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 stand 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 Fantomases! On my way home I felt as if I had wings!

I was at a cinema only once before that: my mother took me to watch the comedy *Gentlemen of Fortune*⁸³ 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. But when the opening credits of the feature appeared 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 Mum: 'Well, the movie is over, so let's go home!' And Mum, afraid that I'd cry if she started to explain to me that the movie was only beginning, immediately got up and took me home. I didn't even have time for crying; I was just sure that the film had ended! Soon I forgot the very thought of the incident.

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

I kept imagining how I would handle what even Fandor had failed to handle and how he would be amazed at my courage and dexterity, and a wonderful feeling arose in my heart: that I have some bright and grand mystery unknown to anybody else on Earth, except me! And it made myself marvellous, unusual. When this feeling didn't pass on the third day after the film, I was even more surprised and said to myself: 'Zhenya, are you in love or something?.'

⁸³ '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.

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 indulge in such nonsense, thank God. And this was a case where knowledge wasn't necessarily power, and, as the Russian saying goes, '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' were like - things that in the West even secondary schools graduates don't really know: they don't teach them such 'small details'. Because if they studied properly facts about all the millions of human lives wiped out by the West across the globe, then there would be no place for the Holocaust left in the school curriculum...

- Mum, was all this true? Can it be true that the Indians were murdered like that? And why? Wasn't it easier just to live next to them? What bastards these colonialists were! How can the Earth bear such people! 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 hanging loose (which, according to my grandmother, looked very messy, but otherwise how could I look like an Indian?), I tied a band around my head, painted my face with Mum's old lipstick and, with hallooing, chased about the streets 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, were put on their ships, - after a good flogging with nettles, that would teach them to hurt the weak! - and carried back to their filthy Europe! Let them stay put there and keep a low profile.

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 realized already 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 afflict 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 their 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.

The Time news program on TV solemnly reported that at last, after a long and heroic struggle, yet another African country had achieved independence. Among those mentioned I remember such countries as 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 left a special imprint on my memory: first, the celebration of the victory of the Vietnamese people over the U.S. aggressors (it was broadcast on our television live, and I remember how we hurraed in chorus at home when the Vietnamese flag was hoisted over Saigon); second, what appeared to me a black storm cloud that fell oppressively on the earth, - the coup in Chile in September 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 from all sides at that time. I got goose bumps on my back from it. Then we began to receive the news about torture, about Victor Jara⁸⁴ and saw his head severed by the 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 on 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

⁸⁴ 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](#).

these arrogant Americans go crawling everywhere, as if there is a honeypot 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 a Vietnamese girl Tran Thi Vee in militant Vietnam and *Perlita* - about the youngest Communist in the fascist Paraguay. I almost wore their pages out. To this day I remember almost every word in those books.

It was probably from that time, the time of Vietnam, Allende, MPLA⁸⁵ and FRELIMO, ZANU and ZAPU, the ANC and Mengistu, Gojko Mitic, Fandor, Black Tulip, Yanosik⁸⁶, Kolya Kondratyev⁸⁷ and Zorro, that I became such an incurable romantic.

⁸⁵ 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.

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.

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](#).

ANC - African National Congress, the oldest political anti-apartheid organisation in South Africa. Since 1994 it is the ruling party.

Mengistu Haile Mariam - state leader of Ethiopia, one of the leaders of Ethiopian revolution.

⁸⁶ 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.

⁸⁷ 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.

I also went to the cinema to watch *Zorro* with Alain Delon twelve times! I knew the words of its heroes by heart, but I just couldn't get enough of this film. Up until 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 untenable quality, almost so much so as inspirational labour enthusiasm under capitalism. Later in life I often thought that it would have been better for me to be born a man, with the masculine type of mindset. Women at least appreciate the rare romantic men who can surprise them with non-trivial acts. 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 see you dragging along with heavy bags, for all the world like an old woman', that arrogant Ethiopian, Said, used to say while he was gobbling up the fruits that I brought him.)

Or when you almost magically manage to find out their home address and mail them a giant gingerbread for their birthday (they do not even know that you know when their birthday is!), when you are making 'honour rounds' about their house (in another city!), when only your best friends know that you have gone to see the 'home town of my hero', - and the 'hero' himself is naively surprised to hear about this: 'Why haven't you come in for a cup of tea?..' And even worse: a man is utterly frightened when you send him a Valentine's card with your own verses! Not because the lyrics are so bad, but because he has never experienced such courtesy before!

Mum was often in love, too. But not in the same way as I, though she did fall in love with people who were just as out of reach, as my crushes. 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 (Mum can draw very well), and we would sing together 'Tombe la neige.' And I also remember how I cried for 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 asked her for dinner, Mum was terribly scared and refused. 'I had such beautiful dreams about him. But what if in real life he turns out to just 'as single-celled as protozoa'?' I didn't share her fears: if I were her, I wouldn't have missed the chance to meet my idol in person! He might be single-celled, but you'd never know that for sure if you refused to meet him altogether. And what if he was very smart and is even better and more interesting than your old dreams about him?.. From my early years I liked the Dagestani⁸⁸ proverb: 'Better take and regret, than not take and regret still.'

My mother was red-haired, cheerful and very beautiful, almost like Zhenya Komelkova.⁸⁹ She was so beautiful that I am not fit even to hold a candle to her with respect to pulchritude. But that never bothered me; by nature we are very different, Mum had 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 the extent that I was upset if I got new clothes for a birthday present; it was so much better to get a good book or a record!

⁸⁸ 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.

⁸⁹ One of the main characters from the Soviet film about the Great Patriotic War 'The Dawns Here Are Quiet'.

In the late 1970's many people mistook Mum for Alla Pugacheva⁹⁰ because of her hair. I thought it was an offensive comparison, because Mum was so much more beautiful! Her natural hair colour was the same as my Grandfather's: mahogany - the colour of thick buckwheat honey. Only when she finally started getting grey hair did she bleach it. Despite her very feminine look, she had always had iron will and analytical, masculine mind coupled with incredible, typically Russian categoricalness. (If I seem to be categorical, then imagine a person hundred times more categorical than me.) Mum is one of those people whom you might well admire at a distance, but with whom it would be quite difficult to get along under the same roof. But, of course, for any child their mother is the best. Marusia cried a lot when I accidentally blurted out to her what I'd overheard said at home about her mother: that she was silly to have six children. I did not understand at the time what was so offensive about that? After all, if Mum had said it, it must be true. When I discovered for the first time that Mum could tell a lie (she had lured me to a clinic for vaccination, saying that she needed to go there herself), it was a great shock to me. I was deeply hurt, the more so because there was no need to deceive me so shamelessly. Of course, nobody likes vaccinations but I knew I would complain 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 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 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...

⁹⁰ Alla Pugacheva - 70's Soviet pop-star.

When a new male friend appeared in her life, Mum started coming home from work later and often went away for weekends, which upset me a lot. Her attempts to get me to be friends with the objects of her infatuation usually didn't work.

Most of all I remember Dima the Poet, '*The Tall Blond Man with One Black Shoe*'⁹¹, as I would call 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 engraved on a wooden board. After he and my mother parted, my grandmother used that board to place a kettle instead of a placemat.

'The road to Parnassus is hard!

But there's the Muse on our guard:

At her behest, out Passion's wallow

We'll couple with Suffering, Joy and Sorrow!'

This is what was written on it. Dima knew about my dream to become a writer. But even creative writing didn't bring us together. I was terribly embarrassed when Mum came 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 that very strange creature with his absent-minded poetic eyes would come to collect me from school, and the other kids started asking: 'Zhenya, is that your Dad?' - to me that transgressed all bounds of decency! Wasn't it obvious that we couldn't possibly have anything in common?

⁹¹ [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.

At the age of six or seven I began to write poetry, too. Frankly, I was rather a 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 had imagined myself to be for several years already. By that time the spaceship's crew had 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. And suddenly Chepurysly began to chooh' - he wrote in the one of the 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 they choohed, but the phrase itself was so funny that the image stuck in my head. Each of us imagined them in their 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 the time: of course in the role of the Princess, in 'Troubadour and his friends'⁹². Little girls of all ages and nations, even Soviet ones, like princesses. By that time, thanks to Mum, I had become a big theatre-lover. Perhaps that actress wasn't special but the fact is that I didn't had a chance to see her even in one more play: she had disappeared. Mum's colleague, who himself acted after work at an amateur theatre, was an experienced theatre-goer and knew people who worked there; 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 I began to hate the fact that motherhood had deprived us, the audience, of Anna's Mikhailovna's play, and marriage began to seem to me 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 sad verses that began with: 'Do not sorrow, my sweet little snowdrop...'

⁹² 'Troubadour and his friends' - Soviet 70's musical which later was made into a full animation film. Music was written by G. Gladkov.

'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 would probably laugh greatly. And as for me, cold sweat breaks out at the thought of what could have happened to me if I had written that poem growing up in a country like Holland: in fact, I would have definitely be fixated on the question whether I was of an unconventional sexual orientation, because I loved that woman so much that I even wrote poetry about her, which could have drastic consequences. When I was in the fourth form I blissfully fancied the tenth form's pupil Alla Obratsova. 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 a school play. She never knew about my feelings, 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 time.

Who knows how many young men and women in the West come to wrong conclusions about themselves in this way in their early years... A person at this age 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, to quote Mayakovsky's lines from *Good! The October Poem*, 'On whose example shall I model my life? On Comrade Dzerzhinsky's - for sure!'⁹³ - thence these feelings originate!

⁹³ 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](#).

Although I had a lot of dolls at home, mostly beautiful kewpie dolls made in the GDR with closing eyes and luxurious hair, that could say 'mama' if you tilted them, the older I got, the less I played them. I much preferred paper dolls from magazines or Mum's drawings (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 those 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. While 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 '13 Chairs''⁹⁴ and Silva from 'The Czardas Queen' (we had just seen a wonderful movie with Anna Moffo in the main role!) appeared in my collection⁹⁵. I remember my passing fad to become a nun

⁹⁴ '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.

⁹⁵ Die Csárdásfürstin or A Csárdáskirálynő (literally The [Csárdás](#) Princess; translated into English as The Riviera Girl and The Gypsy 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

after watching *The Sounds 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, the 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 other opera or ballet company would come to our city for a month, some other drama company for another month and an operetta troupe for the next month. I can recall the craze when the Kazan or Saratov Opera Companies performed in our city. Everyone wanted to see and listen to Renat Ibragimov⁹⁶ and Leonid Smetannikov⁹⁷, who were Mum's favourite performers. The prices were low, so 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.

hugely popular film.

⁹⁶ Renat Ibragimov (born 1947) - opera singer, People's Artist of Russia and Tatarstan.

⁹⁷ 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.

Marusya was the oldest child in the only big family in our street. There were five girls and one boy in their family. Their mother, Aunt Tanya, as we called her, 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 onions and ate them), someone lent their mother money until payday (nobody would even think of asking for interest, God forbid!). The younger girls ran about the street with dirty but cheerful faces. Their father began to build a new house, and 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 there were not even walls inside. 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 sigh: 'Oh! This year it's going to be 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 no fruit left in the trees! When I was small, I asked my grandpa to help me to protect our trees, but when I grew up a bit, I began to protect these two trees myself. The apples of those trees were a late sort, of one tree they only became tasty after being kept in the shed for 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 Mum's old bottles of hair lotion, filled with water. Every time I saw somebody trying 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 phtalazol⁹⁸ 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 she regrets that throughout the Soviet epoch she had lacked the feasibility to swear with words like ‘ass’ in public, and that was her greatest ‘lack of freedom’... Such words were viewed as deeply indecent; people talked about the toilet euphemistically (‘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 she grabbed in the street to ask this question simply scuttled off.

...I wonder what today’s people in a similar situation as those ‘apple-pluckers’ would do to me? Shoot me dead? Burn our house down? I wouldn’t be surprised. Because now we live in a ‘free world’, right?..

Marusya and her sisters taught me 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 turned on’, as we used to say.

⁹⁸ Phthalazol (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, sometimes giving the children a good hiding without any reason. Only now I realise that she was just exhausted after work. But Marusya got a hiding very rarely. 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 mother. 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 curtain. 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 of our age in our street. 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 trusted with was the evil wizard from *Swan Lake*.

...In early childhood I loved running: it didn't matter where or why. I think, as soon as I learned how to open the garden gate, I would rush out at a 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 country road, which got muddy from rain and thawing 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 in Karl Marx Street civilization began: it was asphalted. My relatives had to fix the bolt higher on the gate, so that I couldn't reach it, open it and run away. But I still kept running away whenever possible. Even to the monument to a 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 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 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 intentionally; 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 form, she entered a teachers' training college, though she could continue studying until the 10th form, 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 nine. 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 six years younger than we.

But Dasha took offence when we offered her a role of Marquis Forlipolli 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, grabbing 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 affirmed, laughing. And then I recognized her, by her voice. 'Marusya?.. Is that you?' She still works at 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 even to think about it, let alone talking about it. Well, maybe just for the sake of our friendship...

...We had genial and respectable relations with our neighbours. Many of them used to study at the same school with 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.

It was easy to distinguish in the street 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 of a different nation! Gradually the formerly rural population in the cities grew larger and larger, and eventually the native city folks became a minority. Former urban customs and manners began to pass out of use as well.

There was quite a 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, militiamen (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 general things. For instance, if in 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 five beds of potatoes were dug out of our vegetable plot, but it was done by strangers, not neighbours. While with the mentality prevailing after Perestroika there would have been simply nothing left of those vegetable plots at all!

My grandfather was on friendly terms with Antonovich, as we called our 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 knew only of one: the brother of one of mother's co-workers.

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's dead!' 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 a 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 from hunger. Those who are wont to lie and prevaricate, 'report' suchlike things now about North Korea, for example, and nothing could be further from the truth. But you may rest assured, there was no way for Western correspondents to lie about our city: they simply didn't come to us, because ours was a closed city. I didn't know it when I was a child, and even when I found out, I wasn't much interested in the fact. Working at a military industry plant was in the local vernacular called 'working in the post-office box' (because instead of giving one's full address one only gave out a PO Box address). Sometimes of evenings a distant roar of cannons was heard. 'Mum, what is it?' - I asked. 'Oh, they are just breaking refined sugar into pieces at the sugar factory!' - she replied with a calm face.

Even before going to school, I managed to travel about 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 on 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 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 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 putting a small live crab on the fence of the house where we lived, which shy and handsome local fishermen once did, trying to attract Mum's attention.

According to 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 honestly 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 Mum the very first day, surprised. I also tried lusciously sweet mulberries there for the first time. We ate at a local cafeteria: the food was delicious and cheap, and the 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. I recall beautiful local traditional houses with overhanging balconies above the street, and the mountains which I 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! His owner, puffing, ran behind him. 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 had 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 people like that Dutch missionary, Sandra Roelofs⁹⁹, 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 find out yourself from any ordinary Georgian, Uzbek, Chukcha or Russian, who remembers that time, rather than from some textbook published with Soros' money, or from Radzinsky's¹⁰⁰ books, or from Svanidze's¹⁰¹ TV programs, or, most certainly, from the tales of Sandra Roelofs or her husband.

⁹⁹ 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.

¹⁰⁰ Edvard Radzinsky (b. 1936, [Moscow](#)) is a Russian rightwing writer, playwright, TV personality, and author of numerous film [screenplays](#).

¹⁰¹ 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.

The following year, my mother took me to Leningrad to visit our relatives. Aunt Ira, the daughter of my grandmother's brother Ilya (the man who had been 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 raising of the bridges at night, the Hermitage, and especially, of course, like any child, the palaces and fountains of Peterhoff (Petrodvorets), as well as the trip there by a boat with underwater 'wings'! Leningrad was a large, spacious city, thoroughly pierced by wind, cold and very clean. I 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 eyes¹⁰². In the evenings I read Olya's books: the poetry of Robert Burns and Shakespeare in Samuil Marshak's translations¹⁰³ and four volumes of political cartoons by the Dane Herluf Bidstrup¹⁰⁴, who gave me a very clear idea of what was happening in the world.

¹⁰² 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.

¹⁰³ Samuil [Marshak](#) (1887 - 1964) was a Russian and [Soviet](#) writer, translator and children's poet. Among his Russian translations are [William Shakespeare's](#) sonnets, poems by [William Blake](#) and [Robert Burns](#), and [Rudyard Kipling's](#) stories. Marshak's children's books are loved by kids and can still be found in every Russian family.

¹⁰⁴ 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.

When I came home, I overwhelmed Marusya with all these stories. We also started to play Alexander Menshikov¹⁰⁵, and Catherine¹⁰⁶, and Peter the Great... Peter seemed to me a terribly attractive character. So powerful and wilful!

...I feel my head falling onto the pillow. A familiar black-moustached face looms 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's your nice liquor, you've tried it... Get up now, make haste! At 1 p.m. Amandine will be waiting for you in O'Connor Street, and we are going to the Dublin Zoo!

¹⁰⁵ 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](#).

¹⁰⁶ 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.

Amandine was a pretty, short, buxom 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 'stinking goat', as Urals workmen characters from Pavel Bazhov's fairy-tales used to swear? Love is really a cruel thing. She was apparently nervous about our meeting - she incessantly pulled at the corner of her bag - and she didn't come alone. Her companion was a cheerful and talkative Irish guy: it was obvious from the first glance at 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 which language 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 of that country I have seen, what books I have 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 Menelik¹⁰⁷, the Battle of Adwa and Axum¹⁰⁸. Incidentally, I'm not the only one with this habit: my half-brother, in an 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 going on, 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 Funes¹⁰⁹ and Alain Delon, Amandine's face brightened:

- Ooh-la-la! Nobody knows them here! Except of Tadhg, of course, 'cause he is already almost a Frenchman.

¹⁰⁷ Ethiopian emperors

¹⁰⁸ 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.

¹⁰⁹ 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

- 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 ...' *Fi donc!* - 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 French music. Here nobody knows Edith Piaf or Charles Aznavour, Mireille Mathieu, Jacques Brel (not to mention that nobody knows he was Belgian!), or Joe Dassin¹¹⁰. Here, no one has heard of the Paul Mauriat orchestra. They don'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 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 were sure that it is a cheerful musical animated cartoon with a traditional happy-end...

¹¹⁰ 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.

You only hear songs in English on the radio here. It seems 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 could sing *Hafanana* by Afric Simon¹¹¹ and *Marina* by Rocco Granata (performed by Claudio Villa): we sang as we heard them, including the words, often 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 is best noticeable 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, if you come to think of it, we, who lived in the Soviet Union, were able to familiarize ourselves with the pick 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 led to this conclusion again after recently watching a movie I read about in 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 *Krugozor* magazine¹¹².

¹¹¹ 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](#).

¹¹² 'Krugozor' was a musical magazine with [flexi-discs](#) issued in the [Soviet Union](#) by the public music company [Melodiya](#).

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 will be certainly called Kurnikóva. Boris becomes Bóris. Luckily though, Stalin was not Stalín. For some reason, they call him Joseph, not Iosif. And it is not only about Russian names, even Michael Schumacher became 'Michael' (Ma-ykl instead of Mikha-el)! And Schumacher himself had apparently accepted it. How absurd! Why, then, don't we call Tony Blair 'Anton' or Margaret Thatcher 'Margareeta'?!

Another annoying thing is that nobody here even tried to pronounce my name properly. How about at least trying: 'Yev-gue-nia'? No I am not Eugenia, God damn it! And my hypocoristic name is not Jenny. I understand that there is no 'Zh' sound in English. But somehow Africans can pronounce my name, Vietnamese and Chinese can do it, too, Dutch and Spanish also can say it - no problem, but English speakers, poor creatures, can't do it. They are just so incredibly spoiled by all those who obligingly 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, a self-proclaimed 'expert' on Russia (the one who got his false 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 that 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 this kind of guys well...

Our bus was approaching Phoenix Park, and 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 their own mistakes in life. Even entire nations can't learn anything from someone else's or even their own historical experience, not to mention individuals. Some of them manage to fall into the same trap in their lives over and over again. And then there's nothing else for them to do but regret, as in my best friend Lida Basina's favourite chastooshka:

'Oh, Mama, I rode
On sledge and boat,
With a wrong guy all the way.
Why did I kiss Grisha
Under that little cherry tree?
Oh Mama, 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 were 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 start thinking on your words.

At the zoo Tadhg began to tell us funny stories from his own life, and I realized for the first time how rancorous and vengeful the Irish can be. It is really better not to rouse them, like that sleeping dog from the proverb: they don't forget anything! And they act accurately, sharply and surreptitiously. 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 chap 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 glanced 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 a couple of 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 efficient to live like that than merely call a librarian to move that chap 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. She was beaming with happiness. Apparently, the lovers had made up again. Tadhg looked at her sympathetically, then at me and, when 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 at a small firm. Tadhg's thoughts were preoccupied with moving to France as soon as possible: apparently, France was the same to him as Ireland was to me. And I... Well, I didn't know. What do I want from life, besides Lisa's recovery? For the last few months my thoughts had been fixed only on that: it was the purpose of my existence here, so I didn't plan anything far-reaching. First I needed to overcome this paramount 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 four-year-old Lisa burst into tears after she got out of the coma, opened her mouth and realized that she couldn't speak, and, even more importantly to her, couldn't sing any longer... I had usually tried 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 asked anxiously. 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 feel satisfied that it has happened to someone else, not to them. But I - I am just unable now to listen to any stories that even distantly remind me of my own. I don't read stories about accidents either.

- It's nothing. Something just got into my eye.

- Well, what do you expect from life, then? Or is it a secret?

I finally coped with my feelings and thought again.

- To be honest, the only thing 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 everything and everyone is for sale and can be bought. But perhaps 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.

- Folks, let's get going; it is already 4 p.m. and we haven't seen anything yet! - Amandine shouted like a child at the zoo for the first time.

- I want to see that farm!

In 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 following me. He wandered onto Grafton Street and loudly complained that the Irish were racists and treated him poorly. My heart missed a beat. In the past I just liked dark-skinned people, but since I had Lisa, all of them, especially those from the Caribbean, became like family to me in a way. (They also treated Lisa and me in the same way: if I walked along the street with her, even strangers among them greeted us with a knowing smile - 'We be of one blood, ye and I!') And exactly like with Amandine the previous day, I had an indiscretion to open up to that Dublin Rastafarian and told him that I not only knew all the songs of Bob Marley by heart, but I was at a Mutabaruka's concert in Amsterdam. I also 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! - the Jamaican shouted, seizing my hands. He was a poet, just like Mutabaruka, and recited a couple of his poems to me off-hand. Having met a kindred soul on the banks of Liffey, he began to pour out all his grievances to me:

- Just look, sista, how they watch me! It's all because I'm black.

I looked around. Indeed, the passers-by were looking at him with curiosity. Black people were rare in Dublin 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 mean to say that all the Irish are free from racism. But if this particular Jamaican was not drunk, they wouldn't watch him as much as they did.

There are a lot of racists here, but a different type than the Dutch: more old-fashioned, open. Luckily I don't look much different from the Irish, but those who do, can tell you quite a different story. And I honestly don't know what is worse: when people are open 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 an ever more undisguised interest.

At first I thought that we were just walking in the same direction. After ten minutes, however, 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 it 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 on he went.

I barely managed to get rid of him by giving him the first phone number that came to my mind. I think it was actually Conor's number. I felt very bad about it for a long time after that happened. Well, now he'd probably say that I was a racist too...

After some time I met an Angolan in Dublin who spoke Russian: he had studied in Minsk. People who bandy about the idea that Russia is full of skinheads should have heard 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 their last thing with you.' I heard the same opinion from an Afghani refugee, who was travelling with me in a bus to Wexford. Though, of course, they met Soviet people, not the 'new Russians.' I remembered a definition of friendship that I had read somewhere in youth, based on the concepts that we seem to have in our blood. 'True friendship is when you can call a friend at 3 a.m. and ask him to be at 6 a.m. at a distance of 100 kilometers away - and he won't ask why...' It takes your breath away when you remember that such friendship had really existed, and there really were such friends! Because now we have mainly the likes of Vampilov's¹¹³ Silva, a character from *Elder Son*: 'You burn, if they've set you on fire, it's none of my business.'

¹¹³ 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.

...The Irish have their own version of the Dutch standard conversation on the topic 'Mag ik iets vragen?' ('May I ask you 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: most Irish, mille pardons, have rather poor knowledge of geography, so that even if I told them the name of my city, it would not mean anything to them. Later on people who knew better explained to me, that those Irish, who were unaccustomed to foreigners, applied to them the same question that they asked each other and Americans of Irish origin. In their own country they quickly figure out 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 appears a subject to talk about. Asking the same question to a foreigner with whom they don't have any relatives or even friends in common, is, of course, absurdity, and the conversation fails to begin at this point. ('I suggest changing the subject', as the unforgettable Charley's Aunt Donna Lucia¹¹⁴ said.) But custom is second nature, and the Irish persist in asking 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 at 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 will automatically handle them in this way once 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, during all the four-year-long course of French at University, she barely managed to get a C in it.

¹¹⁴ Heroine of Brendan Thomas' play 'Charley's Aunt' (Soviet film version of it was called 'Hello, I am your Aunty!')

An interview means that you should a) look good (I had a suit expressly 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 would you like to work at 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 in a society where modesty is a virtue - people will notice your good qualities from your deeds anyway, and words by themselves mean nothing. It sounds right, but... Only after much suffering you learn that no one in the capitalist world will ever 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. For no one to notice that you are doing it through your clenched teeth, a fake smile is strongly recommended. After that the interview turns into a game of ping-pong: you are thrown a 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 for interviews - I repent! - just for practice, without any serious intention of changing jobs. 'And should we live, there will be others!'.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ From Pushkin's poem 'Stone Guest'

When you get older, you begin to feel aversion for this process. You get tired of participating in these stupid role-playing games. The rules of such games presuppose that some man or woman, who probably knows less than you, but is full of himself (or herself), sits in front of you and, feeling that he or she has unlimited power, watches you like cattle at the market (thank God, at least they don't check your teeth!) and selects among you the most 'fit', based only on what is written in your papers, how you are dressed and what you say. 'I wonder who the judges are!?' - Chatsky asked.¹¹⁶ They sit and watch you insolently, while 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 grows a feeling inside you, similar to what the hero Vladimir in the film *Kin-dza-dza* felt: 'You know what? You dance yourself... Mister!'¹¹⁷ Especially when you finally understand that any of the employees for these companies is no more than an identification number, and whether you are going to keep your job there or not is little dependent on your effort and diligence. That for the Big Boss all of you are just bums in the seats. So stop putting on an act!

¹¹⁶ The author refers to the famous phrase by Chatsky - the hero of the comedy in verse '[Woe from Wit](#)' 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 judges?' where Chatsky denounces the high society which dares to judge him.

¹¹⁷ '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.

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. And I actually had two offers - on the same day! I had to make a choice. One job was permanent, with a huge discount for airline tickets as a bonus. The other offered a one-year contract, with an opportunity 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 it was a genuine vocation. He really enjoyed not only playing on 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 stop 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. He couldn't convey everything he knew 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 flew into a temper, called me 'stupid' and stopped explaining. Gradually I developed a hang-up about this: am I really as stupid as he tries to convince me? So had it become a matter of honour for me to learn all the things Sonny couldn't teach me, so that I would be able to speak with him on equal terms. However I don'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 located at the other end of the city, in a chic coastal place with a beautiful name - Dun Laoghaire. It was written in Irish on buses coming there from the centre. (By the way, 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, aroused festive mood. It was pleasant to get out of the office for lunch and stroll along the waterfront. Another pleasant thing at Dun Laoghaire was lots of small charity shops that sold different interesting things, which had become unnecessary to their former owners - for a song. Soon I had a whole collection of colourful Scottish kilts.

My spirits were high. It was interesting to learn 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 home 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 trouble began.

At that time there were so few immigrants in Ireland that, in fact, no one knew exactly any laws and regulations on it, and whether there were any at all. The Irish legislation on that subject dated from the pre-war period and was absolutely unelaborated. In practice it summed up to 'Do as you wish, and that's it.' 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 twitched strangely. In general, the attitude of the South to the North was incomprehensible to me: it seemed natural that in any country people would dream of restoring its territorial integrity and reunifying the nation, despite the ensuing problems (as in Germany). But many southerners were not simply afraid to go to the North: they spoke about it with some disgust: 'We do not want their problems over here!', as if it was not part of Ireland. They patently preferred Americans or Australians, with their mythical Irish grandmothers, to the Northerners. I had also long been afraid to go to the North: apprehensive of what my Dublin Irish colleagues had said. Though since childhood I had known more about the North than about the South. Thinking of the North, I usually pictured perpetually overcast sky, police, explosions and even anti-tank 'hedgehogs', the likes of those we had in the defence of Moscow in 1941.

...Dublin spring was so beautiful, so mild, full of flowers, bathed in the warm sun and velvety fresh greenness, that I anticipated 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 spring. And it was in May that I happened to meet the biggest rascal I had 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 came to place my ad (not a personal one, but about putting up a typewriter and a fax machine for sale).

His wife had 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 anyone 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). In a maudlin way, he told me how his wife had left him, how badly her new partner had treated her (I cannot stand that word, 'partner': to me it sounds like 'partner in crime'), how she had begun to drink more and more, how her liver had stopped working, how she had been slowly dying, how they had been reconciled before her death, how the middle girl had 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....

It was not after a while that I realised that Caoimhin was a bore, and meticulous one at that, with a nasty explosive temper. It was natural, if somewhat earthly pragmatic, that Caoimhin in his situation hurried to find a 'mother for his children.' A man is not a woman, and with some extremely rare exceptions, no man would devote his entire life to his children, nobly remaining a bachelor. He immediately presented every new female acquaintance to his daughters as their potential mother (one can only imagine what the poor girls had endured!). As for me, I did not fancy Caoimhin, was not going to be his daughters' mother and did not conceal it from him. But he liked me a lot and decided that he would eventually change my mind. First, he hastened to assure me that he had 'great connections at the top' and would help me to get a visa for my mother. And the fish nibbled at 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 six months.

But when I had already prepared everything, took time off from work and looked forward to going home for my mother 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 conducted himself like that 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 had been given to understand what the other party felt about him, he suddenly thrust himself upon me with a kiss. His kisses were wet and nasty, he felt like a toad. At the same time he went on telling me that my daughter certainly missed me very much, that she was waiting for me, that 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... It still hurts to recall any of that 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 I could open up to. One does not go with such a thing to a landlord or his wife. I frantically paged through my address book 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 force it out of myself), Tadhg immediately said that he would come. 'Let's go for a boat ride, shall we?' 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 Lakes, 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, that smart girl at last left him), about Tadhg's future exams, about my new job... I started to calm down.

Blessington is not far from Dublin, about forty miles, but because of Dublin roads traffic, it took more than an hour to get there. The lake at Blessington is also called Poulaphouca Reservoir. It is hard to imagine that there can be such a quiet pristine 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, which they had leased at the motor-boat station in my home town and on which my grandfather and I used to go up and down the river in my early childhood. 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, 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 there. There were circles on the water around the boat, from time to time we could see through the dark-greenish thick water fish swimming near us.

We reached the bridge over which cars were running, went under it and turned back. Tadhg rowed and rowed on, 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 very nice. And I felt my shock and pain gradually recede into the background. Once again I was satisfied myself of having 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 feel bad. Without calculating if it fits into their agenda. And without presenting you a cheque for the petrol 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 return tickets with me. Lisa had got better in my absence, but not much. Mum had had her hair cut to make it easier to comb; Lisa grew terribly thin and still didn’t say anything, all day long she ran around the rooms like a spinning top and destroyed everything in her way. Practically nothing was left of Mum’s wallpaper, all the books had to be hidden, the 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 fits even more frequently now: she often fell on her face at the slightest unexpected sound, and her forehead bled. We couldn’t even sneeze or cough in her presence without telling her about it in advance. It even became a reflex to warn her: ‘Mum / Grandma is going khe-khe/achoo’, we said it out loud in public transport or public places, 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! Previously, when I lived in the Netherlands, she and I travelled together to Ireland at Easter, and she got a 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 itself: it came within the purview 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 the reason for the 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 with indignation. 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 is 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 that kind girl, Nora, hadn’t helped us. She advised me to go to Ireland with Lisa and address the above-mentioned friendly parliamentarian for help. ‘Our politicians all know each other, and he might have some connections up there, in the Department.’

Well then, but how was I going to work?

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 had studied Russian together, but when Josephine visited the post-Perestroika Russia, she didn’t like what she saw there and gave up her study. She lived with her boyfriend - an IT geek, and tried one work after another. She worked at a laundrette for some time, had a penchant for children and arts, 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 - unlike me, he knew well the reason for the refusal by the Department of Justice to give Mum a visa: her passport would expire in some six months. Why couldn’t that official have said this to us? Was it 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 any longer.

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 display any 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.'¹¹⁸ 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 about 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, since he used to test 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, similar to that, which the Chatlans made in the film 'Kin-dza-dza': 'Oui-i-i...' Bill began to imitate her 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 in a womanly way. But ultimately she was not the real boss, even in her own house. I realized that her husband just would not renew my lease for the next year (the lease that I originally had was for one year, and after that it had to be renewed every month).

¹¹⁸ From the Australian cartoon 'Around the world in 80 days'

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 a steadfast tin soldier), put her in her pushchair and took her out for a walk, in any weather, so that, God forbid, she wouldn't wake Bill with her 'Oui-i-i...'.

By 8 a.m. Josephine came: a healthy country maiden, with a delicate rosy-cheeked face, curly-haired and robust, and, oddly enough, very feminine. She was simply cut out to work with children. Every day I mentally thanked Nora and providence for the fact that they had sent me Josephine. I don't know what I would have done without her. She didn't have the slightest aversion for the sick girl: she sang to her, changed her nappies and talked to her as if Lisa understood her. She even drew out her old university books from somewhere and tried to 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 weekly rent. Of course, Josephine's work was worth it: not everyone would be able to cope with Lisa in her condition, 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 till my mother arrived.

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. 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!’ She 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 much, that she really seemed to expect that I would set up my own house here in six months and begin to teach at a university somewhere. After all, our principle was ‘From each according to his abilities, to each according to his work.’¹¹⁹ 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 (which 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 there.... I just started to cope with the role of a breadwinner, a family provider, the role usually taken in a Western family by the husband or father, and I got used to my new related duties. Mum’s remarks called all my modest achievements in this area in question and made me feel small and worthless.

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

¹¹⁹ 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.

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 to crack jokes: Patrick used to do it with a dead-pan face. With that kind of face he would talk 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 their victory, flushing, he approached her after the final whistle, and she just asked him why the spectators shouted ‘Come on, Shamrock¹²⁰!’ and why he was wearing socks of different colours...

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. (My God, what a ‘good’ wish, thankfully she could at least 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 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 even to do a CT scan: in Holland they had done it quickly (although, according to the doctors, there were only two apparatuses for that 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. Wonderful public health service indeed!

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... 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 go to school together with these morons!’). It just broke my heart when I looked at them, and I stroked and kissed them without any squeamishness.

¹²⁰ Shamrock is a symbol of Ireland

In short, Patrick tried his best, but mostly to no avail. We found that there was simply no place there to treat Lisa. The condition of the Irish public health service was not at all so wonderful as my colleagues had tried to convince me. In fact, an elementary visit to a GP with the flu there 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 not only a doctor but every little old lady knows in our country.

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 people, because their children walk in the streets with bare knees in cold winter, for example;

B) The Irish drink a lot, and they have no other entertainment in life except for pubs;

C) The Irish are racists, because one half-crazy granny in the street told my mother something about Africa (my mother does not know English) and pointed with her finger at Lisa;

D) In Ireland you drive on the left;

E) 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'¹²¹:

'Covered with the wild green,
absolutely all,
There's a Bad Luck Island
in the South Sea Atoll.

¹²¹ '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](#).

There's a Bad Luck Island
in the South Sea Atoll,
Covered with the wild green,
absolutely all.

There lives unhappily
a poor savage tribe,
With a tender character,
but ugly outside...' and so on....

You know what? I agree with Karlsson: '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 a 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.

I knew from personal experience how badly a person could feel in a foreign country 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 bad, but on good things (no matter how little of the good there might be). In fact, remind yourself why you have actually come 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 a foreign country temporarily, not forever, if the general situation oppresses you, you must constantly remind 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 it is your first experience of 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. My creed was: 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 nowadays globally behaves, as if its way of life, rules and regulations are the only right ones for all the peoples on the earth. It is the West that is imposing its will on us through all the Pinochets, Duvaliers, Havel, Yeltsins¹²² (and if others do not accept it with good grace, brings into play its 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 our 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 fall on the hands of such countries as Cuba and Korea, which were betrayed by your own country, would be simply shameless; that's why these countries do not count.) Solzhenitsyn, Scharansky¹²³ and other representatives of a tiny minority among the many-million people of our country at least had somewhere to flee to, if they did not like the USSR!

¹²² Dictators

¹²³ Soviet dissidents

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 Zaporozhye Cossacks used to say), or life here will be quite unbearable for you, as it had become to me in 'ons kleine kikkerlandje' ('our little frog-land', as the Dutch call their Holland with affection). 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 to the local life so that it would be easier for her: for some strange reason, she really loved to revel in her own discontent. I tried to tell myself that my mother was tired. That she needed to rest, to have fun, to get more 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 picking quarrels with me to relieve her own tension. After which 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 her: how little money I gave her for shopping (no matter how much Mum gets, she spends the whole sum the same day), how boring it was in Ireland (I took them on a bus about the country every weekend, accumulating 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'¹²⁴ - 'No, this is definitely not Paris!'

¹²⁴ '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](#).

It was getting harder and harder for me. I believe that the family should help each other in difficult times, as my grandmother and grandfather did, provide a reliable refuge for each other, and not 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 an ice-hole again. My mother acted as if she did not even remember that we had really come there for Lisa's treatment. You may argue if the Irish are racists or not, yet none of them had yet said to us what our own post-Perestroika woman doctor said back home: '*Actually it might be hereditary in her, all these mulattoes and other mixed-blooded creatures have not been studied sufficiently yet.*' Just like the childminder Froken Bok from the cartoons about Karlsson, 'Beware: the dog isn't aseptic!'

The 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 (a tanned blonde from Wallonia, who came to the office dressed in black leather, on a Harley Davidson; she didn't speak Dutch, even though we were at the Benelux department) examined my results of the previous week, hadn't found any cause for dissatisfaction, but nonetheless said with a hurt voice, even with some jealousy, 'And your score at 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.

But since then I started to think that Claudette was picking on me at every trifle.

The joy of work left me. 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 happened 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, but in the Dutch form of arrangement: 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 - he could have got a receipt from me if he didn't trust me! After a while I realized that the prospects of a permanent contract after a year, with which we had been 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 was to extend her visa. We went to the office in 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 has 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 been just recently opened in Dublin. Strictly speaking, there was nothing Soviet about it, save for a couple of pictures and posters on the walls, some strange inscriptions in Russian, like quotes from Ostap Bender¹²⁵: 'The ice is broken, ladies and gentlemen of the jury! The meeting continues!' and signs, misleading the Irish visitors: which of the toilets was men's and which was women's?.. What was that strange letter - 'Ж'?

'Preevet¹²⁶!' 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 it's so important to me!' she said about her boyfriend, looking as if she wouldn't dare breathe without his permission. I could not understand why that girl, so nice, so kind, so talented (she showed me some of her art work), had such low self-esteem. I'm no 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? But 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. 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 get ill? - Nora asked sympathetically.

¹²⁵ Ostap Bender - is a fictional [conman](#) and [antihero](#) who first appeared in the novel [The Twelve Chairs](#) written by the 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.

¹²⁶ Hello! (Russian)

And I began to unburden my soul. I started my story in much detail, unlike the brief version I had told Anita. All the memories that I had tried so hard to drive into my subconscious backfired on me, the same way it was with Amandine and Tadhg in the park for a short while. But this time the memories rushed out in an unstoppable flow. I was surprised to realize that for the first time I described it as if it had 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 to 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. I'll try anyway.

- Thank you! - I said, touched, but with no hope of success. Good luck, 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 and tell us how it all has ended, 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 it turned out that all the week, she had been calling that very minister Mr. Casey again and again and asked him to extend my mother's visa. And she had gained her end! 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, just never mind. The main thing is to find a good doctor for Lisa.'

That week we went to Mr. Casey to renew 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 the third person:

'Who is here to see Mr. Casey?'

We went in, and he chided us gently, in a paternal way (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 the Irish practice happened: Mum's visa was extended for two months. During these two 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: the defector, a former naval officer, whom I had mentioned earlier, his wife and their little son, to whom they had given birth in order to remain in Ireland (back then it still helped!): apparently the secrets that he had betrayed were not enough to obtain a refugee status. At the sound of the Russian speech (the officer and his wife were speaking to their boy, and my mother - to Lisa), all the three of them were very surprised. They fell into conversation. At first they found a common ground in their views on the Irish. 'They really are savages!' - the officer complained. 'The notion of intelligentsia does not exist here. People are very kind, sympathetic, but intellectually limited! Students in our high school know more about European literature than their university students, philologists, do. It's hard to talk to them about anything!'

And it's true... For example, I brought Conor to the Irish Theatre for the first time in his life. Theatres are surprisingly good in Ireland, in classic style, similar to our dramatic art school (so much unlike the Dutch ones: an experimental mare's nest, with an almost mandatory ritual striptease on the stage). Conor and I watched *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He clapped so hard and loud at the end that his hands ached, and he came home stunned. So what, one may ask, had prevented him from going there before? That's right - he just hadn't been accustomed to it.

However, as soon as they started talking about politics, Mum discovered that she and the naval officer didn't have common views. 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’ve become so very happy-go-lucky!’

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 mother 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 have some decent conditions for the child, then you can invite us! Not to 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 11), I, who had no ticket, was allowed by airport workers to see my sick 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 accompanied them to the plane.

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

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 ... And I didn’t care what the Irish were like, as long as they had 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. It was the last straw. Why should I have to give my hard-earned money 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 then 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 hid himself in the dusk of the throbbing driver's cabin, calling to memory the image of that school photo. He closed his eyes, then opened them again, trying to figure out why over the car windscreen, on the glass and even on the clear surface of the instrument panel of Stoletov's tractor, endearingly named 'Stepanide' by him, there were colour photos and drawings from magazines representing Black men, Black men and Black men again.... What could it mean? Why has for twenty years the chap collected photos of... Black men?... These Black men disturbed Prokhorov, as a whisper behind a thin wall.'*
- *Please, answer, Andrei! Why did Yevgueni collect pictures of Black men?*
- *He has been cutting out pictures of Black men for a long time... Probably in his third form he borrowed Uncle's Tom Cabin from the library and cut it all up... The principal, the old librarian, the blind director of studies Vikenty Alekseevich all came into the classroom... Like you, they also asked: 'Why did you do that, Yevgueni Stoletov?' Zhenya was silent ... '*

(Vil Lipatov And All That's about Him)¹²⁷

...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 the accent on the 'e'. 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 imposing, so grown-up, so serious. And he - he was simply my best friend, which he remains up to this day. 'To me you are my mother, my father and my uncle!', an African proverb goes. 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 Mum's firm belief, he was 'our grandmother's pet' since childhood. (Why shouldn't he be, never causing

¹²⁷ Vil Lipatov (1927-1979) - Soviet writer famous for his detective stories 'And All That's about Him' and 'The Village Detective'.

any trouble, never coming home late from work, never drinking alcohol or smoking?) He started his own family only at the age of 38. So you can count for how many years we had been - I dare use this expression - the most important people in each other's life. Even today he knows me better than anybody else, including Mum.

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 Dnieper tape-recorder (which we nicknamed the 'coffin with music'): 'This is books, this is books, books are everything, *than-that-this!*' Once I managed to snatch his favorite marshmallow and eat it while he was chewing on it, talking at the same time, and was distracted a little by something. Shurek remained sitting with his mouth open. 'Don't talk when eating!' - Grandfather laughed.

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 for sure!

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 Zaitsev¹²⁸. It seems it was then that I stopped calling him 'Uncle.' In my early childhood Shurek's former schoolmate often visited him. He was a cheerful, curly-haired young man called Tolik. Shurek and Tolik played chess all evening long on a bench in our backyard and swapped tapes with Vysotsky's songs¹²⁹. Later Tolik got married, then 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!

¹²⁸ Soviet ice skating World champions.

¹²⁹ Vladimir Vysotsky (1938 -1980) was a popular [Soviet](#) singer, songwriter, poet, and actor. Although best known as a singer-songwriter, he was also a talented stage and screen actor. His songs described the war, realities of life and often challenged the 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'.

Sometimes we performed the acrobatic etude The Ram and the Shepherd in front of my grandparents, to their encores: I hung down from both sides of his neck - 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 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 as wind! In the dark I imagined myself to be the underground anti-fascist fighter Zina Portnova¹³⁰, 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 self-made ice hill. In summer we had water-fights, spaying each other with water 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 sledge, having placed me into a big bag! The library was both Shurek's and my most favorite place. There one could always find something very interesting. The library was in the club called 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 my hair stand on end to learn how expensive it was to be a reader in the Netherlands!

Shurek was fascinated by science fiction, and Granny 'hunted' for each new issue of 'The Explorer' magazine for him through all the newsstands in town. Shurek had a bookcase full of science fiction, mine was in the

¹³⁰ 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 Komsomol. Two months later she was captured by the Germans. During Gestapo interrogation in the village of Gorianny, 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.

kitchen. Shurek was very zealously concerned about his collection and trusted it to very few people. He entrusted it to me once I grew up a little. To this day do I remember the fascinating stories of J. B. Priestley, Isaac Asimov, the Strugatsky brothers¹³¹ 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*¹³². 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 percent of cases aliens are malicious and hostile to people? They are really eager to destroy our planet. In the Soviet science fiction literature such kind of aliens would be an exception. Well, everyone creates artistic images based on his own ideas on the world and people, don't they? Or maybe it is just because aliens have quickly understood whom they were dealing with in America?...

When I grew up a little, we started to play badminton in the street in front of our 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 windless evenings. 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

¹³¹ 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](#).

¹³² The 1966 story by the Soviet writers B. Zubkov and E. Muslin where the whole world consists of fragile, one-day use things.

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 twelfth birthday. First, we took pictures of the whole neighbourhood. Then I posed in different 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 a more professional 'Zenith', which I got on my fifteenth 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 some developer, fixer and 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 very high quality. Only the paper was sometimes imported from the GDR. Even today I remember the unpalatable hydro-sulphuric scent of the developer and the smell of my hands after a printing session!

There were no conditions for developing and printing at our place: we had no running water and a completely dark room. To do all that we went to Tamarochka, who had got a condo apartment by that time. A printing session always took hours, 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, Tamarochka made pancakes and treated us to them. We prepared the kitchen for printing: 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. One who has never printed photos in his life can hardly imagine how fascinating this process is! You had to watch silhouettes of people and objects gradually appearing on paper in the tank with developer and estimate by the eye when it was time to take the picture out of it! Having snatched the photo from the tank, I galloped to the kitchen water tap and, flushing it for some seconds under running water, threw it into the other tank - with the fixer. There was a third tank in the kitchen sink in which the photos were washed for half an hour in the running water after the fixation. By then Tamarochka had already spread some sports posters from her office on the floor: our photos were drying on them. Quite often the whole room and even the entrance hall were covered with drying pictures till the next morning. Having woken up (for printing we usually stayed at Tamarochka 's overnight), we first of all crawled on the floor to collect them, even before breakfast. Later, when we got gloss agent, the process went a little faster; but with it we had even less time for sleep.

To be an amateur photographer was quite affordable for anyone. When Perestroika started, everything got 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 Shostka¹³³ that is now even located 'abroad': in Ukraine!). As a result, photography as a hobby, once commonly enjoyed by so many people (with photo clubs at schools and in Pioneer Palaces, with millions of followers like us), fell into a decline ...

Can I ever forget the Olympic Games in Moscow! When those Olympic Games began, Shurek and I spent all days in front of the TV. I remember cheering for Miruts Yifter¹³⁴: small and short-sized, but such a strong long-distance runner from Ethiopia!

¹³³ 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.

And the bouts-rimes¹³⁵ compositions! And our trips to Fyodor! Fyodor was the director of a Soyuzpechat shop, where they sold central newspapers and popular magazines, near Tamarochka 's place. He was a very presentable fellow, looking no less important than a top manager of a factory. It was the only store in town where one could buy a variety of magazines of socialist countries. We collected Polish Kobieta¹³⁶ and Ekran¹³⁷, Bulgarian Paralleli and Zhenata dnes, Cuban Mujeres and Neues Leben from the GDR...

In 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 our vegetable plot. I would come there to feed it bread. But for some reason the small fish invariably emerged floating on its back in a couple of days, and I asked Granddad not to do it anymore....

Picking mushrooms was quite another matter! We had a favourite place by the rail track of the railway going to Moscow. Just as for fishing, we had to wake up very early for mushrooms. Many aficionados of mushroom picking would come to the forest almost at night, and if you overslept, you might get there to find only the stalks of 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 house residents. In those days, people went to their own summer cottages for diversion and even if they planted something on their plots, they did it for

¹³⁴ Miruts Yifter (born 1944) is a former [Ethiopian athlete](#), winner of two [gold medals](#) at the [1980 Summer Olympics](#).

¹³⁵ 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, originating in France during the first half of the 17th century, became popular in Russia.

¹³⁶ Kobieta - Polish fashion magazine for women.

¹³⁷ '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 the USSR and Goskino of the USSR. The magazine does not exist today.

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 to the fields to pick cornflowers for sale: in those days there were no homeless people, maniacs, escaped prisoners, addicts or other social products of 'freedom and democracy.'

The smell in the forest was great! And the mushrooms themselves smelled fantastic! Purple and yellow cow-wheat, which we never saw near our house, grew there, and cuckoos called. By an ancient Russian custom, I counted their calls: their number 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 natural, real, unlike the artificially-grown grove of American maple trees at our house: under those American maples no mushrooms grew, except toadstools! Birches, oaks, fir-trees, aspens and hazel-wood grew in that real forest... The forest was not thick, here and there between the woods there were collective farm fields sown with oats or sweet-smelling buckwheat, about which one can only dream nowadays. Neither buckwheat, nor mushrooms are there anymore, just villas and summer houses of some 'new Russians' and other gangsters...

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 in two: 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 fastidious mushroom picker; he never collected anything 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 up in a bog, but finally picked up the way by the sound of the trains. That railway was not like the one near our house; it was really dangerous, trains there ran almost every five minutes at dreadful

speed, going south to the Crimea and the Caucasus. It would never come to our mind to walk along that railway track, as 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 edible 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 at a supermarket, and that those that grow in the forest are just for decoration, dangerous if served for dinner.

Shurek was the only one of us who would ride a bicycle out of town on the highway in summer, and ski behind the railway line in winter. He also worked in the country: after graduation from his institute he had been assigned to work¹³⁸ in a small urban-type settlement about thirty kilometres from our town and stayed there after the compulsory three years of assignment, working at the same factory, where he was quickly promoted to the position of chief economist with his own office. Sometimes he got hints that if he joined the Party he could become director, but Shurek was unambitious, socially inactive, 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 a.m. Sometimes I went to his workplace too. I liked it there. At Tamarochka'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 sometimes served chicken rumps in the canteen.

That settlement was small, cosy and green, with the traditional square and the Lenin Memorial in the centre. All its population worked at the same factory, and everybody knew each other. All the single local girls immediately saw Shurek as an eligible bachelor when he started working there, but somehow they didn't appeal to him. He fancied one lady, but she was already married... Shurek could only elegeize her in our bouts-

¹³⁸ 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 or leave for another job.

rimes. The settlement was international: Armenians and Ukrainians, Belarusians and Kazakhs, and even a Korean family lived there, with a father (by a divine name - Apollo) who worked as a council worker, or to put it plainly, sewage disposal cleaner. The settlement had been built before the war, purposely around the plant, and people from all over the country had come there to work. There were not many such places in my region. Unlike in the settlement, most people in our city were Russian. 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, among them was, for example, the vice-director, a Belarusian named Stepan Anisimovich, called by his wife in an exotic and old-fashioned way - Stiva, as one of the heroes of Anna Karenina. But in general people who worked with Shurek were 'live', human, not exotic. The director had a romance with the chief accountant. I liked her, by the way; Galina Semyonovna was apt to create the atmosphere en famille, and overall was a nice woman. The director's wife worked at the planning department and was, as usual, the only one in the factory who was unaware of the affair.

In autumn Shurek and I picked potatoes in the vegetable plot and apples and plums in the garden. All this was just for our own consumption, even in 'bumper crop' years it was certainly not for sale. It felt good sharing them with people, but the idea of selling them never crossed our mind. We did not have hucksters in our family, and my relatives generally didn't want any part of this activity, holding that *only those who were generally incapable of doing any real work went into sales*, a perception shared by most people. 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 was biking, badminton, mushroom picking and fishing; in autumn there was harvesting, in October fitting the winter frames into the windows again; and in winter there were sleighs, snowmen and New Year...

I believed in Ded Moroz¹³⁹ for a long time and I do not see anything embarrassing about it. Somehow my mother always managed to put New Year's gifts covertly under the tree at the last moment, in such a way that I never saw her do it. The gifts as such weren't so important for me as the mysterious atmosphere of New Year's night. Indeed it seemed that any miracle would come true if you just wished for it strong enough. We always celebrated New Year's Eve at home; nobody went out into the street. Tamarochka came to us to stay overnight, and we had a merry celebration until the morning, at a festive tableful 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 a.m., for particularly steadfast people (as most had fallen 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 was bought on credit¹⁴⁰, when I was in the second form at school. I remember Shurek to literally jump up in his chair with excitement when he switched it on for the first time! Our favourite TV show was Tavern '13 Chairs.' The then presenter of the telecast 'In the World of Animals' was a Georgian by the surname of Zguridi. 'If he were a Georgian, he'd be Zguridze!' - I objected steadily to my household with my naïve understanding of ethnology. Other programs were 'Kinopanorama'¹⁴¹, which was first presented by Kapler (of

¹³⁹ Ded Moroz (liter. Grandfather Frost) - in the [Slavic](#) cultures, the traditional character Ded Moroz plays a role similar to that of [Santa Claus](#).

¹⁴⁰ The author refers to the Soviet system of individual loans. People were able to buy 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.

¹⁴¹ 'Kinopanorama' was a popular Soviet television programme about cinema. It was broadcast 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](#)

course, I had no idea about his relationship with Svetlana Stalin!), later on - by Kapralov; and 'The Documentary Screen' with the poet Robert Rozhdestvensky¹⁴² as a presenter, whom I disliked, though I don't remember why. A little later there came out Aunt Valya's children's program 'Visiting Fairy Tales.' There were so many interesting, developing, spirit-stimulating programs on our television that it would require a separate book to write about them all. And with this top quality TV, it was quite enough for us to have just two channels!

Shurek infected me with an interest in Western pop-music. Of course, he followed the latest in our music too, but with a slightly less zeal - our music appeared to be always there to stay... I sang songs in different languages by ear, without knowing any of those languages. By the mid 1970s Rafael, 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 (sometimes they don't even have to go anywhere, one can now just order or download music on the Internet!), cannot even imagine how exciting it was. It was almost the same as fishing to search on the radio for songs to record. And the songs that we recorded over weekends could quite possibly be compared to the fish we caught.

When Shurek was asked why he didn't get married (we never asked him, of course: his bachelor status didn't bother anyone at home, but some distant relatives who came to visit us and took a drop became as officious as to do so), he felt shy and joked that he would be glad to, but there was no one suitable: he fancied black girls, and there weren't any of them around. And he actually did like black singers: Ella Fitzgerald, Donna Summer and especially the gorgeous Marcia Barrett from Boney M.

If only I had known what impact it would have on my own life later! What with the 'black' music, combined with Shurek's personal tastes, and

daughter, [Svetlana Alliluyeva](#).

¹⁴² 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 Andrei Voznesenskiy, Evgeniy Evtushenko.

with the movie 'How Tsar Peter the Great Married Off His Moor' (yes, this same Tsar Peter, my favourite!), in which the noble and generous Ethiopian Abram Petrovich Hannibal¹⁴³ was oftentimes mocked at by our native snub-nosed racists, and with a pair of books on colonial history and the history of the slave trade, at twelve years of age 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. That book made an effect of a bombshell, it changed my whole life. You can guess what I felt as a nine-year-old after reading on the horrors of slavery and millions of ruined lives! Anger - not just anger, but such a huge rage, that there was not enough space in my heart to contain it. It was bubbling and I was eager to pour it out in a desire to do something to redeem, at least slightly, this irredeemable guilt against the black part of mankind! I would have done better if I sat down, thought it all over and felt proud of my great ancestors, the Russians, who had never taken part in this centuries-long shameful holocaust. But no, I took it as a crime of the whole white race... I began to feel ashamed. I started to read more and more on the subject. The book *Black Outcasts of America*, books on the history of individual African tribes, on Marcus Garvey's movement *Back to Africa*, on the theory of Negritude by Leopold Senghor - on the distinctive originality of the Africans, notes on Rastafarianism... I 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 at how the white planters behaved towards slave women. I knew it from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It would be a good lesson for

¹⁴³ [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 Moor](#).

them if their own daughters and sisters had relationships with slaves in response! Who are these incredible hypocrites 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 that the desire to 'challenge' the others arose in me - and, given the Western audience, long-exposed to anti-Soviet propaganda, I would like to emphasize: it was not in response to anything Soviet. When I was ten or eleven years old, combating racism seemed to me much more urgent than fight for peace, which was daily asserted on the radio and television. Because, after all, we *already had peace*.

And on all that fertile ground the New Year's miracle, in which I had always believed, finally arose. Even though on the surface, those two things were totally unconnected, they were connected only in my head. On 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 a.m. 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 thin, handsome dark-skinned man in some unimaginable shiny clothes and boots, with trimmed-palm-tree-like hairstyle and hairy bare chest, who was spinning like a top - throwing his microphone on the floor, then lifting it up again and, in general, acting on stage as 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, dazzling man, 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 New Year the 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, classes were not cancelled!) Naturally, I didn't have the slightest chance to get to their concert (the more so because I was only eleven at the time), but I carefully collected all the newspaper clippings on their tour and avidly read interviews of the amazing man, who had forever captured my imagination since that New Year's Eve. I

knew from those interviews that he spoke five languages, and that his native language was called Papiamentu. And I looked forward to them being shown on television soon again. Alas, that happened rarely, and I tried to cherish each such occasion in my memory and 're-play' it over again until the next time. VCRs didn't exist at that time yet.

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 that night I went for a sleepover at Tamarochka'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 been moved over there, and I practiced my disco dancing in Tamarochka'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 as if you have wings! The next day (it was Saturday) my head was in the clouds 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 envied then, 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 very modest 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 jams in a jazz-band, tomorrow - sells the Motherland.' It all depends on who is jamming! Never for a moment did I think of selling the Motherland, and never did I think that the West was somehow worthy of imitation or admiration on the sole ground that popular music was produced there. Unfamiliar with the English language at the time, I invested an entirely different meaning in those songs. Now that I actually do understand the lyrics, I almost get sick at hearing many of my favorite old hits... I also invested the images of the idols that had been formed in my mind with an entirely different meaning. 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? Ridiculous!

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, the Soviet people, too saw the world based on our own life experiences. And Boney M. seemed to me noble, lofty, intellectual (a talented person must be intellectual, I thought) and also - remarkably - a representative of the Third World countries: perhaps, it was possible for me to think so, because gossips about their private lives weren't published in our country, and none of us knew then the spiteful and vindictive character of that lady with 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 us girls in 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 Ryazan villages, in Smolensk villages
Women in love are unusual images.
Even when deeply with feeling imbued,
They only say: 'I have pity for you.'

This truly describes my feelings for Bobby. He was my passionate and ardent knight and, at the same time - a defenseless child who had to be pitied and rescued from the evil white exploiters - his producers. With what pleasure did I give a hiding to Frank Farian in my dreams!

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 on the territory of Namibia.

My love for Bobby was my greatest secret. I dreamed about him every night before sleep. 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 the 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. I fantasised Ica Veron to be a 13-year-old fiancée of Bobby Farrell....

Ica was an orphan (therefore none of her parents would resist her early alliance with a man so much older than she was), whom Shurek, also a Corsican, had adopted and brought up. Why 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 Mum!) and Tony Taney, an old lady from New York (which, of course, was our Tamarochka), named 'Steeva Litkevich Disco' or 'SL Disco' for short. It got to the point that I even actually wrote songs for 'SL Disco' and Shurek and I recorded them on his old faithful Dnieper 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 permit Bobby to sing himself, and she came to Bobby to express her pity and encouragement. After that they left for some country where underage marriage was permitted (I remember that I really looked for such information in an 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 (to be as far as possible 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 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 from Macedonia (oh lucky girl!), who was much younger than he. And they met when she was only 14! One more coincidence: Ica and Bobby '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 made 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, contemporary authoresses in all seriousness publish similar nonsense for adult audiences! And someone actually reads it!

I had some special notebooks in which I padded down the names of all new Negritude songs, performers of roles in 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 school tests were called 'press conferences' - I have kept them to this day. And if anyone thinks that I have ever really wanted to live in Western Europe, let them see 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, except that 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!) emerged from 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 through the ground after this phrase. He had stabbed me without a knife.

The mystery was no longer a secret. It turned out that Grandfather got some of my draft papers, and, without looking at them, tore them up and put them where all old papers ended up in our house. 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. I had adored him for a long time, until I entered university, at the age of eighteen, when life brought me into contact with real men. And the 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 anything like he was in my dreams, but how much happiness he brought into my life, without even knowing it!

You can imagine how the others at school reacted to a strange creature like me. Even though our school was the Soviet type, 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 beyond the innocent 'Miron's a snotty dumbhead.' And the character from the iconic novel and film of my youth, *And All That's about Him*, my namesake, Komsomol member Zhenka Stoletov, who was held by my contemporaries as an ethical model to emulate, had also had a strange hobby of collecting pictures of black people from an early age and decorated his tractor with them....

I entered 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, and 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 a.m. to 12.00 (from the 4th year it was till 2 p.m.). There were two shifts at school, and in the 2nd, 5th and 6th forms we studied in the second shift: from 2 p.m. till 6 p.m. In winter I had to go home in the dark, but I even liked it. At least, I could have more sleep in the morning (I am 'an owl', a candle-burner, rather than '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 ceremonies. 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, always wearing 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, but 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 how crucial this turn in my life was. For ten full years. My first day in the first form is impressed on my memory by the sea of white ribbons and aprons (it was our special-day school uniform), and stomach pain caused by the separation from my family, even for a few hours. I didn't know any of my classmates. But my first teacher was familiar to Mum; her younger sister had once been in the same form as she.

I was very lucky with my first teacher: Nelly Timofeyevna was a vigorous, kind, warm-hearted woman - like a second mum to us. She was one of those teachers who love the Motherland and children really, not in a bookish way. 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 residual 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, 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, Alla and Lena, by the way, 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 was exempt from school lunch. 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. On these days, instead of Nelly Timofeyevna, a teacher from the third form, 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'¹⁴⁴. But I was still afraid of her: Valentina Nikolaevna was a big fan of mockery, and I suffered almost physically, seeing her ridicule 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 at 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 note book, 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. 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

¹⁴⁴ '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'. Like all Russian children, the author studied Works by A.N. Ostrovsky at school.

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. Perhaps, the reason was the teasing ('Tilly-tilly-dough, here come the bride and the groom!') or joke questions, 'When's the wedding?', if there was a friendship between a girl and a boy. It was considered something almost shameful. But I think that if I had met a boy with the same interests as mine, I wouldn't have been afraid of any teasing jokes. It was just that the boys in our class... were 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. My friends and I 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 those same boys in the evenings, but there were few of them, and we disliked them the same way as the boys. For some reason our conduct towards the boys mattered much in the 6th or 7th forms (as it was put in the vital question: 'Can a girl be friends with a boy?'). To be friends, of course, in a normal human sense, not in the sense they all too often mean today, under the western influence. 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? If they want 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 form, 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 there

with their mouths open. My mother laughed a lot when I complained to her about them. And I was very angry.

I never wanted to become grown-up more quickly than I was supposed 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 spell words by syllable, 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 3's (C's) in my 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 perplexed 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' - 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 were written. We also sang songs about Lenin, the Revolution, folk songs, e.g. one in a not quite understandable language - in Ukrainian - 'And whose little hut is that?'

Soon, in November of our first year, we became little Octobristsⁱ, and had our own leaders, older girls from the 6th form. We walked around so proudly with our newly acquired badges! Nelly Timofeyevna was full of energy. One day she staged with us recitation of poetry dedicated to Red October, another day she taught us a snowflakes' dance for the New Year children's matinee... In the third class she set up a puppet theatre with us. 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 children's puppet theatres on the city level, with many older kids troupes as our competitors. Moreover, some of them were almost professionals, from the puppet group in the Palace of Pioneers¹⁴⁵! 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 I remember it, they also were somewhat slow on the uptake. 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 misbehaviour!), 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 form I defended the honour of a teacher who I felt was treated poorly, because she couldn't call to order our hooligan Zhora, who drove her to despair with his behaviour. (How does it happen, that kids loved and obeyed our mathematician, who herself was a clunk-head and hooligan, but were ready to eat alive that really cultured and gentle 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!

¹⁴⁵ 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.

...A few years later the same Zhora unexpectedly came up to me during the 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 ‘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 that plague either.

‘Well, come on then!’, I said.

Then I read his answers and was really surprised. This boy, who looked such an incorrigible underachiever and 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, 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 illiterate¹⁴⁶. It is impossible to imagine anything like that after graduating from a Soviet school. But everything begins with this ‘*Oh,*

¹⁴⁶<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>)

*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 rationale is: *Why should people be developed? If they are too clever, they would start 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 their whole life. Besides, 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 'competitions of good deeds' including tutelage of younger children, patronage of elderly people, of pets. There were merry competitions 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 first was the day when we took the Pioneers' 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 that 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 wound around my neck - standing directly opposite the Spassky Tower in Red Square - tears welled up in my eyes. Perhaps it was then that I so keenly felt the continuity of our generations, which before that had been more of a formality to me.

It was the first time in my life that I visited Lenin's Mausoleum. I remember how surprised I was 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 heartily when our boys began to sing a popular song that was still very new back then:

Stop crying, my darling,
The rains will blow over,
The soldier'll come back home,
Just faithfully wait!

In secondary school, however, my most memorable day was ... the final party. After about the fourth form I began to dislike school so much that I literally couldn't wait for the day when I would finish 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 Mum's stories about hers, my school was already very different...

- I don't understand how can anybody not love their school, - she used to say. - When I was a schoolgirl, we swarmed at school like bees round a honeypot. One wouldn't be able to tug us home out of it! If I came down with the flu, I was virtually in mourning. We had thousands of things to do at school. We were always busy doing something, putting up 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 subbotnik¹⁴⁷, 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 Jasienski¹⁴⁸. 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...

... The kids' all-time favourite, Tatyana Pavlovna, was the same sort of teachers as Valentina Nikolaevna - not to be trifled with, rough, fond of making fun of people, she could easily throw a piece of chalk at some disobedient pupil. She never threw anything at me, though: 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 in her tests one had to solve an additional problem, from the extra-curricular material that she didn't explain to us in her lessons. Even

¹⁴⁷ 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.

¹⁴⁸ Bruno Jasiński (1901-1938) was a [Polish poet](#) and the leader of the Polish [futurist](#) movement.

though I studied well, I wasn't fond of maths and technical subjects, despite 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 Mum after that, during which she told her, in her typically sharp way, that, in her opinion, it was not pride, but plain self-adoration on my part. Mum, of course, didn't stay silent, but protested... And so a cold war began between Tatyana Pavlovna and me, and I developed aversion for 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 eighth form. 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 ward at once), and I, who didn't know yet that she was terminally ill, in an attempt to cheer her up, said a rather clumsy joke: 'Tatyana Pavlovna, are you possibly following my example of being off sick for a long time? Get well soon!...'

She smiled, but her face betrayed that she was in pain. In summer when we passed our first school exams, she died. Ever since, when I meet somebody who exhibits inexplicable malice, I ask myself if this person is probably ill...

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 special 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 of them. 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 skis 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 at 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 fall ill, so that I would have to go to school as seldom as possible. After each time being laid up with a 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' to 'two months' in doctors' slips. After all, I reasoned, the school books were quite easy, and I could learn it all myself at home. After that I'd 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 ill: 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 Karlsson Who Lived on the Roof rightly said, it is even pleasant to be ill: '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 on, 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, each for their 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 not knowing what grade 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 grades list. And that's exactly how I felt - free. Liberated.

My illnesses became more or less a byword 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,
Or flame and ice, or verse and prose
Are not so different as were they...'¹⁴⁹.

¹⁴⁹From the poem 'Eugene Onegin' by Alexander Pushkin (1799 - 1837), translated by Ye. Bonver. The poem is studied in depth in all Russian schools. Russian children are expected to learn many citations from it by

It appeared that verse was written about Alla and me.

But despite all, 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 progressing 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 Boyarsky¹⁵⁰ and how our class hooligan Zhora (the very same one, fan of knights' novels with angel's looks) once invited her for pancakes at his house. Naturally, nobody in our class was supposed to know that!

One more thing - we both adored our local theatre...

I have already mentioned this theatre. In 1977 it was 200 years old. 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'¹⁵¹: 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,

heart.

¹⁵⁰ 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.

¹⁵¹ '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.

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 did care. If somebody was drunk, fell into snow by accident and dosed off, there was always a kind soul who would pull them out of the heap of snow and call the militia or even drag the drunk by their coat collar all the way home...

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'¹⁵², Alla and my favourite play, where he played Andrey Yerin who bought a microscope with his bonus secretly from his wife. '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 the 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 city people still call each other 'Comrade' in the street. And if somebody by accident blurts out 'Madam' or 'Sir', there is a loud sound laughter...

¹⁵² 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.

Alla was an image of steadiness. She is one of those who grow up exactly into such a Russian woman as in Nekrasov's poem - 'a runaway horse she will master' - and would look at you with implicit rebuke, if you showed the white feather. She also loved the peasant humour of Shukshin very much and when she heard his jokes, she laughed so beautifully, so infectiously, waving her hands and wiping tears off her eyes: 'Oh, I can't take it anymore! He's 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 Mum are wonderful tailors). Alla and her mum made an extra income with 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 threw them sausages over the wall: for a price, of course (pilfering was punishable, but it still occurred at some works). Alla had a rare ability for such a young age: to see through people. She would mock me about my sickness and sometime complained that she missed me at school. When I came back after the next cold, the first thing she would ask me was:

- Are you back for long this time, or what?

When we were in the eighth form, 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 in the street of my home town and couldn't really imagine what life would be like without him. His death brought not so much sorrow, as curiosity. I was much under impression of what had happened and even wrote a short poem that started like this:

'A hero of folk jokes is gone...' There was criticism of the deceased and others in it - with an exaggerated self-righteousness, that only fifteen-year-olds are capable of...

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 the additional source of information, sometimes peddled in 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, from time to time pretended for the sake of his cause to be a 'liberal', but 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 their

own country, none of us stole things from work or drank or missed work days for no reason?

My first thought of 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 have 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 apprehensive of him, probably because we didn't know what to expect. But that was a sort of 'fear' that resolved into respect. The same sort as the Western books on Andropov, that were published during his lifetime, revealed. Being fifteen, I continued to write my childish poems, critical, typical of that age, including those about him. Once, completely unexpectedly, I saw Yuri Vladimirovich in my dream. He gave me an intelligent and sad look, smiled and said, pointing his finger at me, 'I know what you write about me!' It was the only time in my life that I saw a politician in my dream. He was the only politician whose portrait I completely voluntarily hung up on my wall, during his lifetime...

One of the most well-known things of that time was how they caught people who weren't at work without any valid excuse at the exits of 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 an '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 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 grocery shops were open in the evenings till almost 11 p.m., which was very handy for working women.

But my spoiled generation was upset about the lack of TV and radio programs with English-speaking foreign pop music, some of which had been nearly completely taken 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 were far more horrible things in life than to go without disco music for dessert. Those things would be borne in on my generation later, under Gorbachev and Yeltsin.

I also remember Samantha Smith¹⁵³ - a cute little American girl, who basically paid with her life for her interest in 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 prepared to call off our negotiating team if those negotiations led to nothing. The Western animosity was in such sharp contrast with what followed during Gorbachev's 'peacemaking' that even from the very beginning of the latter, 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 old enemies as quickly as Gorbachev did, was to concede to them everything they asked for. Though it was presented to us as some 'new

¹⁵³ 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.

thinking', one doesn't need any special intelligence to see that there was no political wisdom in taking the lead of one's opponent. Gorbys 'peacemaking' is of the same type as that of spivs hanging around hotels who would accost foreign tourists with their: 'Peace, friendship... chewing gum?'

Speaking about spivs, black market dealers, selling their goods in side streets (trifles 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 corners... 'Pity Andropov isn't there for you!' - I said to one of them angrily.

Yuri Vladimirovich won our hearts when he began his fight against corruption. Even the through and through representatives of the liberal intelligentsia forgave him the 'closedness' of the country. 'First of all we'll sort out things in our own country, and then we'll possibly open our doors for guests', - people used to say. From the onset of this fight 'for discipline from above, not from below', as poetess Yekaterina Shevelyova expressed it, no foreign radio voices could change our opinion of Andropov. And precisely because he started this fight not from below, but from above, as well as resolutely opposed the Western imperialism, it bred suspicions that his death was not natural and that somebody 'helped' him to go from hence into the other world (among those whose interests he began to touch so decisively). There began to circulate rumours that he fell victim to a conspiracy - because of how fast, literally before our eyes, he burnt out like a meteor in the sky. This story is still wrapped in mystery...

When Yuri Vladimirovich fell ill and disappeared from TV screens, I began to think seriously about what was going on, for the first time in my life: not only 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: 'For temporary reasons...'

I reckoned the death of Yuri Vladimirovich as a tragedy, an injustice, something that could have been avoided, and a result of a conspiracy of 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 bathroom. After the lessons, when there was nobody left there. At the time we were in the ninth form, and even though the times had already changed, I doubt that our teachers would have approved of 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...

That 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, Alla and I were thinking about the future of socialism. We tried to determine for ourselves how we could continue to fight for the cause, to which our hero had dedicated his life...

... After school I came home, where a plate of hot buckwheat or mashed potatoes, with cutlets or sausages, or frankfurters with sauerkraut waited for me. I changed clothes (I hated sitting at home in my school uniform) and began to eat and read something. The greatest part of the end of the day was spent reading (that could also be done outside, depending on the weather). After dinner of borsch or rice soup, fried or 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 workers of this or that factory fulfilled their plan before the date due (so far from how many heads Chechen bandits have cut off today and how many children have been 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: I needed revolutionaries around me, but there was *no need for revolution!* From time to time they would announce on the radio that, in compliance with numerous demands of the working people, for the next school year all schoolbooks for children would be free. Or that the paid maternity leave would be extended. Or that prices for some consumer goods would be brought down. Things like that. In a word, we were becoming far too spoilt!

But now, when there is no Soviet Union any more, life has become so 'interesting' that you finally realise the wisdom of the old saying that 'misfortunes tell us what fortune is.'

'Happiness is when my husband and I simply strolled hand in hand to the market on Saturdays,' - says my friend Alla today. Her husband lost his job in the 'golden' years of Yeltsin's rule and 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 a few pages, the years that were full of so many different events...

For some reason I remember very clearly New Year's Eve of 1979: at the turn 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 to 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, fashionable cut glass ware, imported consumer goods. Yes, it was

difficult to get an apartment - but families would get them absolutely free, ready to move in, with heating radiators, electricity, gas ovens, refuse chutes, hot and cold running water, baths and toilets, even with free wallpaper and other finishing. 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 the reduction of prices for some types of goods by ensuring necessary conditions for it and stockpiling trade resources. The index of the state retail prices in the USSR in 1974 was 99.3% in relation to 1965. Payments for housing have not gone up since 1928, as well as the prices for transport and communal services. 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%, while in the developed industrial capitalist countries working people spend on average at least 1/3 of their income on housing, and prices tend to rise.'¹⁵⁴ Nothing to add, really. And that was not just words; nowadays we have a misfortune to compare things ourselves...

Yes, I remember notorious late-Soviet queues. They weren't deadly. And I only saw empty shelves for the first time in my life in **Gorbachev's time**: just then and only then some goods, like soap or vodka, were rationed for the first time in my life. In my childhood nobody went 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 stocked it (a habit of our grandmothers who had lived through the war; who would blame them for that?). Yes, there were just two or three different kinds of cheeses or sausages - very high quality and tasty - in the shops at the same time, rather than thirty. But what is better: two or three kinds of something that is good and 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 and have to buy lower-rate and unhealthy food? 'Democrats' (in Russia,

¹⁵⁴ 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'.

implementers of liberal bourgeois policy), did you try to sell all these things for Soviet prices? Try and see how long your 'abundance' will last!

It was no secret for anybody that shortages appeared because some shop administrators stashed away certain goods and re-sold them to their friends or to 'right people', or sold them 'from the back door' at double or triple the price. They don't like to remember it now, trying to prove the unprovable: that shortages were caused by insufficient production under socialism. Well, to this we may say one can never produce enough for all the thieves and crooks in a country. At the beginning of perestroika, its 'apostles' tried to excogitate explanations to the effect that such behavior was supposedly caused by the 'low wages of the sales personnel.' Are they trying to say that if you give a pay rise to a thief, he'll stop stealing?

They used the same sort of argument about the doctors: 'if they were paid as much as in the West, then they would perform medical miracles.' 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 salaries 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 had an opportunity, we were ready to buy even 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.¹⁵⁵ When we became pioneers, we were admitted 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 admitted. For example, Zhora wasn't. First of all, you were elected as a candidate for Komsomol membership at school level, then you had to go to your district Komsomol committee for an individual chat. I joined the Komsomol as a member in March 1981 - right at the 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 subconscious from the 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 pictures of shooting, people running, screaming and throwing bottles with inflammable mixture (we never called them 'Molotov cocktails') at military vans... I remember how I tried to understand what was happening there and in Ireland in general. In childhood I read such Irish books as Eilis Dillon's *Island of Horses* and Walter Mackin's *Flight of the Doves* in Russian translation. Soviet translations were especially good, among other things, 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

¹⁵⁵ 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.

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 called Bobby Sands in our newspapers, on the radio and on TV by his full name: Robert. That is because in our culture it was seen as unacceptable infantilism for a grown-up man to be called by his short name. That is 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 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 Soviet newspapers, on TV and on the radio. At that time we still had our own correspondents almost everywhere, not just simply translators and copy-pasters of the BBC stuff. Of course, to us the IRA were freedom fighters, modern revolutionaries. If it wasn't for their religious limitations, they'd be priceless. That was when I heard the name 'Sinn Fein' for the first time.

Could I ever imagine that I would end up in Ireland, that life in 'Ulster' would become more or less bearable, while in my own country unemployment and misery would arrive, along with the closures of factories, dilapidation of buildings, evictions of those who could no longer afford to pay for a roof over their heads, humiliation of women, ethnic conflicts, drugs - and the overall total disrespect for the human being, along with the 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 runs, '*don't you dare to raise your hand at him, he saw Lenin himself alive!*'¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ 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,' - the wife shouts, - 'he saw Lenin himself alive!'

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...

...Apart from teachers whom I didn't like, of course I also had those I did like at school. I was really relaxed at the French lessons of Faina losifovna. When she first introduced herself to us, we almost wrote down her name as 'Osipovna' because we never met anybody called 'losif' (apart from singer Kobzon and Stalin, but they didn't write much about Stalin in our books in those days). Faina losifovna corrected us: 'Not Osipovna, but losifovna!' She was a small, plump 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 had been married to our principal but had left her, so the principal didn't like Faina losifovna. But we did love 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 suddenly in a high piping voice:

You're just the same I used to know, my dear,
My eagle of steppe, my Cossack brave...

Imagine how the whole class burst out laughing! And after that we tried to figure out which of us began to laugh first...

When we started the 7th form, the principal finally 'forced' Faina losifovna into retirement. (I met her later a couple of times; she started working at a local library.) Our feelings about her were best expressed by Alla: 'Such a great peasant woman she is!' For some reason nobody paid attention to the fact that that 'great peasant woman' was Jewish, even though she didn't conceal it. But about my other favorite teacher, Emilia Veniaminovna, that was the first thing that came to your mind in class... Interesting, when somebody is congenial to you, you don't even think about their ethnic origin, but if somebody has a strain of nature making them stand out from the rest, people somehow seek a reason for this difference exactly in their origin...

Emilia Veniaminovna taught us the 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 think, I personally was, and I felt good at 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 the Russian language nowadays?'

The silliest thing was that that boy himself was a Russified Jew. 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, and unlike him, was an excellent pupil, was of Jewish origin too.

Emilia Veniaminovna didn't reply to him; she was too well-mannered for that. She didn't even complain to anybody. But I couldn't stand it:

- Well, we can't help it, Oleg, if some Russians don't know how to write their own language properly!

Later I got to know Emilia Veniaminovna a lot better. I corresponded 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, who learnt German as her major, and I was afraid that my knowledge of French with such a teacher would be insufficient to pass entrance exams to 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 in their house. I had never before seen the ordinary life of my teachers, and it was interesting and a bit weird to see Emilia Veniaminovna wearing an apron in the kitchen. I was also interested in how Jews lived, whether they had any specific traditions (at that time I had 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 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 ninth form we got a new mathematics teacher, Galina Afanasyevna, in place of deceased Tatyana Pavlovna. She was a very young woman, just six years older than we, but already divorced. From the very beginning she tried to establish herself on an equal footing with us: 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 mistaken her for one of the schoolgirls...

We took exams twice during our school life: in the 8th form and the final ones in the 10th. After the 8th we had algebra and the Russian language, orally and in writing (three exams in total). The final exams

were seven: an essay, Russian literature, algebra, physics, chemistry, history and social science and a foreign language.

When I later saw how in Ireland (in the North) they tortured children by forcing them to 'define their future' at the age of eleven, when they had to take exams that would determine the sort of school (grammar, technical or secondary) in which they would continue their education, I was just shocked. Given that the first three years of primary schools they basically hardly teach them anything: they play with toys, blow bubbles and almost 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 *Kin-dza-dza!*: 'When there is no color differentiation of pants in a society, life has no goal, and when there is no goal....'

By the way, any of us could 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 grades (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' in BMT (Basic Military Training)¹⁵⁷. 'In what?' - they looked at me curiously in Moscow while I applied for entrance at MSU.

¹⁵⁷ 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.

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. 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 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 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 was 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 History faculty, - I said honestly.

- Well, thank God for that, because I remember you fantasised about ethnology or something! - she responded.

She was wrong to think that I had become wiser: I just had read that you could become an ethnologist after graduating in History. Most of all, to be honest, I would have loved to study at Institute of Asian and African Studies 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 that 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 then my attitude towards the Party and Komsomol activists had significantly changed and can best be expressed by an old joke about a 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 towards the 'Party activists': We saw with our own eyes that usually it was those who were incapable of anything but smooth talking, who always aimed at becoming such activists. Almost the same type of people who went into sales, only more ambitious. We saw and felt their insincerity when they made their speeches at school and that averted us from the idea of activism: God forbid, my friends would think that I was like one of those ones, 'a cork fit 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 the 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 fake communists 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 didn'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 could you make about a man who was far worse than any joke in real life?)

Sometimes, though, I felt hurt that I wasn't fully trusted. As, for example, in the case with Institute of Asian and African Studies 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 there was also enough human garbage among Moscow men with great reference letters. I met some such people later on at Institute of Asian and African Studies: Vasya, a Muscovite, who had graduated from the IAAS, was fluent in Portuguese and had worked in Angola and Mozambique, 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 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 that wasn't overt: almost as the Dutch racism that you feel, but can't prove in court. And that made it even more hurtful...

At the same time, you couldn'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 times newspapers didn't write about every silly thing (and that was for the better: why would we decent people care to know of somebody's private life, some nitwits' views on anything, or some criminal fracas? Or to read: 'church floor collapsed in Canada hurting thirty-nine people.' So what?), but if any real problem had been raised in the media, no doubt, serious measures would have been taken, and the culprits would have been punished.

Gorbachev's 'glasnost' simply turned our media into tabloids Western-style, where you can, for example, read almost every day of the horrors of

sex slavery in their own countries, but nobody raises a finger to really fight it: they just say their ritual ‘oh!’ and ‘ah!’ over these sleazy facts and enjoy life until the next article. **To come to a clear conclusion is the biggest taboo of any Western-style journalist.** And God forbid if they call for action: that ‘would disturb the balance and objectivity’...

Our Soviet journalists - I mean, the proper ones, of course! - had conscience, a clear civic position, not like that of some amoebae - microscopic protozoans which perpetually change their form, whose ‘objectivity’ reminds me of Trotsky’s position on the Treaty of Brest: ‘No peace and no war, and disband the army...’¹⁵⁸ -that is, leave 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, - Right in front of you two big men are dragging a boy away, and you are trying to cover up their crime out of fear.

*- I didn’t want to cover it up, no, but they asked me to. And what if they have the right to drag boys away?’*¹⁵⁹

... The graduation party was long... When it was over - at 3 a.m. - the whole class walked to the local park throughout the town. This park was open that whole night on purpose for secondary school graduates, and all the attractions were there for us for free! We wandered about till dawn, and I didn’t see a single seventeen-year-old who was drunk or fighting anybody, not to mention worse things. Everybody was cheerful and happy. Because we, the school kids of the early 1980s, weren’t yet accustomed to ‘universal human values’ to such an extent that we couldn’t imagine enjoying ourselves without drinking, having sex and beating each other up.

Alla and I 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

¹⁵⁸ 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.

¹⁵⁹ Kir Kulychev, One Hundred Years Ahead

it was safe. In Soviet times they checked on the safety of amusement rides regularly. We were 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, I was certain. All the roads were open to me.

... Why ethnography? Interest in different nations - not just African ones! - a desire to learn more about them and general internationalist feelings grew in me in my final school years. Maybe because there were so few people of different ethnic groups in our town.

- Comrades, 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 the 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, she was from Minsk. The letter was addressed 'to a girl, a pupil of the 7th form of the secondary school No 5 of the town...' and she wrote about herself, about her family, her hobbies and her city...

I got so interested in writing letters that I 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 the union republics and all autonomous republics of our great multi-ethnic country. Just TV concerts on the Day of the 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 lived, how my age mates breathed in its different parts. I wanted to learn a few, even the simplest words in the languages of all peoples of my country, including Nogai¹⁶⁰ and Selkup¹⁶¹.

¹⁶⁰ 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.

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 the 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 much to write about, but please reply to me soon!' (indeed there were some such letters too), a lot can be gathered from my collection about life in the USSR in the 1980s. That is what I explained to excessively zealous Tamarochka, who was always trying to throw them away, to clear a shelf in her storage room: 'It is a historical source!' Of course, everybody looks at any source for something that confirms his or her vision of the world. For example, today's 'democrats' would have grasped at the letter from Eliza Chen from Tajikistan, who would tell how 'Tajiks tease us' (Koreans) by the nickname 'The Death of Japan,' to support their thesis that the USSR was a 'prison of peoples.' Although in reality, it was just an ordinary way of children's tease, based on appearances. Take the harmless teasing of ginger-haired people, for example: 'Red-haired, freckly-faced, all his family disgraced.'¹⁶²

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

¹⁶¹ 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.

¹⁶² 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.

age, who dreamt of 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 a very remarkable article - In the light of what Chechnya now has become, about a 10-year-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 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 common language. Their hearts would usually melt as soon you exhibited interest in their culture and language, and I could never understand why Russians who lived in those republics couldn't exhibit such interest, if only 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 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 Turkmenbashi. Maral had ten brothers and sisters. After finishing school she was 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 German and asked my advice on that matter (as if I had any experience to give her 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 had whole Czech

villages since the epoch of Catherine the Great. And Tanya from Kiev, who was personally acquainted with Dean Reed himself! And the 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 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 didn't have a bike, but just walked in all weather, winter and summer, carrying a huge mailbag over her shoulder. 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 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 known the most well-read nation in the world, and rightfully so. I myself in our family received by mail the magazines Young Naturalist, Pioneer, Camp Fire, the 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. 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. Serguei Kara-Murza¹⁶³, scathing the delusional liberal intelligentsia, gives the system of subscription as an example: 'As a result of the autistic way of thinking the intellectuals' 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, to a rationally thinking individual it is obvious that any

¹⁶³ 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.

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 occur to the liberal intelligentsia, who veritably dreamed of freedom of a worm, which is not limited by any skeleton.... We remember that in 1988 intellectuals considered 'the removal of limits on subscriptions' to be an act of freedom, the most important event of the year. An epoch-making significance was attached to this small act. What did an 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 subscribe for newspapers and magazines was itself a product of Soviet 'totalitarianism.' And an average cultured family subscribed to 3-4 newspapers and 2-3 heavy magazines - there is nothing like this in the free West... The Literary Gazette had a circulation of 5 million copies! After killing this 'totalitarianism', the intelligentsia entrusted the new regime with imposing by market methods such limits on subscriptions, 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 fell 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 had never ever been robbed! Grandpa usually gave her a pension 'tip': he rounded off the amount and gave the excess to Aunt Lida: 'for her work.'

It was especially convenient to write responses to all the letters when I was on a sick leave at home. 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 reply 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 form 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 the 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 those 'gentlemen of fortune' were distinguished by a special kind of sentimentality and pity for themselves, lame ducks, and none of them felt guilty of anything they had done. Having read those letters, none of which I answered, I could later accurately figure out who was an ex-convict in real life, by their style!

Sashka didn't fall into any of those 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 only his grandmother, who had moved to Kazakhstan from the Far East, spoke Korean in his family. 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 for 'Maxim' or

Playboy. Also sportsmen didn't have to become racketeers, which was the post-Soviet career of my second cousin...

Sashka was a very sincere, direct and overall good guy. He said what he believed, and he believed in what he said. He believed that our country was 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, to paraphrase Pushkin, *on me spleen mounted sentinel and like my shadow dogged my life*, but I was frankly jealous of 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, his good intentions to work and increase the national economy in the rural location faded. He described his farm hostel with distaste. Well, such was our generation: things that had not scared off 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, rather than how to return to the asphalt pavement as soon as possible and 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 Sergeevich¹⁶⁴ - 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 had made sacrifices in the past in order that we should live better, but we - we would already not have to sacrifice anything for anyone....

Sashka struck lucky: since he was an athlete, he quickly got out of the 'hell' of the collective 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 the infectious diseases inherent in our intelligentsia a couple of years earlier than he did, and I got over them exactly when he was catching them. It hurt my heart to observe him going through the same delusions, without listening to someone who 'had already been there.'

At the time when Sashka was a Soviet patriot, I temporarily 'suffered' from a typical malaise - romanticising the Western 'civilization.' Though for me it was never absolute: for example, I was aware of all the great harm colonialism and the slave trade had done to the peoples of the world. I did realise what the foreign policy of the Western countries amounted to. As I said before, I had never been given to the adulation of the West and wasn't interested in the Western 'rags.' But after my first trip to the Netherlands in the late 80's there was a short period in my life of such romanticising (this is what I am now incredibly ashamed of, for neither before nor after did I suffer from such blindness as then). I am looking for explanations for this, and I can't find any. Perhaps it is connected with the fact that, when a student, I discovered that the racism which officially did not exist in our country, was in fact alive and

¹⁶⁴ 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.

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 a 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-groomed Holland that for a long time had been associated with nothing else but the smell of grilled chicken. I often asked myself in Moscow: how on Earth was it possible here?

At that time I was still unaware of the fact that 'all that glitters is not gold.' The fact that in reality completely wild racist prejudices were raging in the hearts of so many of those 'civilized' Dutch people, and they were finally able to blurt it all out after a right-wing Dutch politician named Pim Fortuin vocally expressed what they had been thinking all the time.

In a word, I tried to convince Sashka that 'civilization' was there. He, quite rightly, pointed out the advantages of socialism to me, advantages which at that time were simply taken by us for granted, as something natural, like air. Maybe this is why Sashka's letter seemed to me so dull and vapid, like speeches of our leading ideologists at party conventions...

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, for example, that every progressive person simply must marry a person of another nationality: because only interethnic marriages were 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 your ideal may turn out to be not as revolutionary as he should have been, by virtue of belonging to a nation of oppressed people, but most possibly a vicious little bourgeois...

When Sashka married a Korean girl, whom he had played chess with, 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 father's instincts are so strong!' I wrote to him. 'Instincts are something that animals have, but I'm a kind of human being, I think!', Sashka retorted, 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 course we had a lot of arguments about nationalism. I couldn't understand why Kazakh youngsters started rioting when a Russian was appointed as the first secretary of the Communist Party there. 'I wouldn't care if a Kazakh or a Russian would rule over our country, as long as this person is suitable for the job!' I wrote to Sashka. 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 had begun to move out of Kazakhstan even before that. Russians and Ukrainians, one after another, moved to Russia... But he was most shaken by the departure of his best friend - the Greek Kostya - to his 'historical homeland', where he had never been before and didn't even speak Greek. 'How could he?! How could he leave his Motherland, which brought him up and gave him everything?' Sashka wrote to me with indignation. However, in less than two years Sashka's indignation absolutely disappeared. Now he suddenly '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 to me - it came like a bolt out of the blue sky and struck me right in the heart. It wasn't like my earlier quite gentle criticism, because I had never, not even in the period of my errors, come out against the principles of socialism. No

matter how I tried to tell him about the reality of Western life now, that I had realized what the West is like for myself (so far from my two-month 'tour' without problems and responsibilities), he would not listen to me. He kept repeating the same mistakes through which I had already passed, and even went further. He went ahead 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 and 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 had 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 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 had always believed so sincerely; just because some of those monsters have assured you, like 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 Nazarbayev¹⁶⁵ and Yeltsin were your arguments, are they really true Communists?

...Sashka doesn't write to me anymore. He hasn't written for several years already, despite the fact that I regularly send him postcards on every holiday and sometimes 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 capitalist countries as well, and I was almost drowned in a heap of messages from *les jeunes Algeriens*¹⁶⁶, 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. These words exhibited 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 him to be. First of all, I had already got 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 the skin colour of chocolate milk. He had extraordinary eyes: wide, of an amazing almond

¹⁶⁵ Nursultan Nazarbayev (born 1940) 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.

¹⁶⁶ Young Algerians (French)

shape. Later I realized that it was a hereditary trait in their family on his father's side: they are Latin American Indians (Sonny's 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* ¹⁶⁷]. 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 yet a terra incognita 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, a 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

¹⁶⁷ Fried potato covered with a mayonnaise, ketchup, curry dressing, peanut oil, and stewed with an onion

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 seeking me out. 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 ¹⁶⁸! I have dreamt of 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'Alvadorez¹⁶⁹, I had 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 had 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 Prince Charming 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 had to leave soon, and I could hardly come there again (we had already spent a considerable sum of my grandmother's savings on this trip!)? 'On the one hand, on the other hand ...' I was speaking like some Tevey the dairyman¹⁷⁰ !

¹⁶⁸[4] Dushi (stress on 'u') - endearing name in Papiamentu, 'dear', literally 'sweet'

¹⁶⁹ '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.

¹⁷⁰ Tevey the dairyman is the protagonist of several of [Sholem Aleichem's](#) stories, originally written in [Yiddish](#) and first published in [1894](#).

At that 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 ¹⁷¹.

Whether that brought me any happiness, is another thing...

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'.

¹⁷¹And 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' ¹⁷²

(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. Outside there was a car 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 for 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.

¹⁷² 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 (Papiamentu).

‘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 form.

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 with a heart and 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 scene¹⁷³ 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*¹⁷⁴, 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!'

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!)¹⁷⁵ 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

¹⁷³Pim Fortuyn - Dutch politician - reme nationalist (1948-2002).

¹⁷⁴ Varken - pig (Dutch).

¹⁷⁵ Geert Wilders, Rita Verdonk - Dutch nationalists-populists.

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 green¹⁷⁶ (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!

'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!'

¹⁷⁶ 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 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.'

'Hmm ... 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 him¹⁷⁷.

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 for 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.’

¹⁷⁷[5] A scene from the Belgian comedy ‘Coco Flanel.’

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!¹⁷⁸') '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.

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...

¹⁷⁸ Nice to meet you! You have such a cute little backside (Dutch)

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*¹⁷⁹ 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*¹⁸⁰ - 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 beleg¹⁸¹. 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

¹⁷⁹ The Dutch supermarkets.

¹⁸⁰ One package of coconut bread and one smoked sausage per week.

¹⁸¹ Mincemeat for a sandwich.

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 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 cloudberryes 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 language from Hans Kazan's 'Prijzenslag': 'Kom maar naar bedenken en sla je slag!' ¹⁸². 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

¹⁸² A Dutch version of the TV show, 'Wheel of Fortune'

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!'¹⁸³) 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.

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: *Komsomolers - noble spirits, restless hearts, Komsomolers always finish what they start*. At that time my mother said that as soon as some careerist Komsomol leaders finally reached the age when they'd govern for real, they'd finish what they started even at a price of destroying the country. Though tainted with dark irony, it proved to be prophetic. Gorbachev was

¹⁸³ Soviet song by Lyudmila Lyadova

too old for the Komsomol, but like in the song, 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, everyone's 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*¹⁸⁴ to make our lives easier. But this inevitably meant that he would have difficulties with his studies, 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*¹⁸⁵ in Enschede was very difficult to find. I was surprised when I remembered how our boys - students at

¹⁸⁴ Temporary worker (Dutch)

¹⁸⁵ Temporary work (Dutch)

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 students' 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 ¹⁸⁶, but I had none. I had a pen-friend in that city, by name of Esther, who 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 unfashionable 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 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' ¹⁸⁷, 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

¹⁸⁶ Illegally, without paying taxes

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 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 dictate to me what to do.

¹⁸⁷ 'It became summer' - a song about the first sex experience of a Dutch teenager

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, amesagenallesh. ¹⁸⁸

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's so very proud of white skin and race,

That sleeps in the antechamber - that's a right place!' - as the lines from Samuil Marshak's poem 'Mister Twister' read. ¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ - How are you? - Thank you, fine. (Amharic)

¹⁸⁹ 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.

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'?¹⁹⁰ 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 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.¹⁹¹ 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 Carlsson'¹⁹² 'and 'you shouldn't be too demanding to some...'

¹⁹⁰ 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'.

¹⁹¹ Be in full swing

¹⁹² Karlsson - the character of a Soviet animated serial, based on A. Lindgren's book.

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 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,¹⁹³ 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?

¹⁹³ Gentleman (Dutch)

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 stopping 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'¹⁹⁴ really were or 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.

¹⁹⁴ Norms and values (Dutch)

- I never go on the street selling the newspaper De Straatkrant! ¹⁹⁵, - 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.

¹⁹⁵ Newspaper for homeless (Dutch version of 'Big Issue')

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 enter a plant you needed a pass, I visited my mother at 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 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 ¹⁹⁶, where we would gladly walk about 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' ¹⁹⁷ in chorus! That song had just been released on air.

¹⁹⁶ the Russian acronym for Moscow All-Union Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy.

¹⁹⁷ A. Pakhmutova (1929) - one of the best Soviet composers of popular music. Moscow Conservatory graduate she composed music for Symphony

'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 into jail...' - the top of today's lyric creativity.

And once all the department went on tour to Ostankino Tower ¹⁹⁸ and had lunch in one of its three high-rise restaurants: I think in the Bronze one. By the way, we could well have selected 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 sunbathe 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 sunbathe 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.

orchestras, ballets, wrote songs for National Children Choir and numerous films. The song 'Hope' (1975) remains one of the most favourite with Russians.

¹⁹⁸ 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 hours' 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-rope 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 were boozing 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 there myself. I did go to collective farms as a duty with my schoolmates several times. But the agricultural tours with my mother's workmates was absolutely voluntary, and 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 ¹⁹⁹. 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 ²⁰⁰ 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.

¹⁹⁹ Prince Bernard was the father of queen Beatrix

²⁰⁰ Adinda was the character of a famous anti-colonial novel written by the Dutch writer Multatuli 'Max Havelaar'.

- My God, I am not mean, I've simply never cooked more 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!²⁰¹ - 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 verkeerd*²⁰² and eating cakes (I preferred *schwarzwaldkirschentaart*)²⁰³. 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.

²⁰¹ People, children! (Dutch)

²⁰² 'wrong coffee' is coffee in which there is more milk than water (Dutch)

²⁰³ Black Forest Gateau (Dutch>)

- 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 everything we needed. They say in Russia: one who searches always finds²⁰⁴, 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 had only given 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 *allochthonous* ethnic groups do not want to integrate. Isn't it too late to fret and fume?

²⁰⁴ All good things come to those who wait

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'²⁰⁵. 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'. *Help the Russians to survive the winter!*'

What? Was there a war? And even in war, have we ever begged for help?

²⁰⁵ A Russian 'anecdote', i.e. joke

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 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*'²⁰⁶ 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 Brabanters²⁰⁷, the vast majority of whom have Catholic roots, their culture being closer to the Flemish than the sober and boring Protestant Twente inhabitants²⁰⁸.

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 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 Curaçao,.... Another branch of the family settled in Apeldoorn.

²⁰⁶ Modern industrial city

²⁰⁷ Brabant is a province in the south of <<Netherlands>>

²⁰⁸ Twente is the area in the very east of the <<Netherlands>> in the Overijssel province.

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, whom I later met in Curacao, was a complete contrast to him; 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 kabritu²⁰⁹, galina stoba²¹⁰, Johnny cakes²¹¹, funchi²¹², kos di lechi di koko²¹³ genti di kacho²¹⁴, keshi yena²¹⁵, empana²¹⁶... My favorite drink is still poncho krema²¹⁷. It is customary to take children of all ages to such parties, including infants, although they 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'²¹⁸. - *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!*²¹⁹

²⁰⁹ Soup with chevon

²¹⁰ Braised chicken

²¹¹ 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

²¹² A kind of mush, similar to semolina, like West-African fufu

²¹³ <Antilles> sweets made from coconut milk

²¹⁴ Literally 'dog's teeth' is a kind of sweets

²¹⁵ Farci piece of cheese

²¹⁶ <Antilles> cakes

²¹⁷ Ponche krema is a Venezuelan liqueur, made from rum mixed with milk, eggs, sugar, vanilla, lemon and cinnamon.

²¹⁸ Piggishness (Papiamento)

²¹⁹ Oh my God! What piggishness, mates! They are pigs! (Papiamento)

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 jeeps, security guards in shops and American refrigerators there 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 than Sonny's. She had no Zomerbergs' 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 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'²²⁰. It wasn't easy. Sonny didn't explain why something was so or 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 Papiamentu. 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'²²¹: 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.

²²⁰ Vallen en opstaan - fall and stand up (Dutch.)

²²¹ Underroasted macho (Dutch.)

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 Semenov²²² 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 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 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 sweat it out: as a director of Yuri Nikulin's famous clownery, he needs his exemplary hard workers to '*sweat it out cheerfully*'! The culture of enforced fun begins already on the lowest steps of the social ladder...

²²² 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.

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!' ²²³ 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!..

²²³ Twelve hamburgers on the stove

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 were 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 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 of Emergency (GKChP) ²²⁴ 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 when he learnt 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...

²²⁴ State Emergency Committee - a group of eight Soviet high-level officials who attempted a coup d'etat with the purpose of saving the country from the disaster Gorbachev had led it to.

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'²²⁵ 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 immunity against various thimble-riggers, including political spin-doctors (the brand of Western democracy) - there had been no such need before. 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 to 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 live and rejoice.

²²⁵ The program of transition to 'the market economy' in just 500 days engineered by Gregory Yavlinsky and S. Shatalin that virtually promised the people paradise on earth after such a transition.

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 ²²⁶ 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, 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....

²²⁶ Annual public transport ticket for students (Dutch)

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 'multiple 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*²²⁷ - a sort of Sovietology in Dutch. It was not only the history of our country - from the Western (Dutch-variety) perspective, but also social studies, economics and even law. Such wild hodge-podge.

²²⁷ Ruslandkunde - Studies on Russia (Dutch)

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. It was a book which claimed that our women were working because their husbands did not earn enough money to live on (!) There were a lot more nonsensical claims. For example - in dead earnest - that the USSR had no Labour Unions. Such 'experts' - in whose own country, by the way, there are almost no female doctors or female professors, apparently because their husbands do earn enough! - graduate from Dutch's higher schools....

I was happy when that 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 uneasy about going home - because I hadn't asked permission to marry in the Netherlands. Who knows how long the authorities would make me stay there... The emigrant press, Dutch-grown experts on Soviet affairs and teachers intimidated folks like me 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 Verde Islands! 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 all crooked, with a small child. She had been dyed blonde, but her dyeing was done so unskilfully that she looked artificially red-haired.

- Suzanne - she introduced herself. - Sorry for the delay, we were visiting our aunt in Brussels.

A middle-aged lady with a determined 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 shower and toilet 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 looked out onto 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. A stairway led from the window to the garden. Using it, 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 utter devastation: some old couches stood there, and lamps, and jars of pickles, which Madame Popescu was obviously 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 asking them how they had got that apartment.

- We have 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 a 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 Westen²²⁸ on Saturday, but in order to register the gas and electricity supply in 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 old flats. Periodically the geyser spontaneously extinguished, and we inflamed it, risking our lives (who knows, perhaps, 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-by 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...

²²⁸ Quarter in Rotterdam-West

The quarters had bad reputation, but nothing had happened to us over the five years of living there. Once you were known in the quarters as locals, you were treated accordingly. The Moroccan neighbour from the coffee-shop helped me to convey home a Christmas tree in a bucket (Sonny was flatly against celebrating any holiday, and in such cases I adorned the house alone). Everything was close at hand: 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*. (It is exactly there that 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 two-three *true Aryans* appeared on the street, people looked at them as if they were from the moon, and they even got scared! The Dutch had never been notable for courage, despite their long tongues (*grote bek*).

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 the Moroccan neighbours' place collapsed during the night, and the government immediately gave them a new apartment, while 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 - close to Feyenoord stadium - during 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 a remark of one of them: 'I've paid for what I'm eating!'

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 five or six children at home, and parents had no choice what to feed them on). Sometimes, when they were throwing food before our faces, a plump sissy boy (or girl), working exclusively for his (or her) pocket money, dumped over a full tray in the trash, cheerfully proclaiming to the entire kitchen: '*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: under the guise of customers, guests from the corporate headquarters had planted a purse. The guy who found it - a cleaner, a migrant worker, honestly gave it to the manager. The purse had been hidden in a safe. Some time later the owner came back for his wallet, but the manager told him we hadn't found it. 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 again managing some migrant workers, teaching them how to work! I bet if the thief had not been a blond Dutchman, that 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 didn't.

Periodically, Sonny called, sometimes even at night (due to time difference) and was very offended when I said once: 'You know, what time it is?' In the domain 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 not longer lives here! - I said.

- That's interesting ... - he said. - She's rented the housing for herself, and has not paid for it for three months now. Excuse me, and who are you?

My heart 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 corporations, where Madame Popescu has rented it. But she hadn't paid for the past several months, so he came to find out what was wrong.

- Pardon my indiscreet question, but how much do you pay her?

I told him. The gentleman clutched 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 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 were 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 it specified certain time - well, say, a year, then next year she might turn you out. Now - I suggest you should take this document 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 if I could 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 at this place. I sympathize with you about this situation. 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 would immediately quit his internship and come back! So we decided to keep mum until his come-back and 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), putting 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 her 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 have hated this state of mind ever since. I felt the same two or three more times in my life in different circumstances.

...As for 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 the specific jargon, added to the foreign language. When finally the case was settled - by the termination of the contract with Madame Popescu and signing it with us (she still was 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. Sonny impatiently snatched the piece out of the box, while the courier 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 on the hot piece and, it seemed to me, grew pale. He then refused eating that pizza (and it was a tasty calzone²²⁹).

- What if she wants to poison us? - he whispered to me.

... 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 Willemstad²³⁰! 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.

²²⁹ A pizza with some stuff inside, like a pie

²³⁰ 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 true professional! - was a dark-skinned girl from Sint Maarten, who studied at 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 they were discriminated on the basis of their origin (ABC islands ²³¹), having lost the victory to that girl - just because she was English-speaking. I didn't know that there were such serious odds among the inhabitants of those 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.'²³²

The winner, as if feeling that not everyone was overjoyed 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 her 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 filled with tears.

There also sang a guest at the festival - a cheerful middle-aged Aruban, 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!

²³¹ ABC- Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao

²³²Les forestiers - people from the forest, Southern Guineans

After the competition itself there was a 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, he looked on you somehow differently from the rest of the Antilleans. He altogether lacked the typical Antillean 'machismo.' He had large black eyes, like a wild antelope, was tall, thin and flexible as a reed. He wore 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'²³³, 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:

- It means that you do not want to dance with me, but with a *mariku*²³⁴ !!! ... - he said with reproach and contempt.

Mariku? Others would be happy in his place! There was no reason for jealousy.

²³³ 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!'

²³⁴ *Mariku* - homosexual (papiamento)

Those who are familiar with the Antillean culture, know that *marikunan*²³⁵ 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:

*'... No queremos mariflor,
No queremos mariflor,
No queremos ma-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 ...'*

And even:

*'Busca la solucion para echar a un homosexual
Pam, pam, muerte es la solucion ...'*²³⁶

I did not know Spanish or Papiamentu (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.

²³⁵ Marikunan - plural from mariku

²³⁶ The song of a <<Panama>> singer Nando Boom 'No queremos mariflor' of anti-homosexual content, that was very popular on the Antillean islands in 1992.

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).

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*²³⁷, 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 Dienst²³⁸ is always on his heels thinking that he earns on the side... In short, nothing good for 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 not felt 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 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, with him on my mind...

²³⁷ Cheese-heads (nickname for the Dutch)

²³⁸ The organisation giving the dole (Dutch)

- 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

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 for a bunch of prostitutes: we were transported by taxi after our shift, and my route went along the 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 was my usual 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?

... 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.

- Hmm... 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 any differences between them? What has changed over a couple hundreds of years? He is the same - thinking that he is a gift for an indigene, like all planters, and she has a slave's inferiority complex and needs a 'white man' for self-assertion... Have these *Pocahontas* slightest dignity?

The flight to Curacao is rather long, no less than nine hours. It was difficult to fall asleep because of the smell of last night alcohol, which was already emanating from the Dutchman. They never stopped serving 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 Kora²³⁹. Somewhere on the background of the desert, resembling 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 a rarity in Europe!), I completely forgot how hot it was outside and was off my guard every time I stepped out of the cool, comfortable depth.

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.

²³⁹ Tera Kora - Red Earth (Papiamento), the region on the north of <Curacao> not far from Hato airport.

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 noticed on our way to Sonny's house, 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 engaged in agriculture in Curacao. Soil is too arid here. There are no rivers on the island, it is dry almost all the year round, rains sweep noisily and after them everything dries out almost immediately. Besides groundwater springs in some places (people who have one on their sites, also usually have a well at their house), drinking water is extracted by the desalination of seawater, which is very expensive. The same water is used for irrigation, and therefore good green gardens are a luxury that not anyone can afford.

And the Portuguese are famous for their wonderful ice cream.

The land around was quite dry, though not so red as close to the airport. There were some plants that grew here sporadically - thorns and all forms of cacti. From the top of the plane they looked like toys, but in reality they are 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 swept on one side by the continuous sea wind, similar in shape to candles, blown out by a strong wind. They were called *divi-divi*.

Flocks of homeless 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*²⁴⁰ 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* had no intention of falling on a human's 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.

²⁴⁰ Lizards (Papiamentu)

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 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 pretu²⁴¹ 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.

²⁴¹ Bolo pretu - literally 'a black cake', a long Antillean cake, containing prunes and alcohol. It is cooked on special occasions.

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 dissatisfied with everything. I remember when somebody was getting a job, he complained that young people were untidy. To come for 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.²⁴²
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 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....

²⁴² She is very tired. Leave her alone! (Papiamento)

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 was no kitchen in the house, but there were two small bedrooms - ours and Omayra's, a shower-room with a toilet, and a hall, that was reinforced with rusty dusty fitness machines on which Omayra worked it out from time to time to dispel 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.

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 the full sun! I could not but release 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 ²⁴³ 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 Paisley²⁴⁴ assures, that this place must become a model for the rest of the world...

²⁴³ Westpunt - extreme West area on <Curacao.>

²⁴⁴ Ian Paisley - Protestant Unionist politician in Northern Ireland, leader of the DUP, First Minister in the first joint local administration with Sinn Fein

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 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 any 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 ²⁴⁵, the newer part of the city. Generally, there are no 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 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?

²⁴⁵ Literally 'another side' (Papiamento)

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 - 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*²⁴⁶ on the Venevisión channel. 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 habitually watched *Super Sabado Sensasional* on the same channel. She addicted me to Colombian *vallenato* music. At that time a popular Colombian singer Raphael Orozco was shot dead, and one of Saturday night programmes 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 that time, my emotions for Latino music had been rather lukewarm. Apparently, if you want to love some particular folk music, you should plunge into the atmosphere in which it was created and executed...

²⁴⁶ 'Cara Sucia' - 'Slob' (Venezuelan soap opera)

There was 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 there. 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!*²⁴⁷ - 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 that Guillermo Davila, an actor playing in *Cara Sucia*, performed there. Omayra wanted to see it and went there with us, even being ill. *Mai* had forbidden her to leave the house (an amazing thing: *Mai* was not even her relative, but 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.

²⁴⁷ He is not going to jump anymore (Papiamento)

Omayra had an only son whom she loved very much. He was twelve. But he did not grow up with her, he was living 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 might recollect the Soviet film *Ladies Asking Gentlemen for a Dance*, 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 at that. 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 of a day when her son would finally come home for a vacation...

And she also had a secret which she divulged me: a few years before she had tried to commit suicide and swallowed some 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 about the room. And when she came to, they send her to live at *Mai's* house - far away from her own relatives.

When I recall that Omayra's birthday is on the same day as Lisa's, I feel very ill at ease ... It is not good to be so superstitious, but I just can't help it.

Willemstad was as two-layer as Omayra's life: merry on the surface, tragic on the underside. 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 couldn't afford electricity cut off for non-payment. Money was rather spent for petrol - it was necessary for getting to work. Naturally, such people did not use refrigerators, and because of that perishable groceries cost more. It was a vicious circle.

People, who got an opportunity, ran from poverty to Holland. Or, at least, they tried to move 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 to occupy the territory (it was occupied if the building works were started officially). There was no money for finishing constructions, though, and therefore deserted foundations and walls showed everywhere 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 have seen such huts only in documentaries on Jamaica. Sometimes posh Mercedes cars with local politicians dressed up in European fashion suits swished past those huts. Dutch politicians, who loved to talk about the Antilles with their ready-made 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 was 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 as they do in Cuba!'*

I remember how surprised Sonny and I were when we discovered while in 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 barefoot and very dark-skinned in comparison with *yu di Korsou*²⁴⁸. I met him in Uncle Patrick' garden. Jean worked there as a gardener.

His real name wasn't Jean at all, but nobody knew it. Many people in Curacao simply called all Haitians 'Jean': the first best French name they knew. Just like all our girls are called 'Natasha' abroad...

²⁴⁸ Natives of Curacao (Papiamentu)

They looked a bit down at Haitians there. Just like at Colombians and women from the Dominican Republic. The irony of the situation is that Antilleans are just the same economic migrants in the Netherlands as Haitians and Dominicans in 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 have been dreaming of it for a long time.

Jean and I made friends - possibly because I was the only one of all the people around him who didn't look down on him as on a mute servant, but was genuinely interested in how he lived and in his native island - the first independent country of the Western hemisphere (we learnt about the uprising of Toussaint L'Ouverture at history lessons in the secondary school).

Jean spoke Dutch a bit, because before coming to the Antilles he had lived and worked in Suriname where his girlfriend, a local Chinese, still lived. Sometimes she sent him tapes 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 in his big brown eyes...

We communicated in a mixture of Dutch and French. He told me how he loved sailing with his friends around his native island in a small boat. Even though they were risking their lives, because, apparently, none of them could swim. I could not understand how anybody could 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 wouldn't see because they were of the 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 be permissive to servants!' - Sonny taught me, - 'Otherwise they'll jump on your neck'.

- You're lucky! You can find such a good job here, - Jean tried to persuade me.

A good job? Me? In Curacao? What kind of job?

-With your languages they'll hire you in any casino! - explained Jean, with a touch of slight jealousy.

And that's what people call 'a good job' here?

Jean didn't know where I was from. He was illiterate. I tried to show him my country on the map, but that didn't mean anything to him. I tried to explain it in words.

- Soviet Union. l'Union Sovietique. 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 so prospectless 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 a bench vise, that today every eighth indigene 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, frankly, expected that when we came back, the car would be just left as dirty as it had been, but it was shining as new.

Please just don't think that Holland is somehow different from the Antilles in this sense. Before I came to the 'civilized' world, I had never seen real poverty and I had 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 was why people didn't pay much attention to them.

In the USSR we were completely deprived of the freedom to be homeless and unemployed! What a disgrace! What a horrible violation of human rights!

The first thing that shocked me so much in Holland was exactly the horrendous indifference with which people treated the homeless. It was as if nobody looked on them as human beings. In Rotterdam most of them lived around the train station. From the time I began going to the university by train on a daily basis, all the city 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 a box with bonbons already opened by me. I did it automatically and immediately became even more ashamed: what am I doing, he'd be offended; who offers people already opened boxes? But the homeless man, to my surprise, stood as if struck by a lightning.

- Classy! - he exclaimed in excitement, - I haven't tasted 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 was even more ashamed...

When my university friend Femke told me that she was surprised to see more and more homeless people in Holland, I was shocked at her naivety. What's there to be surprised at? She should have just read Karl Marx. He described such things very well...

I formed a complicated relation with the Caribbean sun. I began to suntan sitting in a chair outside the house when Sonny went back to work on Monday. 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 the Antillean sun burnt your skin completely in approximately twenty minutes, and if you stayed under its rays for an hour, it would just completely knock you out. During those 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 people looking 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. A whole shelf there was full with different colored little bottles on which - I mean it! - there were labels with 'elixir for unhappy love', 'medication for passing exams' or even 'love potion'! In *botica* they gave us cream for sunburns and advised me to stay at home for several days.

At that time we had just moved, temporarily, to Marina's parent's house in Dominguito: they celebrated the graduation of their son in Holland and asked us to look after their house and their two dogs while they were away. The dogs needed to be fed with meat and boiled rice twice a day. The small one had the name Rambo, silly for a dog of such a size. The house was big and chic in comparison with the granny's room for lodgers: stone floors, bidet in the toilet, waterbed that I had seen only in horror movies before, 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 chattering from cold with pleasure.

There were many beaches on the island: private at hotels, those for tourists, and common ones. They were mainly on the southern and western coasts: 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 the sand was dotted around with barbeque installations and most visitors were the local rich, to Seaquarium where almost out-of-date Dutch women were baking their hanging milk glands in the sun (it was sheer *porokeria!*) and to my favorite one, Kleine Knip on the West Coast where, to my pleasure, there were almost no tourists, just locals. The 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 liked the beach in Sonesta that was meant to be for a hotel, but the hotel wasn't built yet, so for then it was available to all. The waves in Sonesta were so high that if you didn't look out, 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 seized you and threw you in the air! At the same time Sonny's cousins of both sexes dug him into the sand up to his neck and stuck to him various body parts made out of sand... They thought it was very funny. Well, everybody has their own way of amusing themselves...

When Sonny had such an opportunity, he tried to show me the island. Bit by bit we travelled it all around, even to the far eastern coast where almost no people lived except for some fishermen's families, and there was even no electricity in some places. Everything there was covered with divi-divi trees and herds of South American cattle were pasturing quietly. When I saw a South American bull for the first time, I even got frightened: it was so huge that it reminded me of an elephant! By the way, we also saw ordinary, Dutch black & white cows in Curacao. One of them was sadly sitting on the red soil in Terra Cora, exhausted from the heat. There was not a single piece of grass around it. She reminded me of a reindeer in the heat of midsummer I had seen in a Stockholm zoo.

A lot more appealing was the West Coast! Sonny brought me there at the time when there was not a single soul on the beaches. As well as on the roads: he even offered to teach me to drive, but I shamefully chickened out (nowadays I wouldn't, but it's too late...). It was happening not far from an allegedly ghost-haunted dilapidated house with the scribble 'Rasputin' on the walls, which rather surprised me. The car seemed to be flying over the road in the air, and I was squealing 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 the Dutch language at all, because to admit that you did automatically meant to risk being taken for a Dutch. There wasn't anything more insulting to me than that. When the wife of one of Sonny's uncles told me during our picnic on the Barbara beach that I could sunbathe there any way I liked, 'even topless', I almost chocked her for such an offer: '*I am not Dutch, I am not a whore!*' The poor woman must have thought that all Europeans were the same...

Another couple of such tantrums, and Sonny's relatives decided for themselves that his wife was '*Rusiana loca*' - 'Crazy Russian', but I couldn't help myself. The umbrage, the feeling of emotional trauma, disgust towards the Dutch way of life were stronger than me. If only I had a hope that I wouldn'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 impudently and shamelessly they behaved there. Even those who had already lived in Curacao for many years, wouldn't bother to even try to learn the language of the local people that I had mastered to a reasonable degree within a couple of months, without any books or lessons. They were just absolutely sure that everybody was obliged to speak in their language to them: *the language of masters*. Those who don't like it so much when women in burqas and headscarves walk in the streets of their own cities, apparently consider it to be OK for themselves to walk about somebody else's cities and even pay bills in banks almost negligé, in trunks and swimming suits. And these cities also have their own norms and values!

As a protest I dyed my hair black, so that I wouldn't look like Dutch at all. That produced the desired result: people started calling me *Venezolana* and addressing me only in Spanish... I was quite pleased when some Dutchman on the street even mistook me for a local.

Uncle Patrick was sympathetic to such fads of mine. He also disliked the Dutch: his idols were, as I have already mentioned, the Yankees. He even attempted to enlighten me what a brilliant country it was. And since that took place before Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, I let him get away with it.

Uncle Patrick honestly wanted to entertain me: he asked me for a dance at his birthday party where he was dressed in bright white suit beautifully contrasting with his skin colour; he offered me a temporary job at his private company and even gave *Mai's* phone number to a Russian ship captain who harboured in Willemstad at that time. Uncle Patrick was connected with the customs and was one of the first people to learn about it. 'My nephew is married to a Russian woman!' - he decided to make the captain happy. Nowadays, of course, you wouldn't surprise anybody with that even in Papua New Guinea, but at that time the captain was a bit surprised. And phoned me.

We spoke for about fifteen minutes. He invited me to visit the ship, but I was shy: who knows 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 it.

To work at Uncle Patrick's office was easy. I worked 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 the *civilization* in Europe didn't reach such a *level of development* yet, and there weren't any private security men in the shops there; Curacao was *ahead of time*. The second best after 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 together had set up their company) had a streak of greed in them. Later I understood that they were only trying to survive: you wouldn't have palm tree gardens in your yard on the wages of a policeman or a customs officer...

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) were really money-minded. The whole family. And from time to time they argued 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 had got married. The Zomerberg family had nothing in common with the Gosepa family. The Zomerbergs were chiefly intellectual and poor - exactly what Sonny feared in his own life. For Señor Arturo his marriage to Luisa Gosepa was his second one. She was fifteen years younger than he. 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 a Curacaoan, but *Aruban* surname. *He was of the same origin as my idol Bobby!* Probably that was 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 that way when I was a child.

I was very close to visiting Aruba - 'the homeland of my hero'- again, thanks to Uncle Patrick who had already arranged for some boat to take us there for a couple of days. But it wasn't destined to happen: 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 that large two-floor 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 effort - on one side only.

- Nobody would see it from the other side anyway! - he explained to me.

A busy road to Westpunt passed next to the building. There were often accidents on Curacao roads. Along the roads they sold local lottery tickets, in which you stood a much bigger chance to win 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 only took their paperwork, Uncle Patrick interviewed them himself. I remember especially well one of those applicants: in rubber sleepers on his bare feet, with a comb stuck in his hair and with a face of somebody who didn't give a damn. His pregnant wife literally dragged him into the office. She was also the one who answered all the questions for him. I felt so much for her.

- Maybe you'll give him a job, Uncle Patrick? - I asked when they left, - I feel so sorry for this woman, she's been really doing her best. After all, it's not such an important job, is it?

Señor Patrick smiled and made a speech the meaning of which was that from a human point of view he completely agreed with me, but from the business point of view he didn't. Yet all I thought of was their future baby... I didn't care about some 'business' if a child stayed hungry! He didn't choose his life, after all.

Of course, not everybody on the island was as Americanized as Uncle Patrick. The attitude towards the Dutch was in general moderately negative. But the attitude towards the issue of independence was more complex: despite all the dislike for colonizers, despite the awareness of the facts of discrimination and exploitation, very few people wanted independence at any cost. People simply did not believe in themselves. They gave examples of other small Caribbean countries where, after reaching independence, life had not become much better, to put it mildly. Naturally, the most evident example of that was the oldest independent country in the Western hemisphere - Haiti. A big role in this attitude was also played by the Americanization of the younger generation, a trend 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 made by those same Americans. 'If you don't blow your own horn, who will do it for you?' - my Granny's brother used to say. That's precisely about Americans. It also looked like the people of Curacao saw in Americans 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, much to my surprise, that many Curacaoans sympathized with Cuba and admired Fidel. One would think that with the pro-American sentiment that reigned in Curacao, 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 were well aware of the fact that Cuba had excellent medical care and, in general, quite a normal life. Many brought their relatives for medical operations to Cuba: 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 important event happened in my life. I got baptized. In a Catholic church. By the local bishop himself and under his direct guidance. Not that I suddenly became a great believer, and not that I wanted to please granny *Mai* (even though she, of course, was on the seventh heaven with happiness!). Just because my own communist mother asked me to do it: 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 was really going on there, back at home, had they all gone crazy? But I didn't even raise any questions - so much all my thoughts were occupied with new impressions and the beauties of the island at that moment.

Mai made a big party for the occasion. *She* even suggested to us getting married in church on the same day. Why waste time?

We had been 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 could only be once in your lifetime, and I already back then wasn't hundred percent sure that I wanted that with Sonny. But I couldn't say aloud that I doubted the strength of our union - after two years together! That is how I became baptised, confirmed and married on the same day...

During those three months Curacao had grown on me. I already could not imagine my life without it. Sonny didn't interrupt me when I told him about my plans for our future there. And that's why I was sure that he was supporting them...

... I was loath to leave Curacao so much, that I cried 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 'more bitter than 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 had passed since...

And when I was divorcing Sonny, it wasn't just a divorce with him. I was also divorcing his homeland, his relatives, all my Antillean friends. I was divorcing our dreams. And that was a lot more painful than a divorce as a legal procedure.

Irina Malenko

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 the time when his ancestors had created by their hard work the wealth of those who still continue to hold this beautiful island in their deadly grip and yet continuously scream that Antilles are just a burden...

Potverdomme,²⁴⁹ if it is just a burden to you, then why are you so desperately holding on to the place?

²⁴⁹ Damn! (Dutch)

Chapter 6 'But you have freedom now!'

'Why don't matters feel right?

Looks like nothing has changed...'

(Vladimir Vysotsky)

'Our mum is anarchy; our dad's a bottle of port'

(Viktor Tsoi)²⁵⁰

...You may ask me, how I managed to end up with my ideals and views in such an endlessly capitalist hole as the Netherlands... And of course, you will be absolutely right to ask this.

I am not going to say that I am not responsible for my own deeds, but an absurd concurrence of personal and historical circumstances also played a big role...

I was more or less certain that when I finished school, I would leave my home town (by the way, from my whole class I was the only one who did). It was because I wanted to see the world so much and, however deeply I loved my place of birth, I knew too well that if I had stayed at home, I would have never been able to do that. So I wanted to go to the capital not to seek a more comfortable life. Of course, if I could travel to Africa for my work and then come back into the shadows of the apple-trees in my garden back at home, I'd do that with pleasure. But 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 thrilled with anticipation of it. But at the end of the day, it happened 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 a.m., and came back by 10-11 in the evening. We travelled on an electric train about which they used to joke: guess what is long and green and smells like a sausage? Somehow my fellow countrymen 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

²⁵⁰ Viktor Tsoi (1962- 1990) was a [Soviet](#) rock musician, leader of the band [Kino](#).

sausages. But 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 an 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!

The roundtrip fare was two roubles, a single ticket for your destination was one rouble, 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, the fare was even less for me: students had a 50% discount during the school year, and I went home every weekend, and in general, could go home any time I liked, without even thinking of the price for the ticket. Close distance to Moscow was the main reason why I decided to study there and not to chance it in Leningrad, in Oriental Studies Faculty of Leningrad State University, where the demands of party membership and gender were not so strict as in Moscow... But I'll get back to it later.

... By the time an electric train approached Moscow, the shops there were already getting open. Straight from the train station people dived into the metro, which cheered them with its grand beauty. I have always loved Moscow metro. It looked so gala-like, even on ordinary days, with all its adorned stations, so different from each other, which couldn't even be compared it with the dirty undergrounds of Rotterdam and Amsterdam, desecrated by graffiti and stinking of urine. My most favourite station was Novoslobodskaya, with its colourful see-through stained glass windows. And I also loved the refreshing wind from its tunnels mixed with the sharp smell of rubber. And the escalators! On escalators people were standing and reading books and newspapers. It was also very handy to arrange a rendezvous in the metro, especially in cold weather. It was well worth to travel to Moscow just to see the metro! You could really spend the whole day there, moving from one line into another: the entrance price was only five kopecks, and you didn't have to pay anything for changing lines while you were still underground. In my student year a sole monthly ticket for all the four kinds of public transport on Moscow cost around five roubles.

We didn't often visit Red Square in those years, and that is why such visits were especially well remembered. It's today that they hold pop shows and suchlike nonsense in it, but back than this place was really sacred. The Kremlin towers seemed to me really reaching the sky with

their stars! And when you heard the famous beat of its chime, in real life, not on the radio, you really felt a shiver run down your spine. That place was history itself! During my school years I visited the Kremlin, the Armoury, the Tretyakov Gallery, the History Museum, the Lenin Museum and many others.

But still, on an ordinary basis, we travelled to Moscow for shopping. I we didn't do it out of any desperate needs, we just combined the useful with the pleasing. When my Granddad travelled to Ukraine during the Civil War to exchange things for food, well, that was really dire necessity! But none of our generation knew what hunger was like. We just wanted to get something special, for example, for a holiday or birthday, and it was only natural that in a big city the choice was wider. We bought, for example, several kilos of assorted bonbons for decorating the New Years²⁵¹ tree. But it is very much the same in Western countries: people from small towns and suburbs do go to bigger cities with their shopping centres to get Christmas presents and the like, and nobody screams that this happens 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 the shops I was interested in just a few: toy shops when I was still a child and later, when I became a teenager, book shops and record shops. I remember our trips to Detsky Mir ('Children's World')²⁵² 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 right, with various fairy-tale heroes coming out of their houses when it struck a certain hour. The little Sun with its funny face seemed to be alive. There we bought things that they didn't sell in our town, e.g. stereo slides from GDR portraying scenes from various fairy-tales. I adored them. Or filmstrips for my filmscope. Modern children don't even know what it is.

Here one could also buy children's clothes, school uniforms, winter coats (they often bought you a coat 'to grow into'). When I saw for the

²⁵¹ In the USSR and Russia it is called 'New Year's tree', rather than 'Christmas tree.'

²⁵² Famous children's department store in the USSR

first time how much children's clothes cost in the West, I almost had infarction. Quite often they are even more expensive than the adult ones. But a child, unlike an adult, grows out of everything so quickly! In the USSR children's clothes, shoes etc were subsidized by the state and cost virtually nothing. So, when some smart ass, who, living in the USSR, has never experienced any need in anything, continues to chant to me the tales about 'totalitarian state' and 'Gulag Archipelago', I remember prices for baby's bedding, clothes and shoes in the USSR. If to subsidize them, to subsidize public transport, to provide people with free housing, free medical care and free education, 'is not a state duty', then what the hell do we need such a state for?

When I came to Moscow with Sonny after five years' absence, we came round to Detsky Mir, too. I wanted so much to show him that amazing clock from my childhood - the Little Sun. But it wasn't there already. Probably, some 'business-minded' Russian had sold them abroad or into some private collection. Such 'businessmen' are just marauders by their nature. All their 'business' consists in 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. One of the floors was occupied by a supermarket. Sonny wanted to go in, but the owner, a man with Middle Eastern looks, showed us by gestures that we first had to leave our small bags with him. He didn't know a word of Russian. Rage hit into my head. Look at him, sitting there, a fat-bellied bourgeois, commanding as if he was doing us a favour by letting us 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...

...In Kalininsky Avenue was another of my favourite shops, Melodiya, where you could buy LPs that they did not sell in my home town (probably because nobody there would have bought them. Melodiya company didn't know about my existence!) For example, Traditional Music of Ethiopia, that a naïve listener would not listen to in full. I scared my neighbours with the song called Fano one summer, when I brought my record player into the yard.

Next to 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 awaiting somebody for some really serious matter. You had to approach them and

ask (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 (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, who only recently had appeared in our country, some of them former Komsomol activists. One such activist from Mum's factory disco, called Vava, reminded me of a diplodocus (small head and very big everything else). He fancied 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', where there was a will, there was a way: they momentarily disappeared from the streets like cockroaches from a kitchen sprayed with dichlorvos²⁵³. 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 take them to book provided there was a will to do that! 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, at that time they already had the nerve to accost people!): 'Pity that Andropov isn't there for you!' When you said that, you somehow felt better. But their numbers didn't diminish. And soon the whole country became one big dirty market. But that is already a very different story...

As a child I only went to all the other shops in Moscow because I had to, with Mum, and usually complained non-stop that I was tired and wanted to

²⁵³ Dichlorvos (DDVP) - is a widely used insecticide to control household pests, in public health and protecting stored products from pests.

go home. I especially hated a shop called Wanda with Polish cosmetics and make-up and the queues there. I could not understand why Mum needed all those silly things: she was so beautiful without them. (To be honest, I don't understand it to this day!) Mum also liked to visit other shops with goods from socialist countries, many of which were in the suburbs, for example, the shop Jadran. There were also special shops from our socialist republics in the capital. What beautiful traditional silk they sold in the shop called Tajikistan!

Mum was tireless and ran from one shop to another at a speed of a hurricane in order to have time visit every shop she wanted. 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, which was exactly what she would do, she then went straight to buy whatever she needed. Of course, within the same shop, and only when I reached a certain age, approximately twelve years or so. As I've 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 pastime. When I first heard that in Holland many women consider shopping to be their hobby, I laughed long and heartily. And my opinion hasn't changed to this day. Yes, they didn't have queues or their queues were shorter than ours (except on the eve of holidays), but this didn't make it more pleasant. Well, of course, one can forgive the Westerners for having such hobbies: after all, what else do they have in their 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 coming home from such 'expeditions.' Usually granny and I went to see them in at a tram stop, around 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, at some distance from it the tram line turned sharply, so that we could hear at home the creaking of the tram on that turn well from afar 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 alcohol shop that was still nicknamed by locals by the surname of its

pre-revolutionary owner. But by 11 at night, of course, it had been long closed, so it was quiet all around it. We weren't the only ones to see in our relatives coming back from Moscow, so we weren't standing there alone. How impatiently I waited for each tram: looking if it would be number 3 or number 9, the only two numbers that came from the train station. And if they were, then I would try to look into them: were 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 doors under the pale light of the streets lanterns. Don't ask me to explain why. I don't know. That was just what it 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 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 decided to travel there out of curiosity? Especially because back then travel was well-affordable to people. It was the only summer that 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 two weeks of the Olympics). Shurek was on his annual holiday, and we both liked sports, at least, as spectators. Those days there was practically nothing except the Olympics and the news on our first TV channel. But we both were quite content with this. I supported all the Black sportsmen, from Cuban Silvio Leonard²⁵⁴ and Brazilian Joao Carlos de Oliveira²⁵⁵, who I was certain, were robbed of their victories, to the British Daley Thompson²⁵⁶. But everybody's favourite

²⁵⁴ 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

²⁵⁵ João Carlos de Oliveira (May 28, 1954 - May 17, 1999) was a [Brazilian](#) athlete who competed in the [triple jump](#) and the [long jump](#).

²⁵⁶ Francis Morgan Ayodélé 'Daley' Thompson (born 30 July 1958), is a former [decathlete](#) from England. He won the decathlon gold medal at the

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 six kids completely flabbergasted 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 to imagine for contemporary youth. When professional sportsmen receiving millions from their sponsors were not allowed competing 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 out your bank account. You probably remember these words:

Walk to the Olympus proudly, aiming for the sun's prize cherished,
For the sake of your country, for the sake of sport's beauty!
Let your victory be honest, let your life exude brightness!
We will set the heavens flaming, they will sing of us some day!²⁵⁷

These weren't just simply words, people were like that. 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 Mum's favourite sportsman, the 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 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...

[Olympic Games](#) in [1980](#) and [1984](#).

²⁵⁷ Words of the Soviet song Heroes of Sport by A. Pakhmutova and N. Dobronravov, that was often played during opening ceremonies of various sport events

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 tasted for the first time back then. What can I say about it? It wasn't the choice of my generation... And Pepsi-Cola to me, I repeat, 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!' But I noticed that it was mainly those who had moved to Moscow only recently themselves, who 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 VDNKH²⁵⁸ for her work. On those days there was no need to run around shopping and after that to the train station to catch the train. We usually stayed in one of the hotels near VDNKH - at Altai or some other. At that time they were decent hotels, not hostels for migrant workers. Even though we usually shared a room with another woman on a 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 about the town. To go to Red Square when it was already dark, for example. We had dinner and lunch in my favourite canteen near the new Cosmos hotel (I still remember handsome Yugoslav builders who were building it), where they served tasty sour cream in glasses and lemon jelly. For dinner we bought thick and creamy Mozhaisky milk with tasty Moscow bread in a milk shop. And the best thing was 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...

... When I came to study in Moscow, I prepared myself in case I wouldn't be able to enter the university at the first try. And I even thought of what I would do for a year, if I didn't (to work as a photographer at Mum's factory). So that I wouldn't be too upset in such a case and also because we heard rumours that 'all places are already given to children of those with connections.' There was quite severe competition at the institute where I brought my papers: eight people for one place. That meant, I had to get at least 18 points out of 20 at four entrance exams, so I should have

²⁵⁸Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy

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 from at least half of the lessons. 'Wow!' - they said at the Institute when they 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 now 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 of the exams, as any normal person would, but also I was afraid to go outside on my own for the first few days. 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 a completely different thing 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 dived into a bus, then into the metro, got to the Institute and after study went straight back to the hostel. I ate either at a pancake café at Sokolniki metro station, 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 explore that 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 four girls: from Naberezhny Chelny that was temporarily called Brezhnev then, from Ufa and 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 my studies. 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 at such a thought! And as I expected, they failed their exam after that.

There were four exams in all. First was a literature thesis: for all except those who had finished school with a gold medal. Those with a medal took history first; if they got a '5' for it, they didn't need 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 at university, it was the easiest. I remember that my thesis at 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 three 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 hadn't passed the first one. I was not on the list, which 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, as 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 sort of 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). In BMT.

- In what? - the whole commission looked at me a bit lost.

- That's Basic Military Training.

- Kalashnikova has a '4' in 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 gave 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 was to 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 for any extra tuition? It was like a fairy-tale! Looking back, I think that those myths about the 'impossibility of getting a place without connections' had been made up by those who failed their 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. Besides, mine 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 that came towards 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 a chief executive at a workshop at 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 Mum dated. He looked a bit like Frank Sinatra. I wished he could sing like Sinatra instead! Because he and Mum had an habit of loudly singing classic Soviet songs together when he took us for a drive in his car, and the voices of both of them weren't the greatest in the world... To listen to

that all day long as I would have to during the journey to the Crimea, was not easy.

Victor Petrovich smoked a lot and held a belief that it was enough for male's looks 'to be just slightly better than those of an ape.'

- Well, his looks aren'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. Mum liked to pull the object of her attention to her own level in the process of a relationship, to bring him to the theatre, to advise him on what sort of books to read, how to dress tastefully and so on. And not every man is capable of withstanding that, even though she had the best intentions. If she failed, she just shrugged her shoulders:

- Well, a clout is a clout! You can't change his nature!

After a while she began trying to change yet another one... Mum reminds me so much of one of the protagonists in the film *Pokrovsky Gate*, Margarita Khobotova.²⁵⁹ And, by the way, she is one of her favourite heroines!

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 waiting for Mum to come home after work, eager to have a word with her in private. Finally she came back, had dinner and bingo - 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 fellow of yours again... Go...

²⁵⁹ The *Pokrovsky Gate* is a 1982 Soviet [comedy film](#). Margarita Khobotova, its heroine, is a highly overbearing lady.

And off she went: for the whole evening and sometimes even till 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. Mum was about the same age as I am now, and I am sure that today she wouldn't approve of such behaviour on my part, being a granny. But she still refuses to understand how Granny and I felt back then.

For winter Petrovich put his car into the garage, and 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 rarely rode in a private car since Dad's stepfather died. I liked to fantasize about everything in the world while riding, looking at changing landscapes though the window. At 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 themselves 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 that. And not just believed, I was aiming at it. And that is why I childishly protested against the good old Soviet song I'm in love with you, Life!²⁶⁰

I'm in love with you, Life,
Which is not an unknown emotion.
I'm in love with you, Life,
When you're tranquil or teeming with motion.
Windows' glimmering light,
I am walking from work, tired and happy
I'm in love with you, Life,
And aspire for good things to happen!
I am given so much-

²⁶⁰ Music by E. Kolmanovsky, text by K. Vanshenkin, translated by Ya. Zilberman.

Vast expanses of meadows and oceans,
Tender hand's precious touch,
Love's and friendship's perennial notions...
Light of day from above
Pours on me its excitements and treasures,
Life, you've given me Love,
Most divine and most rich of your measures!
Nightingales, full of fire,
Sing of passion, affection and kisses...
And the crux of desire -
Children - welcome consequence of bliss is...
We shall walk their paths -
Childhood, youth, railway stations, deep harbours,
Then grandchildren at last
Life repeats its achievements and charmers.
Years so rapid in flight,
Graying hair and weakening mettle:
Life, remember the plight
Of young soldiers who perished in battle?
Triumph, life! Sally forth
In the spring trumpet's sound direction -
Life, of love you are worth,
And I hope I'm worth your affection!

My youthful vexation was caused by the fact that everything seemed so pre-destined in that song: children, grandchildren... And who had decided that I ought to live like that? The Party and the government? And what if I, for example, did not want to have children? Why ought I to have them? And what if it was not enough for my happiness to walk home from work, tired, in anticipation of a plate of borsch or even cornucopia awaiting me at home?

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 yet another song, against which I protested just as much for the same reason - The Migrant Birds Are Flying by M. Isakovsky and M. Blanter, in which I most disliked the first stanza:

Passed over the birds through the distance,
And heaven in autumn is blue,
Birds fly to the tropical countries,
And I still remain with you!
And I still remain forever
With you, oh my dear Homeland.
Pearl-strewn Turkish coasts need I never,
Nor need I all African lands!²⁶¹

Why 'Nor need I all African lands?'- I was angry,- I do need them, and very much so!

Since then I had long reached the level at which I can understand and 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 the feelings of a war veteran who finally comes home and who knows from his own experience what it is like to be away from your Motherland... And that's why I am twice disgusted when I see the same, well-familiar to me teenage infantilism of the modern Russians who are not 15-16 as 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 finally understand that you can swim against the tide, but this road is just unlikely to bring you to happiness in the end, it will be too late. One should grow up in time - not earlier, but also not later than it is required...

...I went to the Crimea with big pleasure. I was even prepared to accept such company. Before that I had been to the Crimea once, with Mum, in Yalta, but it was in spring school holidays, so I wasn't able to swim in the sea back then...

We were driving for almost two 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 state frontiers with rude guards and queues. From the first day I for some reason most remembered a small town of Oboyan²⁶² in the Kursk region: cosy, homelike in some way, with streets covered with white fluffy

²⁶¹ This song was written in 1948 by and M. Blanter and M. Isakovsky, translated by Vladimir Markelov.

dust. And from the second day - the city of Melitopol²⁶³. Ukrainian round bread called palyanitsa, Ukrainian poplars reminding me of candles by their shape and the bitter smell of sagebrush and other herbs in the steppe near Zaporozhye²⁶⁴, heated by the sun... I also remembered Sivash²⁶⁵ 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?

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?

Mum and I 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 non-black soil countryside, from which people were not averse to move to 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 the USSR, in the late 1980s, Ukraine still remained one of the most desirable places for the graduates to be sent to. But today whole regions of Western Ukraine are 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

²⁶² Oboyan is a [town](#) in [Kursk Oblast](#), [Russia](#), located some 60 km south of [Kursk](#). Population: 14,100 (2005 est.); 14,618 ([2002 Census](#)).

²⁶³ Melitopol is a [city](#) in the [Zaporizhia Oblast\[1\]](#) of the southeastern [Ukraine](#), The estimated population as of 2007[[update](#)] is around 158,700.

²⁶⁴ 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).

²⁶⁵ Syvash 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.

millions of working age population of Ukraine every fifth person is working abroad. They are already preparing to build a monument to 3,000 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, were certain of happiness in store for them. You see, back then nobody had 'opened their eyes' yet to the fact that apparently me, 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 the Ukrainian language, together with such books that were often wanting because of great demand in our Russian shops: Jules Verne, Dumas, and Conan Doyle... And television in the Crimea was also in the Ukrainian language, and we watched 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 salaries were ones of the highest in the country, and their labour was very much valued and respected by all of us...

.. And today... *'La Strada International Human Rights Centre has initiated the establishment in Ukraine of an institution to foster the children whose parents went to work abroad'*. Congratulations, guys! Now you have truly become free and independent!

Isn't this a paradox that the most pro-Western course is now taken by 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 Sudak.²⁶⁶ 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

²⁶⁶ Sudak is a small historic town located in the [Crimea](#), [Ukraine](#) located 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](#)

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 at people's doors in search of a place to stay for the night. We decided to spend that night camping out somewhere and then in the morning, with fresh energy, go and look for a room to rent for the rest of our holidays.

That's what we decided, and that's what we did.

We didn't drive around much. Petrovich decided to drive up some hill 'so that we wouldn't be getting into people's way', 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 made a camp-fire and began to boil potatoes. It was already pitchy dark. Lilac sticky twilight gave way to the black and warm Crimean night. The 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 on them full blast to cool them down. Then the 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 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 tipsy man's voice out of prickly bushes nearby:

-You know, only you and me are alive here, we are surrounded by the dead, I am telling you!- he was saying passionately to his companion. 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 got ready for the night. Mum and Petrovich put up the tent, and I went to sleep in the car. After so many miles on that day and the 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 I saw a black cat crouching. Probably, that's what woke me up - the noise of 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 waved 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 on the horizon. At the bottom of the hill people were getting water from a pump (it is very dry in Sudak, and in summer they had some problems with water supply, so people usually collected it every morning with buckets from a pump). 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...gasp! 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 German names on them!

I remembered the night and the black cat and froze for a second. Now I also understood the meaning of that strange drunk men's conversation yesterday. And another second later I realized that it was not just us who saw the town as if in the palm of our hands there: 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 laughed about it afterwards! But that was already later. At that moment it didn't seem funny to us.

That's how the last days of my childhood were passed...

.. For a long time I couldn't believe that I became a student, not even when I had already got a confirmation letter 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 Red Square. That's when I visited the Lenin Mausoleum for the second time in my life...

These five years were the most intense, the most interesting years of my life.

There were 100 students in our year, divided into four 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 '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 the USSR - and of course, I was eager to find out if there would be any Africans who I was day-dreaming about all my childhood... I noticed some Arab faces and, to my pleasure, two 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 the lion's mane. The foreigners were keeping to 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 foreign ones...

We read the lists dividing students into four groups that were hanging on the wall. Unfortunately, all the foreign students were in another group. That meant that we'd see each other only during lectures, but all practical lessons and exams would be held 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 out...

We saw him during the muster. Cecen Alexeevich appeared to be a short, rather bandy Kalmyk²⁶⁷. ..

²⁶⁷ Kalmyk people or Kalmyks is the name given to [Oirats](#) (western [Mongolic](#) people) in Russia, whose descendants migrated from [Dzhungaria](#) in the seventeenth century. Today they form a majority in the autonomous [Republic of Kalmykia](#) on the western shore of the [Caspian](#)

The day before that 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 Rechnoy Vokzal metro station, where our Institute was renting one floor. Here there were not five or six, but only three people in a room, plus a bathroom, a kitchen and a toilet per every block of four rooms. It couldn't ever be compared with the dark Stromynka, this going into the sky 20-floor highrise! Only one thing there wasn't appealing to me: it was strict entrance regulations. Sometimes they didn't even want to let our parents in. I think that was somehow 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 clean and ironed bedding free of charge. The room was modestly furnished, but nice: beds, chairs, and a table. They would give for temporary use everything: curtains, tea kettle, even an iron... The rent, **for the whole year**, was 24 roubles, all-inclusive, that is electricity, heating, water, etc., even cleaners. For comparison: our **monthly** student grant was 40 roubles, for excellent students - 50...

Secondly, I was lucky because as we were waiting for the keys to move into our new hostel, I met a girl who became my best friend ever. That was above-mentioned Lida Basina from the Zhitomir²⁶⁸ region in the Ukraine. Quite possibly, had I not met her, I would have been quite a different person today.

Lida had an amazing ability to communicate with people: you spoke to her just for five minutes and you already had a feeling that you had known 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 were not for Lida.

sea.

²⁶⁸ 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)

I first paid special heed to her for one reason. At that time, what with my friendship with Emilia Veniaminovna, and Mum and myself visiting the concert of the Birobidzhan²⁶⁹ musical group Freilach 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 of their culture and their music, which I practically heard for the first time in my life when I turned 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 had known me since nursery school! It melted all the possible ice ...

- Let's move in together! - She offered to me.
- OK, - I agreed immediately.

So we shared a room for five years and didn't have even one serious argument during all that time. People who knew both of us, later often expressed surprise over our friendship: we were so different that it seemed we had nothing in common at all. But despite that, we got on fine. From Lida I finally learnt something nobody had yet managed to teach me, neither at home, nor at school: how to communicate with people. I think that was what attracted me to Lida most - she was so unlike me. And she was attracted to me, among other things, by the fact that I wasn't in the slightest interested in our male fellow students and that I practically always went home for the weekend, leaving the room at her disposal. You will be right to surmise that Lida was not totally indifferent to the opposite sex. And for some reason she chose just one particular cohort as an object of her attention at a time: in our first year - militiamen, in the second year - Azeris²⁷⁰, after that - 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 this policeman in an alley, and...

For some reason Lida had a very low opinion of herself. She was certain that 'nobody would ever marry her', because she was 'already so old' or

²⁶⁹ Capital of the Jewish Autonomous region in the Russian Far East

²⁷⁰ The Azerbaijanis are a [Turkic people](#) living in the [Republic of Azerbaijan](#). Commonly referred to as Azeris

because she was '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 prudent enough and loyal, she had loved one and the same man for a long time, only for some reason she expressed these feelings to him in constant mocking him... It was a 'law of her nature': if Lida Basina was mocking somebody, it meant, that she was 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 a little Kazakh, a little Polish and fluently Ukrainian, even though she was already quite big when they had moved to the Ukraine. Before moving to Zhitomir the Basin family had lived in the Krasnodar region, in the Donetsk region and even in Sakhalin! I didn't understand back then yet that even though Lida was of Jewish origin, she was one of those Jews who felt themselves Russian by their culture, by their upbringing and felt it was far more important than the ethnic origin. And they were probably right. It is more important. But despite being fully Russian in her spirit and upbringing, Lida possessed an unmistakable natural Jewish sense of humour that soon became legendary in our Institute. While I considered myself to be a reasonably gifted person, I admitted Lida to be truly talented, not just gifted. If only she had decided to, 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 had tried twice to enter an actors' school, but wasn't accepted, which had affected her self-confidence. Why she wasn't accepted, I don't know. Maybe it was her slight Southern accent, just like the heroine's of Irina Muravyeva in the film 'Carnival'²⁷¹, or, perhaps, because she was petite and, as Karlson on the Roof would say, '*not the first beauty in the world*', even though she was very charming indeed. She had an unusual combination of velvety brown eyes with light, almost ash-tint hair, thick glasses and a figure, the distinctive feature of which was defined by

²⁷¹ 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)

herself as 'Basina's belly.' No, Lida wasn't obese, quite the opposite: she was thin as a lath, but somehow she combined a bony back with quite a round tummy. Lida was two years older than I.

Our third roommate, Valya with big blue eyes and a long nose, unfortunately, didn't fit into our collective and moved out quite soon with a row, having earned herself a nickname The Horse. She was a spoilt little girl from Naryan-Mar, who God knows how managed to get into the Institute as a 'national cadre.' The higher education system was such that some entry places were reserved for natives of various republics. Of course, on the one hand it was a way in for some local apparatchiks' sons and daughters, though quite a few of such students, who hadn't made any effort to get admittance, had to quit the studies for truancy or bad performance (I recall some from Mordovia, Georgia, Kalmykia). But on the other hand, quite a lot of others, within my recollection, 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 in that they didn't have to write the entrance thesis in Russian. But Valya wasn't Nenets²⁷² at all, so what right did she have to enter the Institute as a 'national cadre' from the Nenets Autonomous Okrug? I disliked a lot the way she spoke disdainfully of the aboriginals of that land. But even more did Lida and I dislike Valya's petty greed and selfishness. When she received a parcel with canned cloudberry from home, she didn't even think about sharing it with us, even though before that she had been tucking away 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 would get out her cloudberry and begin to gobble on them in bed. She probably thought that we wouldn't notice. Why she couldn't eat it in daylight, but hide under the cover of the night, 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 lights off and went to bed, me and Lida got out our apples

²⁷² 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](#)

from under the pillows and began to slurp on them as duo, as hard as we could... The next morning cloudberry disappeared from the room altogether.

And soon, 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 gold medal graduating from her secondary school with distinction. That meant she only had to do one entrance exam instead of four. But when talking to her, you would hardly believe that that was the case. She wasn't overly cultural. She was a straightforward, reasonable girl, who was always openly telling you what she thought, 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, became flat and vulgar in Lyuba's. Lyuba and I were also friends of sorts, but we never managed to cultivate deep friendship, with true communion of souls. We were together simply because Lida was our link.

Lyuba and Lida usually went to seek adventures together, it wasn't my cup of tea and I didn't get involved into this. Already in the 1st year Lida's big love burst into her life: a guy from Azerbaijan called Nariman. It burst into her life suddenly and unexpectedly: when Lida went to the kitchen in the evening to put the kettle on. To the accompaniment of shouts and the knocking of pokers that Nariman and his brother Latif were using for cleaning our chute there... Nariman and Latif were students of 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 at Aviation Institute students from Azerbaijan received extra tuition in Russian instead of the lessons of foreign languages. But, of course, technical specialties are so much more difficult that the need for such tuition was quite understandable.

The same evening militiamen were gone and forgotten by Lida forever. At least, until the time when she later graduated and began working for the militia herself... The whole night through she was tossing and turning

in bed, and the next day after the lectures she went straight to a bookshop and bought herself a Russian-Azeri dictionary. A few days later she was already trying to learn the Azeri language on her own:

- *Men seni sevirəm...*²⁷³ Nariman, and how do you say in your language: 'Oh, there is such a cute guy!'

Nariman frowned, not understanding why she would need to know anything like that, 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 oglandyr!*'

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 the newly acquired Lyuba's boyfriend Mukaddas (everybody called him simply Misha) passed his exam on resistance of materials (after passing it any student was proverbially believed to have matured enough to get married!), he said to Lyuba, slightly looking down at her:

- You are historians... Big deal! You've told your tale, you've got your A grade!

None of us had any prejudices about the Azeri's or any other ethnic group²⁷⁴. So what if somebody comes from Azerbaijan? The main thing is if he is a good person. Lida's schoolmate, a Jewish girl who was also studying in Moscow, at Agriculture Academy, married a Kyrgyz boy for big love and moved to Kyrgyzstan with him. In the USSR mixed marriages weren't uncommon - every sixth marriage was mixed, so nobody was surprised.

I made no haste expecting in the future to meet my one and only African revolutionary, and because of my teenage ideal I did not take any particular notice of men of other nationalities. But I marked that when you socialized with guys from the Caucasus, a lot depended on how you behaved. I treated them amicably, but without any flirting, and they reciprocated me with respect. I didn't go to their rooms for a cup of tea along with Lida and Lyuba, though yes, I did once, but I felt that one of the guys began to display a bit too much attention to me, and I retreated just in time.

²⁷³ I love you (azerb.)

²⁷⁴ Today in capitalist Russia racism against ethnic minorities (as well as various ethnic mafias) is widespread

I simply represented a different sort of friendship in Lida's life than the one she had with Lyuba: we went to theatres and cinemas together or just walked around Moscow. I had tacitly reconciled myself to the fact that Lyuba and not I was most probably Lida's best friend, because they spent more time together than Lida did with me; it made no sense being jealous. That is why I was so surprised that when in our third year we moved to a new hostel, where there were just rooms for two people, Lida asked me, rather than Lyuba, to be her roommate. I was flattered, even though I think that, apart from personal reasons, Lida also had practical ones: I went home every weekend, straight after the last lecture on Saturday, and came back only on Sunday late at night, with the last train. So for the whole weekend Lida had a free hand for her flirtations...

We had classes six days a week, from 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., sometimes to 4:50 p.m. The most difficult thing was to wake up when we had a 'zero lecture' - the one that started at 7:50 a.m.! We then had to leave the hostel at almost 6 a.m. to get to the lectures on time! In the break we were literally sleeping with our heads on the tables.

-Why is it that I have to get up so early, walk somewhere, freeze in the wind, and he is nicely sleeping in there? - said Lida resentfully one dark and cold winter morning on our way to the metro station. - That's not right!

We reached the station; she took a two-kopeck coin out of her pocket and ran to the telephone booth. Nariman and Latif had a phone in their room, since they were classed as the working personnel of the hostel.

-Hello! - said sleepy Nariman, who was woken up by her call.

-Hello! Are you up already? - asked him Lida.

- No - yes... - half asleep, he still didn't understand anything.

-Well, why did you wake up so early? - and she hung up on him.

How could he realise after that 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 I could not avoid them at university: nobody was free of P.E. there, there was a special group even for people with disabilities; so I just signed myself in with an ordinary one), jogging somewhere in Dynamo Stadium or even in famous Gorky Park where we had our lessons in good weather, I was suddenly pierced by an acute feeling: 'What am I actually doing here? Where is my family now, what are they doing at home?' At such moments I was awfully homesick. But those sensations passed away quickly, because there were

too many interesting things going on around me, starting with the studies themselves. For the first time in my life I actually had a feeling that I was really studying not because 'I had to', but for my own sake! Yes, being a student is quite a different thing from being a school pupil!

Among general subjects in our first year we had already mentioned P.E. (with a great teacher who didn't demand world records from us, but at the same time motivated us enough), History of the CPSU and... Medicine. Yes, that's right. The thing is that all girls taking university education at the same time received a second profession: civil defence nurse. In case of war. Retired military medics gave us lessons. We had had those lessons for three years, after which we took a State Exam and became reservists. To my big disturbance, since, by our Constitution, women were not liable for military service and could only join the army voluntarily. In practice, though, in my time it was compulsory for all women who went to university: it meant a compulsory stamp in your passport saying you were a reservist and the issue of a military card to you, along with the registration with the local military authority. 'Do they really want all educated women shot in action?' - I protested. Other students didn't share my feelings: the war seemed improbable, and they pointed out that we really learnt a lot of useful things 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 Yperite²⁷⁵ (the Mustard gas that was used by Germans in the WW1 near Ypres), but also epidemiology, disinfection of wounds, bandaging various body parts, making injections or even applying enema. So, indeed I am a broad profile specialist! I even know some girls from our faculty who really do work as nurses after graduation, 'earn their bread making injections.'

During the medicine lessons that took place in the basement, from where we had a beautiful view of the Bolshoi Theatre in between the indentations of the old Kitay-Gorod²⁷⁶ wall and hovering well above it, there often happened funny situations; there were so many unusual things I don't even remember all of them. I recall well, though, how during one

²⁷⁵ Various poisonous gases

²⁷⁶ Kitay-gorod, earlier also known as Great Posad is a business district in the centre of [Moscow](#), Russia, encircled by mostly-reconstructed medieval walls

of the lectures we had to sit for 45 minutes wearing a gas mask. Lida and I were sitting in the front row listening to the lecture when she for some reason decided to turn her head back and suddenly began choking with laughter. I couldn't help myself and also turned to see what was there: I 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 aloud. The lecture was almost disrupted!

And when the time came for us to get our military cards, and we went to the district military authority for them, one of our girls, Zoya from the Ural, who reminded me of a hero of Marina Dyuzheva²⁷⁷ in the film *Pokrovsky Gate* (*'I am all so clumsy, so bony... I am all so self-contradictory!'*), came late. She ran in, heavily breathing, and started asking us who was the last in the queue.

- And you, Zimina, you'll have to go upstairs first. Third door on the right. There they'll give you footcloths and a pair of boots. What size do you wear? Don't forget to ask for a size bigger than you normally wear, otherwise they won't fit 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 three colonels sitting there, talking about something important, and I am asking them: *'Can I try on my footcloths 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 a rosy face, tender as a peach, who, as a real Muscovite, was terribly afraid of provincial girls and because of that tried to be especially strict to them. There was a rule at our Institute that if you missed a P.E. lesson without proper reason, you had to come in your free time and make up for it. At one of such compensatory lessons Lida almost drove him to tears.

²⁷⁷ Marina Dyuzheva (b.1956) - popular Soviet actress

- And now we are going to do long jumps. Now, who jumps further than me will pass the test! - declared the teacher, for example, making a very moderate jump. And from the crowd of slackers there came Lida's caustic whispering:

- *Nobody can jump further than Mikhail Sergueyevich!*... ²⁷⁸

The poor fellow blushed, but pretended that he hadn't heard anything.

- And now let's squat, grab ourselves with our hands under knees and walk a full circle in this position.

- Are we playing Buchenwald, Mikhail Sergueyevich?

He blushed even more, but attempted to strike back:

- I think that for Buchenwald we look a bit too overnourished, Basina.

But it wasn't that easy.

- Why, no, Mikhail Sergueyevich, I think, that's exactly how those sadists looked!

Another half an hour of that, and Mikhail Sergueyevich gave up.

- You know what, Basina... I think you have worked enough for today. You've passed the test. You are free to go...

- No, no, Mikhail Sergueyevich, I've missed four hours and I only made up for two. I am staying!

A silent scene.

One of our teachers had a slight speech defect: he lisped. He was a shy, quiet, inexperienced professor, so it was quite noisy at his practicals. Once around March the 8th²⁷⁹ we drank a bottle of champagne during the break: one bottle for the whole group of 22 people, so it made us just slightly tipsy. We hid the empty bottle under the desk until the following break, meanwhile that professor - Vladislav Georgievich was his name - came in and the lesson began. Vladislav Georgievich, attempting to speak through the hum of voices, said:

- Well, of course, we won't be able to hear all of your presentations during this term...

And then there was suddenly a lull. But Lida didn't realize it in time, and everybody heard her clear voice:

- And whose presentations won't we be able to hear?

²⁷⁸ Hinting at Gorbachev who had the same name and patronymic

²⁷⁹ International Women's Day, widely celebrated in the USSR

On top of this a huge empty champagne bottle came rumbling from under the desk and rolled with horrendous noise 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.

As for the lectures on history of the CPSU²⁸⁰, we somehow didn't really take them seriously (which was not a rule at all universities, however) and hence almost didn't listen to the lecturer, thinking that we could read up for the exam on our own. And it was a pity. Because he told us some things that weren't in the book. For example, on the cardinal difference between the Soviet economic assistance to the Third World countries and the Western one...

Besides, we had general history subjects: History of the USSR, History of Antique Greece and Rome, history of the Middle Ages and so on, as well as special subjects: bibliography, additional historical disciplines, archival science etc. Already in my first year I damaged my handwriting irreversibly: thanks to one of our professors, Ivan Arkadyevich, who delivered his lectures on Native Pre-Revolution History at such speed and made us commit to our memory such an enormous amount of facts, names and dates that you wouldn't find in any textbooks, that we couldn't but learn to write at a speed of a machine-gun. Afterwards it was hard even for me to make out what I had written down: I had to re-write those notes once again quickly, before I forgot what he was talking about. He could easily ask you during the exam, e.g. what the name of Genghis Khan's mother was - and you'd be really in trouble, if you didn't know the answer!

Almost everybody loved our professor of Ancient History, Nadezhda Petrovna. She could have become an actress: she practically played out various scenes from history before our very eyes, like on stage. Caesar, Spartacus and many other heroes long familiar to us from books, suddenly became alive during her lectures. A petite woman, with a low artistic voice, she had also set up a group of extracurricular in-depth study for those students who were interested in her subjects, and many came there inspired by yet another chance to listen to her. This group held 'historical trials', where various historical characters were accused of crimes and had to be defended. Students took the preparation for such trials very

²⁸⁰ CPSU - Communist party of the Soviet Union

seriously: some played the part of the defence attorney, some - of the prosecutor, some played the accused and the witnesses. To know the facts they read up extensively on the subject, so many a serious monograph were perused 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 held in a proper historical setting, with costumes, and many students came to watch those performances as general public. The trials sometimes lasted till late at night, but nobody rushed home: it was so fascinating and unpredictable! None could say in advance if the accused would be acquitted or convicted. By the way, Cromwell was convicted... Largely thanks to the Irish farmers and their testimony.

So no wonder that after such studies back at home it was not only too easy, but also excruciatingly boring for me to study at 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 the roll during a lecture, and we had to say our names. So what? At any rate, we got proper knowledge, with a broad foundation, as a solid building, steadily built brick by brick for five years. So much unlike studies in Holland, with their absolutely arbitrary set of subjects a student was permitted to opt for (as long as the total number of credits for them was sufficient), which reminded me of an old turn of children's amateur performance:

'OK, I write down: 'Rabbit.' Come here tomorrow at 8 p.m., I am going to have you for breakfast. Any questions?'

'Yes. Am I allowed not to come?'

'Sure. So... I strike out 'Rabbit' off the list...'

... And when Lida, Lyuba and I were sitting on a metro train, showing off our skills at deciphering old manuscripts for Palaeography ²⁸¹ practicals, and people, amazed at how smart we were, were looking into

²⁸¹ Palaeography is the study of ancient [writing](#). Included in the discipline is the practice of deciphering, reading, dating historical manuscripts, and the cultural context of writing, including the methods with which writing and books were produced, and the history of [scriptoria](#).

those Old Russian scripts over our shoulders, trying to read at least some of them, I was really in the seventh heaven!

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 those groups, at the lectures they instilled in us the idea that every archivist is a researcher, a person of science, so much more than a mere curator of the past who sits on a bundle of old papers. During the seminars in history we had to make up our own theses and present them to fellow students, answering their questions afterwards. You could choose one of the offered subjects for it from a list or suggest your own subject. That is how we learnt the difference between historical sources and literature and learnt how to interpret sources. During sessions in 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 in Archeography - how to prepare historical sources for publication. Later I was surprised to find out that in Western Europe archeography is not studied as a separate science, but is just looked upon as a part of palaeography. Yes, there are far too many things here that are not looked upon as separate subjects: even chemistry and physics at school are not studied as separate full-fledged subjects, but are turned into some sort of pathetic mixture with rudiments of biology and nature knowledge that is ironically called with a proud word 'science'! Do they fear that people might learn too much and become too smart?...

One didn't have to remain in Moscow after graduation to become a researcher; one could just as well do it while working in the archives in any part of the country! Apart from full-time studies, the Institute also offered part-time (evening) lectures and even correspondence learning (where people who worked full time and studied 'on the job' only came to the Institute to take their exams - from all the corners of the country), and also a Rabfak - a special preparation course for workers, farmers and those who came from the army. A person could move from part-time to full-time studies or vice versa. Several students joined us in our second year from the correspondence department and even a couple were transferred from other faculties.

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 wouldn'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 terrorists there at the time, of course...

During our student years we joined the 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 subsidy from a special bank of mutual assistance. If a student got a child, she could take a year's break from her studies, while keeping her place at the hostel. In every group there was a leader who was selected by the dean's office, a Komsomol leader and Trade Union representative who were elected by students themselves. The leader kept absence records, was responsible for the general order, received the student grants for the whole group every month and gave each of us his or her amount (we got paid in cash).

The student grant, as I already mentioned, was 40 roubles; if you passed all exams with straight A's, then you got 50 roubles a month until the next sessional exams. If you didn't pass an exam, you could do it again, but you wouldn'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 had been already paid for the whole year in advance, so you would just need money for transport (from 1.5 up to 5 roubles maximum per month), for food (the most expensive three-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 old ones; as a rule we bought new clothes and shoes when we needed them (which does not mean that we didn't follow the fashions, and once in three to four months we did renew our wardrobe). Using libraries was free of charge, and there weren't many more essentials one would need money for. Because all our textbooks could be simply borrowed from the library, we didn't have to buy them (which we could easily do, though, quite cheaply, if we wished to, because bookshops were full of excellent books,

including on special subjects). Of course, parents helped many of us financially, myself included. But if parents didn't help, those students who needed it, could work part-time: as street cleaners, cleaning chutes, like Nariman and his brother, as a night guards at the museums, etc. or even working some night shifts at a bakery, for example. In any case, there was no need for any of us to get into debt or sell ourselves in order to get education. Many, especially boys, for summer holidays went to work with *stroyotryads* - numerous students' work teams that worked in construction or agriculture in the USSR, often in faraway places, under the leadership of one of the teachers. They could earn really good money in those two months, enough for almost half a year to live on. After our second year the stroyotryad was compulsory for everybody for a month.

In the so-called 'civilized' countries a student not only has to pay for their studies: they also have to buy their own textbooks every year, and those are awfully costly (universities do have libraries, but they are not meant to provide each student with books for study, so they simply do not 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 to buy that dictionary alone. In addition, you couldn't work simply as much as you would like to, the way it was in the USSR: in Holland the state was vigilantly following the student, and if he or she earned more than a certain amount, some money was deducted from their grant. And these people keep telling us that they are free!

Like many students, I often just had snacks 'on the go,' we didn't have much time for lengthy eating. In general, I don't like having breakfast, I can't get a piece into my throat early in the morning, especially before exams. Before lunch break we usually had two lectures (2x45 minutes each), then a lunch for 45 minutes and then another two 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), in a sandwich café next door, in a workers canteen two blocks

away, or sometimes even in GUM²⁸². Sometimes I simply bought 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 usually fried potatoes or bought some semi-finished meals. Smells and tastes from all the 15 republics were blended together in our student kitchens, and in another hostel where our foreign students lived, - from the whole world. I am not the best cook in the world; I simply hadn't had to cook for myself before I started living on my own, but here one could learn to cook anything. By the time of graduation I could already not just fry potatoes, but even cook Ethiopian *wot* or Arab *couscous*.

When we had a mood for it, we, girls, went to Shokoladnitsa²⁸³ - a café in Pushkinskaya Street after lectures, 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 marvellous ice cream café for children back in my own home town (during the Perestroika they replaced it with a beer pub). I usually left so much meat on my piece of chicken that Lyuba said to me in a voice of a 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 to a café that looked more like a restaurant, in the Moscow Hotel on the 15th floor - in that very beautiful 'Stalinist' building that has now unfortunately been demolished... From the balcony there you had a really breathtaking view of the Kremlin! And that café wasn't for some 'elite': anybody could eat there. Of course, not every day, but what person in their senses would have meals 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 the atmosphere in that café was quiet and tranquil. We usually took some caviar, solyanka soup, meat with mushrooms and an ice-cream each.

²⁸² Well-known State Department store, next to the Red Square in Moscow

²⁸³ 'Chocolatière' - popular café in Moscow, with various sweet desert dishes on the menu

Every month after getting my grant I went straight for the book shops. To Academkniga in Gorky Street that was always, from early morning till closure time, thronged with people in such large numbers that it couldn't even be compared with some 'sausage train!' There you could find all the newest publications of researchers - my specialty was books on history and ethnology of African countries - and their price was minimal. Besides Academkniga there were also other bookshops: Progress at Park Kultury metro station, Dom Knigi in Kalininsky Avenue, Books of Socialist Countries and many, many others. I was in those shops like a cat trusted to keep the cream! On Saturdays after lectures I used to bring home tons of books. And I was constantly reading something - in the metro, on the train. I simply could not imagine life without reading, not even for a single day.

And finally, theatres... I didn't plan to go there in advance: ordinarily good plays were all sold out, and it was hard to obtain tickets - much harder than that notorious sausage, about which our 'democrats' are now ranting non-stop. It was far easier to buy a ticket incidentally, for the same night: Moscow was full of small kiosks where they sold theatre and concert tickets, and on my way home I would often search in their windows for something worthy on sale. That is how I visited almost all Moscow theatres, even those that are very hard to get in, such as the Satire Theatre, and even the performance of our already ageing classic of stage Arkady Raikin.²⁸⁴ If there were two tickets for the same performance, I usually bought two and then invited somebody to go with me (I wouldn't ask them to pay me for the ticket, of course, the more so that it wasn't that expensive).

What an indescribable pleasure it is to watch a good theatre production! The only theatre that remained out of my reach was the then fashionable Taganka and, of course, the Bolshoi, where all foreign tourists we taken. But once Lida and I managed to sneak in there: we wished, at least, to see its resplendent interior and were lucky to be treated to a show. It was Saturday morning and they put on a performance of Indian musicians dedicated to the Week of Indian Culture in Moscow. We sat somewhere very high up in the gallery, right under the ceiling, but the theatre impressed us as utterly gorgeous! Only it was somewhat smaller

²⁸⁴ Arkady Isaakovich Raikin (1911-1987) was the renowned [Soviet stand-up comedian](#)

inside than I had imagined. The traditional Indian music sounded plangent, a row of girls were performing traditional Indian dances on the stage. Suddenly I heard loud 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 scandal if somebody noticed! And then I looked around and saw that at least five other fans of Indian art in our row were snoring simultaneously...

Sometimes you could meet a celebrated actor or actress in Moscow streets: they didn't drive around in supercars with bodyguards, but used metro and buses like all normal people and made no bones about queuing up for some delicacies or specialty tarts. To stop them and ask, for example, for an autograph, was possible, but considered to be awfully impolite, and we usually just glanced at them trying to pretend that we weren't looking, and then told our families at home about such an encounter. Most of all I remember meeting Yuri Yakovlev²⁸⁵ when I was going for my post-graduate entrance exam. It had been a good omen, judging by the result of that exam!

We also went to concerts, sometimes to cinemas. There was only one TV in the hostel, in the function room, but I could perfectly live without it at all. When we were in our third year, the 65th anniversary of the foundation of the USSR was celebrated, and Lida and I were lucky to get to the concert hall at the Russia Hotel - the one where Boney M. performed in 1978! I remember clearly Trio Marenych²⁸⁶ from the Ukraine being announced, and Lida whispering in Ukrainian loudly, so that half of the public could hear her:

- Oh, he's such a gorgeous guy, is Valera Marenych!

Only those who have actually seen what Valera Marenich looks like, will fully appreciate all the humour of the situation...

I often took our foreign students to various concerts or theatres too: I made friends with many of them quite quickly. I was interested in actually meeting real people from other countries and also felt sorry for them a bit. Because our students kept some distance from them, as if they were from another planet. But I wished so much for them to feel a part of our

²⁸⁵ Yury Vasilyevich Yakovlev (b.1928) is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed [Soviet](#) actors

²⁸⁶ Two sisters and a brother from the Western Ukraine known for singing Ukrainian folk songs

collective! 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 have good memories of it back in their own countries! I took Ethiopians to the circus in Vernadsky Avenue. Sometimes I made blunders, but I also managed to work miracles, for example, to take my Tunisian friend Habiba to a concert of Jewish folk music in such a way that she wasn't hurt. I realized what I had done only when the first song had already begun: I closed my eyes in horror: What have I done? and then thought 'Perhaps 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 and absolutely quietly, with her charming accent:

- Are those Jews or what?

Luckily, it was for once quiet in the Middle East at that time. But I still felt quite uncomfortable after that and decided to straighten out the situation by inviting her to a concert of my favourite Uzbek band, Yalla.²⁸⁷ As soon as Habiba heard the first sounds of their music, she jumped up, eyes glowing, and 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 was unlikely to have visited without her. For example, to a party of Yemeni students in Moscow, where I tried couscous for the first time. Or to 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 institutions. Most of them were Vietnamese, Mongolians and Bulgarians, with some Arabs in between. Black Africans came to study there in the same year as I: those two Ethiopians whom I have mentioned. Later, in the year following ours, there came some more students: a girl from Sudan, a couple of Cubans and even a 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

²⁸⁷ Yalla - the leading popular music group of the Central Asian republics, from Tashkent -- the capital of Uzbekistan. Was very popular all over the USSR.

sewed jeans for sale. From time to time they got into trouble for this, because generally foreign students didn't have the permission to work in Russia, let alone to work privately. The sewing machines kept 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 couples actually exist in the world!

The student grant of our foreign students was three times higher than ours: 120 roubles. But they needed it more than we did, not getting help from home and having 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 that 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 at the office that issued them that permission) and sold them: speculated, using our Soviet terminology. And some of them made quite a lot of money by that. I won't say that just everybody did it, it won't be true, 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 them to study in the West; if you don't want to, send them to the Soviet Union!'

Most of all I befriended two of my year mates: Fatima from Morocco and a Tunisian Habiba, whom I have already mentioned. They looked like sisters, but their characters were very different. Fatima was very feminine, shy, quiet, and Habiba - independent, sharp-tongued, almost a feminist. Both were wearing trousers and had short haircuts (no headscarves whatever); Habiba also smoked. 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 did one of these two things. I don't know if it really went that far, or they just wanted to scare us, but we decided not to tempt fate and came to that exam dressed almost like saints. Except for Habiba. She came in her usual trousers, and when that 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.

The professor liked her answer so much that decided not to make a fuss about it.

Fatima spoke in a quiet, a bit cooing voice and emanated fine and mysterious Eastern aromas. The same aromas filled her room in the hostel. She had difficulties with the Russian language, and we communicated in a mixture of Russian and French. She would ask me after lunch:

- Can I say in Russian that I've filled myself in, like a car?
- You can say 'I've got refuelled'!

She couldn't get used to our climate and used to ail every winter. She also found it very difficult to walk on icy footpaths in winter (it really does require to master certain locomotive skills). In the second year I tried once to teach her and Habiba to ski. Habiba liked it, but Fatima almost immediately fell into snow and was afraid to try it again after that... Fatima was married; her husband, a communist, also studied in Moscow to become a journalist. Before that they had studied in Romania for a while and then moved to us. She lived in her husband's hostel, at Profsoyuznaya metro station, and I sometimes went to visit them. There were so many different people from all around the globe in that hostel that I even envied them a bit. There were some unusual couples there, for example, a husband from Ethiopia and a wife from Madagascar, with their little girl to whom they both spoke in Russian, their only mutual language. Russian as a language of international communication - yes, that is how it used to be...

Fatima, Habiba and I became really close friends. They often asked my advice, confided to me their problems, and I corrected mistakes in their written Russian and shared - mostly with Fatima - my own little secrets. Once or twice they even borrowed some money from my mother to travel home for holidays. And then, already in Tunisia, Habiba sewed clothes for sale the whole summer to be able to pay it back...

By the 3rd-4th year I had become so brave as to take two foreign girls - Habiba and a Mongolian girl, Munhzul, - to my home for the weekend, even though foreigners couldn't travel outside Moscow without a special permission, and we might have easily had problems for this misdemeanour. But we took our chances. I said to Munhzul that she could pretend to be a Buryat girl, and to Habiba - that she could claim she was

from the Caucasus. The trip went well with each of them, they both liked our town. Mum made a great dinner for them. The only one who was scared was Petrovich: he had never seen any live foreigners in his life, and when Habiba came to us, he avoided her in the beginning. He watched her peeping through a hole in the curtain and only after some time decided to come out.

- She is actually quite an ordinary girl! - he said to Mum later, after Habiba's departure, sounding genuinely surprised.

Here I come to the part of my story, which I'd rather cross out from my memory... I have noticed that I have been trying to postpone it as long as I could, but the moment finally came. The picture won't be full without it, it is important for the understanding of what happened to me later.

*'I will never forget our friendship
If in Moscow friends are there for us!'*²⁸⁸

Such are the words of a well-known old Soviet song. And another, not less well-known, but much later song goes:

*'If your friend proved to be half and half, not a friend, not a foe, so-so...'*²⁸⁹

... The very first kiss in my life was very strange and happened only because I did not expect it to happen. I had never seen that man - neither before nor after.

On that frosty winter day I was going home from my lectures, but still had plenty of time to alight at the VDNKH and go to the canteen that I had loved since my Mum and I had trips to Moscow in my school years. By the way, it hadn't changed a bit during all that time.

I was standing in the metro carriage full of people when I saw him - a tall, dark-skinned military. I often saw people like that go out of the metro exactly at the VDNKH station.

Suddenly, despite myself, I smiled at him... Any anti-Soviet source will assure you, that 'smile wasn't a common thing for the Soviets to do.' They claim it is because we 'had such a hard life.' What sheer nonsense! We are just not accustomed to strained artificiality. And we still don't do it

²⁸⁸ Song about Moscow, a well-known song from the film *Svinarka I Patukh* (1944), music by T. Khrennikov, lyrics by V. Gusev, translation by T.Meierhold

²⁸⁹ Vladimir Vysotsky's song from the film *Vertical*

now, even though the same anti-Soviet sources are trying to convince the world that we are now finally 'free' (or, at any rate, 'more free'). That ilk simply can't conceive of the fact that '*Laugh without reason is a sign of folly.*'²⁹⁰ Or smile without reason, for that matter.

On that day I just felt good. The weekend was coming. I had just passed a difficult test. Was that enough reason for a smile or not? I think so.

I smiled at him and immediately felt uneasy. What am I doing, what for am I doing it?

He also began to smile, and by the time we walked to the escalator, we already spoke to each other. The military-man's name was Gitachew, he was from Ethiopia. His Russian fur cap looked a bit funny in combination with the 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. I caught my breath. I didn't expect that at all. I was scared and mumbled 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 come,- he said even more sadly. So sadly that I tried to reassure him that I would.

A week later I did come at the appointed time to 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 to the question why I took my next African acquaintance, Said Dawd, for that long-awaited African revolutionary of my dreams. Probably because I was so naïve as to think that a revolutionary country could not send an ordinary petit bourgeois - the son of a small shop owner not just by birth, but by spirit - to study in the first socialist country in the world. Or maybe I felt an appeal to Said because, unlike another Ethiopian student I knew, Tadesse, he didn't speak in slogans and make fancy speeches in public. To

²⁹⁰ an old Russian proverb

me the way Tadesse constantly quoted Marx and Lenin seemed very false, perhaps, because I judged him by our own Komsomol activists.

But most probably, I was mistaken simply because I had never met a real, through and through, *petit bourgeois*. Yes, we did have philistines, plenty of them, in the USSR, but a real shop-owner... Our philistines at least tried to pretend that they weren't like that! Now, that I have taken full measure of people of that kind, I can clearly understand why Margaret Thatcher was the way she was²⁹¹...

... They were sent to us to study by the same organization, but they were so different: Tadesse, a metropolitan-born boy from a Christian Amharic family, a frail activist with a scar across his face who tried to deport himself as an adult man, but looked almost like a child, and whom we often could not take seriously with his naïve archery and overly suppleness, - and Said, a provincial man from the town of Dessie in the Wollo province, a Muslim, tall, quiet, shy, with handsome sharp Semitic face features.

I liked his modesty. I didn't like upstarts.

The religious roots of our fellow students were of no significance to us. Religion had not been a part of our daily lives. It seemed something medieval to such an extent that we could not even imagine that it could be otherwise elsewhere in our days. And when I saw a 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 heartbreaking stories of Said happening to be an Islamic fundamentalist. He never was. I did not even see him praying, not once. He was simply an Ethiopian version of the Wise Gudgeon.²⁹²

If only he knew what I imagined him to be, he'd probably laugh himself into stitches in his sticking-out belly. And not just he, most people at our Institute would probably laugh, too. But they didn't know much about him and didn't pay much attention to him, unlike Tadesse who was in the front rank in everything.

²⁹¹ Thatcher's father owned a grocery store

²⁹² 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

All Said's things were tidy and clean - from his handwriting to the way his books were arranged on the shelves. Naturally, with such tidiness and perseverance he was a good student. He was a big pedant and very precautious. He never took a slightest risk. All 'noble indiscretions' were as alien to him as they were to Ippolit from *The Irony of Fate*.²⁹³ Only Ippolit wasn't that petty...

Our acquaintance began accidentally, even though I had noticed him on the very first day. But he seemed to me so cold, so impregnable, so indifferent to girls... I didn't dare even to say hello to him, even though my friend Fatima who was in the same group as he, had a high opinion of him. But Said turned out to be a classic case of a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The first person to notice me wasn't he, but Tadesse, or rather, he noticed Lida (it was indeed hard not to notice her!). She had really made a great impression on him. But because he didn't dare to approach her, he was glad to see me around, with my knowledge of when the Battle of Adwa²⁹⁴ was and what the name of the emperor Menelik's²⁹⁵ wife was, with my adoration of Miruts Yifter and so on... That's how we began to socialise closer.

I must give him credit for no intention to mess anybody around. He didn't proclaim eternal love, but simply expressed his wishes in a direct form, a bit like that Administrator Minister from Schwartz's Ordinary Miracle, which I have mentioned above.

Still, to me, that was a truly unpleasant encounter - truly unpleasant despite the fact that nothing actually happened, except for some verbal exchange. Girls who themselves have been in a similar situation (and I know that there were enough of those among the Soviet girls of my generation), are sure to remember the state of shock you find yourself in, when you first receive a proposal indecent by our norms and values, even though made 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

²⁹³ *The Irony of Fate* - very popular Soviet comedy film from 1975

²⁹⁴ 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](#).

²⁹⁵ Emperor Menelik II (17 August 1844 - 12 December 1913)- famous Ethiopian emperor of that time

and wrote down a couple of thoughts - of course, for myself. As in that fairy-tale where the hero so deadly wants to share the fact that Tsar Trojan has donkey's ears²⁹⁶ - that he divulges it to a hole dug up in the ground - to ease the burden on his shoulders... But it so happened that when I came home for the weekend, my granny, while unpacking my bag, saw that scrap 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 had happened. Later Mum told me, and when I fully realized what Granny had actually read, for the first time in my life I felt my heart literally sink into my stomach. Before that I thought that was only an expression, but after that incident I know it describes exactly what you feel at such moments.

It made no sense to explain anything to Granny, to try to convince her that nothing had really happened between me and Tadesse. To her, the very fact that I should put myself into such a situation, depicted me in quite a negative light. As for Tadesse, she began to hate him without even once seeing him. And all his compatriots along with him.

From that time on I have never kept diaries.

At that time, of course, I fretted and fumed at Tadesse. But now I think it's better to be an honest twerp than a liar. In any case, at that time my whole innocent being burnt with a desire of revenge: how could he even have dared to propose to me such things! And I couldn't find a better way of revenge than give a couple of smiles to his friend... To that very one, cold and impregnable.

He was very surprised. He looked as if he couldn't believe his eyes. And the next day he came up to 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 tea²⁹⁷, and I was searching for our best tea, Bodrost²⁹⁸, for him in out shops. After that he

²⁹⁶ Serbian fairy-tale

²⁹⁷ One of the best local tea brands in the USSR

²⁹⁸ Bodrost ('Energy') was a mixture of various Soviet and Indian tea leaves

was spending the whole evenings hand-picking Indian tea leaves from the Soviet ones. You could smell the foreign Fa soap from him: he bought it on his trips abroad twice a year, in London or in West Berlin. In all five years of our studies he didn't go back home for holidays even once. He also bought various stuff for his lion-style hair: special creams so that his hair wouldn't be 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 in store to enjoy thick hair: he was already getting bald. And he also suffered from gastritis. It was no wonder with the spicy food he ate: it was Said who taught me to cook Ethiopian *wot*²⁹⁹ ...

He washed himself three times a day and despised his Mongolian flat-mate because the latter 'walked to the toilet barefoot.' Judging by his attitude, he despised my compatriots too, and feared them as that 'savage' Mongolian. Said insisted from the very beginning that nobody should know about our meetings, I mean, the most innocent meetings, such as going to the cinema together. Such super-secrecy appeared strange to me. We weren't doing anything reprehensible.

- 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 then what exactly they are capable of, and how he knew it. We 'knew' such things only from the scandalous Voice of America, not from our own experience. In my whole life not a single KGB agent had ever persecuted me. Not even had a chat with me. But I felt uncomfortable to question Said: after all, he was older than I and looked so certain of it. He was already 27 and I was just only 18...

-See for yourself, how racist your people are! - he said to me when we were wandering through the blooming apple tree alleys in the VDNKH. And that seemed true: people, completely unfamiliar strangers, shot hateful glances at us, and some of them even openly expressed their disrespect. My compatriots who were brought up with the Soviet films Circus and Maximka and the ballet Path of Thunder!³⁰⁰ I didn't expect anything like

²⁹⁹ 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](#)

that from them. Racism in any manifestation shouldn't have existed in the USSR!

Why? What did we do? Why do they think it was their business? Who gave them the right to decide for me whom I should be seeing? Do we bother them? We weren't kissing or anything; we weren't even holding hands in the street!

When Said heard their remarks, he just buried 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, was developing into something very serious.

Soon I was completely confused. If he didn't want me to have any problems and was certain that I would have them if I continued to see a foreigner, then why was he seeing me at all? When I asked him about his native country and life there, he just brushed those questions off with 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 wouldn't be able to. Then why the hell was he stringing me along?

I didn't know that the real reason for this was quite simple: *there weren't enough Ethiopian female students in Moscow* for all the male ones. There were much fewer 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 the sense he had imagined. But he, being long an adult man and a son of a shop-owner from a semi-feudal country, didn't know and couldn't understand that there could be any other senses... Only that he was a bit more patient than Tadesse...

Meeting in the streets soon became a real torture, because of the impudent passers-by, and he offered me to meet in a hostel. Foreigners lived in a separate hostel at that time, as I have already said, - it wasn't even a hostel, but an ordinary block of flats, a five-floor 'khrushchevka'³⁰¹, very much resembling the house where 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

³⁰⁰ Soviet anti-racist films and ballet (based on the well-known South African novel of the same name)

³⁰¹ Apartment building type typical for the Khrushchev's years (late 1950s-early 1960s)

only because of the strict grannies -watchwomen³⁰² 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 each of them and 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 at the Conservatoire. Their hostel was located 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 bounds 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 I am sure of it now!) something so huge, so important that I wouldn't easily throw such words in the air. But I thought that his words were possibly caused by his insufficient knowledge of the nuances of the Russian 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 spent 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 the hostel unnoticed by the watchwoman: almost like a ninja... I don't want to describe in details how to do that; what if 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 two who knew that and I feared even to imagine what the Vietnamese must have thought.

-If anything happens... if you get pregnant or anything... that would be our baby!- tried to convince me Said. But I was intransigent.

...Soon the summer came - my very first student summer holidays. I passed all exams with A's again. That summer the International Festival of Youth and Students took place in Moscow, for the second time in our country since 1957. We, students, were allowed to stay in Moscow and

³⁰² 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 p.m.

even work for the Festival: in hotels, registering guests. I feel sorry even now that I didn't take that opportunity. I'll never have a second chance to see such an 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 whom I honestly told the whole story. Galya didn't condemn me: she was a newly-wed herself, having married a guy from Western Ukraine called Andriy. They also lived in a hostel, but even after their marriage still in different buildings (there weren't enough rooms for young families), and Galya said that I could stay with her, and then we'd see. I had told my family at home that I was going to stay with Galya. And I didn't really lie. I just kept a part of truth to myself.

Donetsk in the mid 1980s was astonishingly beautiful. Approaching the city by train you could feel the smell of smouldering coal miles away, but in Donetsk itself 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 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 gardening works in Donetsk.

I wonder what it looks 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, the mines, 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 metal workers, who graduated as computer specialist, doesn't think about Donetsk' mineworkers at all now: she and Andriy moved to Kiev, are both working not in their own speciality field, sometimes are left without work, trying to raise two children. .. Every time she is made redundant again or suddenly receives a wage cut without any explanation, she complains of 'not very nice treatment' of her by the representatives of '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!'*³⁰³ - as the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek would say of such people. I had been grateful to her for a long time after that journey, for her hospitality, but now we are no longer in touch. Well, one who lives with wolves, howls like wolves... If you marry a descendant of Bandera's³⁰⁴ followers, you'd become like him, too. Man and his wife are the same Satan.³⁰⁵

Donetsk University astonished me. That would really be the place for me to study! I haven't seen such numbers of foreign students even at Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University in Moscow. They had their own competitions, had their own music bands, they lived 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 day-to-day life. I wonder where Peoples' that girl from Afghanistan to whom Galya introduced me is now. Is she still alive?...

There were four hostels here, all the four huge edifices resembling our Moscow high-rise buildings were situated not far from the Shakhter³⁰⁶ Stadium, near a big lake surrounded by typically Ukrainian weeping willows. The windows in those hostels could be opened just a little bit: to prevent any possible accidents, the administration placed special metal frames on them that limited the range of opening. Galya lived in Hostel 3, Andriy - in 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 asked him to (her bed was behind a wardrobe and a curtain).

- Give me a pillow, Galya, and I'll go...

³⁰³ From his famous poem 'Song of Lawino' (1966), here translated from Russian translation back into English

³⁰⁴ 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.

³⁰⁵ Russian proverb

³⁰⁶ Mineworker (also name of the popular soccer team from Donetsk and of the stadium)

- But pillow has an appendix to it, - whispered Galya seductively, trying to pull him closer. I didn't like to witness their cooing. And I didn't understand such conduct, to be honest.

Sometimes Andriy came to us for dinner and when Galya offered him soup made of concentrate from a paper bag, he said softly, but with his whole heart:

- Galya, did I really get married to eat soups from concentrate?

If KGB really had a desire to get us caught red-handed, as Said imagined them 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 properly checked at the entrance even once during those two weeks: 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! - impudently lied I in fear, jumping into the lift and pressing the button as hard as I could. Once on my floor, I ran into Galya's room, locked myself in and spent there probably an hour shaking and expecting any moment a knock at the door... But nothing happened.

During the day Said and I 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's recently mentioned that it should be made easier for people to 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 Gorbachev. But about this thing Gorby didn't lie: today you are free to marry any American or European moron, unsolicited 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 childhood. That's what it read, in broken Russian:

'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...'

Besides dad the shop-owner who was constantly complaining that the new authorities 'restrict his business' and mum the housewife (the one Said used to ask his favourite question about dinners), he also had three sisters and a brother who was getting a free medical degree in socialist Cuba. But no matter how long you feed a wolf, he still looks to a forest...³⁰⁷

But it was already too late. I already felt sorry for him. And I imagined that it was probably love after all.

My generation was the last innocent generation in our country. No laughing: we had girls in our hostel (mainly from Central Asia) who were 17 or 18 and still seriously believed that you could get pregnant from kissing. I ask you not to laugh because all the 'technical' knowledge in this area that is being promoted among young people nowadays almost since nursery school not only doesn't guarantee any happiness, but thoroughly warps your soul. None of these young people will ever know the wonderful sacramental mystery of man and woman's love. Pushkin's heroes were thrilled by a view of a 'narrow heel' of the object of their admiration³⁰⁸. But the generation that has chosen Pepsi is thrilled by nothing any more... And knowing 'the technology of the process' doesn't ensure your protection from human meanness.

Of course, if you really wished to behave like swine, 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

³⁰⁷ Hint at self-seeking and ungratefulness of those people

³⁰⁸ Pushkin's 'Stone Guest' short poem

innocent for as long as they would like to: by the incessant series 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 the number of such pregnancies in today's Britain where children at the age of five are already taught on cards with pictures what male and female genitals look like and are called.... The connection between these two things is so obvious that it is stupid to deny.

It's impossible to imagine anything more disgusting than children being taught what penis looks like before they actually learn to read and write properly!.. And after this British 'sages' suggest even more 'drastic means' in their struggle against teenage pregnancy, such as the encouragement of interest of youth in oral sex and lowering of the age of enlightenment as to what penis and vagina are to 4 years!

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 seems 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 (even the Dutch!) are revolted by the fact. The authorities tell them that they can do nothing, because paedophiles have freedom of speech too...

And this society is being thrust on us now as a model to emulate?...

The so-called 'free' society, in practice, just deprives people of a conscious choice, by imposing on them since early years all sorts of bestialities in all possible ways. It might be difficult to understand for some, but there were some things which I myself did not wish to know. And if someone should have begun back then to ply me with them - in any form, even in the form of fairy-tales about bees and flowers, as the Irish priests do at their schools, - I would have just closed my ears and walked out of the door. Even if it were my relatives who should have tried to ply me with such rubbish. Fortunately, they did not try; possibly because they knew my temper. Mum only once told me that if I ever had any problems, I could always ask her for help. By the way, I am not alone in my views: my 'liberated' Dutch girlfriend Katarina (with her impertinent 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, it was unpleasant for her to discuss such things. But her advanced progressive Dutch parents still kept telling her and her brother about it, almost by force. I saw this brother of hers: 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 matter is 'just drink tea.' *Neither before it, nor after, but instead!* 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 felt no need and no interest in them.

But that poor creature Said was suffering. He had been suffering already for a year and did not give up the hope. And eventually my pity to him prevailed over my own norms, dreams and ideals... I know that it sounds awfully naive, but I thought at that time that when a person saw how deeply you trusted him, he would not dare to hurt you. I did not know that a shopkeeper wouldn't even notice that you are giving 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 Bodrost tea and carry for him bagfuls of Armenian apricots, despite the risk of 'looking 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, *Omar Yusuf, Khottabych's brother!*³⁰⁹

Said didn't not understand anything at all, but got scared. In general, he was not among 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 home on leave. He felt sorry for me and said that things would sort themselves out. I was touched by his kindness and care. But I wondered if he would have been just as caring if he had known that I grieved over a foreigner, an African...

... My relationship with Said - '*a half romance, or no romance, but merely its title*³¹⁰' - had lasted till September, 1986, though he had begun to see somebody else even before that. At last, he found an Ethiopian girl, and after that, for all the three years which were left for us to study

³⁰⁹ Evil genie from the famous Soviet fairy-tale 'Old man Khottabych' (spotting hint at Saud's Muslim origin)

³¹⁰ Song 'Hey!' from the Soviet film 'Shores'

together, we did not say a word to each other. For a 'keepsake' from Said I had a broken finger and a heart, burnt out like steppe after fire, to such a 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 cased my finger in plaster, jokingly pitied me for the fact that I would never be able to put a wedding ring on this finger: Said had gripped my hand with such force that a splinter of the bone broke and got stuck in the joint. There was no chance that it would heal completely, and they didn't get that piece of bone from my joint either, so the finger remained forever a little bit more thickly at the joint, and it was really impossible to put a ring on it any more.

Life had given me its first hard lesson then: you should never give up your principles and go against the voice of your conscience just in order to please another person, however concerned you may be about them.

... 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 a single person even looked at us with a jaundiced eye, though racism since then had avowedly become more widespread.

Maybe, the matter was that people had felt how Said actually treated me and saw that my relation with Sonny was absolutely different?

...Anyway, one thing puzzles me even now. Why is it always necessary to use cunning in love, to wangle, 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 subterfuges? 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 any real deep feeling, and in this case, why even try?

I do not want to do any of this. It is unworthy of a human being to apply any such tricks in order to 'tame' a person. If you are not just physically attracted to them, but also feel deep respect for them. I would have been the most devoted friend to someone congenial to me. I would have been such a companion on whom one could 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 life had not stopped for all that time; it just ran its course. I am such a person that won't allow any personal problems to influence their performance in studies. *'What matters is not anything personal, but work and results we achieve!'*³¹¹ Perhaps teachers felt (and maybe someone even knew) that something had happened to me: I remember sympathetic looks of some of them during the next term exams. But I did not require any indulgences out of pity, though: I was a good student. Moreover, to divert myself from my suffering, I plunged myself fully into studies - into studies, rather than into alcohol or drugs, as so many people in this 'free world' do.

In my second student year (when this first personal drama of mine was taking place), there were a lot of new and interesting events. By tradition, the year had begun with a monthly trip to a collective farm to assist the farmers in harvesting. In Lenin's Hills - near Moscow, where Lenin once lived -, all of us stayed to harvest apples. We lived in pretty much the same conditions in which Mum's colleagues had been living when I had gone to the collective farm with them. There only difference was that it wasn't summer, but already September, so it was not very pleasant to wash your face and hands outside with cold water. But such things temper you somehow. My Granddad showered himself every day in the yard with cold water, in any weather - and he never was 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 correspondence departments. They quickly joined in 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.

- Basina, confess, you are Jewish, aren't you? - he pestered her. He spoke with the rolling French 'p'. Lida heroically kept silent, but one day it became too much for her:

- Bortnikov, do all the Cossacks speak with rolling 'r'?³¹²

³¹¹ Soviet pop-song 'My address is the Soviet Union'

³¹² Rolling 'r' used to be typical for the Yiddish accent in Russian (in the old days)

Another time, when he addressed her not teasingly, but about something serious, she suddenly struck back at him:

- Bortnikov, you'd better be careful. We, Jews, are hot-tempered people!

Some students were also expelled from our course: basically, they were such people whom we had not even seen properly throughout the school year. During our stay at the collective farm, I was satisfied that 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 it should bother her personally, wasn't clear) who in the previous year had been having noisy parties in their room, attended by the Georgian named Vakhtang. Both of them got pregnant (I do not know how they managed: all our collective-farm life was in broad daylight, with no privacy whatsoever), later got married, and it was amusing to observe, how suddenly 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 the 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 last. It's not so easy for four people to feed almost 100 persons in two shifts three times a day and wash all the dishes after them. Though it was the cook who was preparing the meal, we only helped her: peeled onions, potatoes and so forth. We washed the dishes with soda, which calloused our hands. But it was a nice work. It was only bad that Lida, unlike Lyuba, soon went back to Moscow: with the permission of the administration. Her geologist mother was celebrating her 50th birthday, for that she arrived in Moscow for two weeks, and Lida was allowed to spend that time there provided she was to work somewhere in the city until we returned to our study. Lida got a job as a kvass seller in a kiosk: it was a usual summer work, as kvass was a summer drink, but they still sold it in September. In her new place Lida, as usual, didn't waste any time: she fought with late season wasps, got acquainted with militiamen, let local drunkards drink in her kiosk, etc.). But I really missed her very much...

Foreign students were not sent to work at the collective farm, they stayed in Moscow and had Russian lessons for that month, and therefore I

breathed a little bit more freely. My relationship 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.

At the end of the second year we had office-work practice: at a district Komsomol committee, and then there was a work for a month in a stroyotryad - student work team. Lida, Lyuba and I got a job at a greengrocery near Novoslobodskaya metro station. This is how the destiny brought me into the world, quite unknown to me then, of those who later became grave-diggers of my country: Komsomol activists and shopkeepers. And to tell you the truth, they had more common features than differences.

Lida fell in love once again in the district committee. In my opinion, it was auto-suggestion. Her only true love, Nariman, had 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 perverse subject of her imagination for some years and even a hero of her brilliant self-composed rock opera (our entire student population followed the process of writing that opera!). When inspiration visits Lida, she is capable of revealing her talent in all its splendour.

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 had imagined them to be. But had 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 balyk³¹³... And I'll get you some tickets for the Italians³¹⁴...

He didn't even blink when he saw me.

The intelligence service, in my person, of course, immediately informed Lida when her new crush had his birthday. The poor girl ran all

³¹³ Sort of smoked fish

³¹⁴ Italian pop-singers were very popular in the USSR in the late 1980s

around Moscow, in search of white carnations: someone had told her that men should be given bouquets only 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 were probably too much preoccupied 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 the Zhitomir region. And you?

- And I am from Voroshilovgrad.

- Oh, - said Lida derisively: she couldn't help it, as usual, when tête-à-tête with the subject of her dreams. - You call that Ukraine?

Vlas was offended.

- It's not Ukraine where you come from! It's almost Poland! *Galan was killed there!*³¹⁵

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 that *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... an operation 'Anti Easter' on Easter's eve (no joking; I laughed myself sick when I saw that 'classified document' on Vlas's desk!), consisting in their own walks in threesomes around a church during the Easter night to scare off the youth of Komsomol age if they happened to be there. Well, and they also wrote reports and held meetings. And they accepted schoolchildren into the ranks of Komsomol.

The routine that I saw there and characters like Vlas made me reluctant to join the Party.

After that we worked for a month at a greengrocery. And by the way, we were paid quite well.

It was absolutely another world. First of all, I had never heard before such broad choice of swearwords. And everybody there swore: up to the

³¹⁵ Yaroslav Galan (1902-1949)- Ukrainian communist writer who was killed after the WWII by the anti-Soviet forces

director; for them it was a kind of vernacular they used for speaking. Swearing in the USSR of the mid 80s was very rare, yet it seemed to be a professional language of such rough occupations as shopkeepers and party officials, the same as argot was the language of criminals that later on miraculously transformed into 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 the 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 got nervous, when I had to weigh something, while there was a long queue waiting. But Lida went to sell fruits and vegetables willingly, 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 also possible to press unnoticeably the cup of the scales at the bottom. Some products could be soaked, in order to make them heavier; in some vegetables they added soil.) During the packing we were taught to hide a rotten potato in the good ones: in the middle of the package, neither on the top, nor at the bottom. We saw how goods that did not appear on the counters were brought into the shop, and then the director called round her friends from other shops, and they almost ran barter trade between each other (almost - because they still paid to each other for the products and things which they exchanged, but it was the state price, just a trifle.) We who *temporary became some of their own* were allowed to buy that 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 the loader assigned with me - Seva, who was no enemy to alcohol, 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 sippers too. And even all the women - saleswomen - in

that 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 the Presidium. But I silently gave him such a look that he moved away from me and never even looked at me anymore. In Soviet time it all depended on how you behaved. The boors were not allowed to go unbridled.

Lunch for us was prepared by a granny was officially enrolled as the cleaner in the shop. It was the same every day, plain and simple, but very tasty and nourishing: soup and the second course. After eating we went to the 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 used to swing on children's swings there. Loaders, having had lunch, *played a game of cards*³¹⁶. Overall, the atmosphere in the shop impressed us as semi-criminal. But the customers did not see it; all of this was left behind the doors.

So, it is these profiteers who are 'doing 'business' in Russia nowadays. People, who are themselves not capable of making anything useful, but know all too well how to short-weight and to short-change....

... In September we were given not only our grants for the summer, as usual, but also the salary for that month in the shop. And to my joy, I bought in Akademkniga bookshop an enormously thick book 'Africans' by Basil Davidson, which before that I had fancied 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 all the bitterness in my soul, I didn't give up my plans. Who on Earth was he that I should give up my plans of learning the language of that very interesting country where, I was sure, there were so many fine people!

During those one and a half years I had read so many research monographs on Ethiopia that I already knew even such things that Said himself probably had no idea of: so keen was my interest. At that time it was possible to learn only four major European languages at the courses of foreign languages in Moscow; even Swedish was taught only in one place, and to sign for that course, you had to produce a statement that you needed to learn it for some official purpose, rather than just for fun. One of my coursemates, in love with an Estonian guy who respected Sweden

³¹⁶ In the USSR playing cards in public was considered to be inappropriate

very much, decided, like me, to begin mastering a language, connected with her flame. We had to forge a certificate for her that she needed it 'for her diploma thesis about the Soviet-Swedish relations.' Lida managed to make 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 even no textbooks: there were only a few dictionaries and some phrase books intended not for people like me, but for 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 replied to me and gave me his home telephone number. Oh God, how my heart was 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 had not aborted my plans to connect my future with the Ethiopian revolution. I did not want that the knowledge I had acquired during that time be wasted: I wished to use it as a basis for my future serious research work, connected with that country.

After the telephone conversation we met at that 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 enormous reverence for him. After all, he was not obliged to help me! And he was also 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 inscribed for me his dictionary: 'To dear Zhenya for long memory, with a wish of success in learning the Amharic language. As Ethiopians say...! - and there he had written something in the absolutely unfamiliar to me Amharic' script.

- *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, frankly, it would have been too expensive for me without Mum's help. But

Mum thought positively about my aspiration to learn, even in spite of the fact that she had already been initiated in the sad story of my first love.

I had been learning Amharic for almost two years, two lessons a week for two hours each. Mum says the money, which we spent for those lessons, would have sufficed to buy a colour TV-set.

My teacher had an *exotic* name, Nikita Arnoldovich. He worked with Ethiopians as a translator at the High School of Trade Unions; he had visited Ethiopia several times and once Gwad³¹⁷ 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 must have been at least 15 years younger. I remember well our first meeting: 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 and almost dark outside. I stood in a hall of the institute near the public bulletin board which I had almost learned by heart by the time my new teacher came in.

- Zhenya Kalashnikova? Is it you? - I heard behind my back. I turned round and almost fainted with unexpectedness. Instead of a middle-aged, a bit slovenly bore of a translator as I imagined him, in front of me there stood an absolutely charming, a bit awkward, tall, easily blushing fair-haired young man with warm steel-grey eyes and a radiant smile. Hardly older than I, and so attractive that I had to remind myself that I liked only Africans guys...

And not only attractive, but also very brainy. It's about such people we say 'smart_as_paint.' For the first time in my life I met a person about the same age as I (he was just five years older) who, apparently, was more well-read than myself! Very soon I started to admire him secretly and looked forward to every next class, though Amharic was not an easy language to learn.

The problem was not only 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

³¹⁷ Comrade (Amharic)

that language is absolutely different from the usual European ones, and I needed some time to get myself 'adjusted to the necessary wavelength' for its perception. The learning of the Amharic language reminded me of studying mathematics: there was a strict internal system in construction of phrases. They are put to each other like bricks: it reminds one of doing a mathematical problem, step by step, - by adding various prefixes and suffixes to words and if you don't learn strictly the rules of such a '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 for the classes thoroughly, despite being busy at work, and earned his fees more than fairly.

Nikita Arnoldovich lived on the other end of Moscow, near Domodedovskaya metro station; 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 to him for 10-15 minutes about Ethiopia, about books, about interesting things. He was the only one of my acquaintances who had similar interests as I did, 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 those 10-15 minutes!

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 had no sense of limit... (We all are people of the extremes who do not feel when it is time to stop: now the whole country are indispensable atheists, now suddenly all people without exception are expected to study the Bible and hit the floor in churches with their foreheads...) And by doing so I often spoil those 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 collaboration

with fascists!), which I had accidentally managed to buy in a second-hand shop near the monument of the first Russian printer Ivan Fedorov...

If we didn't have to hurry anywhere, we could discuss those books for hours!

Once he offered to walk with me to the metro station because he was going the same way. It was winter, it was slippery, and while leaving the entrance, I slipped and nearly fell. At 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 that moment in my mind for much longer and much stronger than one and a half years of going out with Said...

Lida bantered with me about my trips to Nikita Arnoldovich two times a week and advised me 'to get to know him closer': wasn't he such a catch! But I never looked on him that way. I admired him too strongly for that, not to mention that I already had had my portion of 'romancing' 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 serious 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 from Moscow! - he got noticeably 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 enough! Enough! You've dinged it into my ears. I want to look at your Arnoldych with my own eyes.

I felt like hearing her opinion about him and, knowing Lida's character, I was prepared for a cheerful adventure. But how could we make it? We couldn't just hide behind his door!

Soon I heard during a lesson Nikita Arnoldovich arrange by phone to go together with his friend to a swimming pool one Thursday. On his desk I found his subscription slip for the pool in Baumanovka and later the same evening I informed Lida about the coming possibility...

It was fine weather, almost summer-like, on Thursday. Lida and I skipped the last lesson and went on foot from the Institute through the whole centre to Baumanovka. Never before did Moscow seem to me so

beautiful, as on that evening. Over the Yauza³¹⁸ the red sunset flared, shining at the windows of the factory called Manometer. It was very quiet, not a branch moved on the trees that were bursting green with only recently opened leaves. We had a lot of time, and we managed to walk through all Lefortovo, with its ancient buildings. I tried to imagine where the Kukui village was there once³¹⁹.

We quickly found the swimming pool and arranged an ambush, like 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 the path to it. Lida providently brought with her some newspapers: to cover our faces lest he should notice that he was observed.

He was on the path at the appointed time. *'But the intelligence reported accurately...'*³²⁰.. I quickly covered my face with the newspaper, and Lida stood up from the bench and slowly made a circle around him. And it would all be OK, if it wasn't for a draught of wind that, twice unexpected on 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 another direction and pretended that I was waiting for someone, feeling his amazed look on myself. And I feverishly thought, how I should behave the 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 oglandy*³²¹! - she said with approval, showing me a thumb. I nearly fell 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 had happened. But I saw him slightly grin; not with contempt but as if flattered that there was such an absolutely unexpected attention to his person...

³¹⁸ River in Moscow

³¹⁹ Place in Moscow where foreign community lived in the XVII-XVIII centuries

³²⁰ From the Soviet song 'Three Tank Drivers'

³²¹ Such a good-looking fellow! (azerb.)

The lessons were continuing. For two years Nikita Arnoldovich had perfected my knowledge in Amharic to such an extent that when I finally really needed it during my practice - at the Institute of Africa, the shrine of our domestic African studies! - I could already translate handwritten 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 root...

All this time we called each other 'You' in a polite form³²². After one and a half years of our studies I thought that the duration of our acquaintance and the 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 'thou'. After all we have known each other for a long time.

Nikita Arnoldovich was confused, but he told me that I could also name him just 'thou', and that we could start using this new form of address 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 was this all about? After all, as the Russian saying goes, I did 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 would call each other just 'thou'... - I cautiously reminded him. And then an absolutely unexpected thing 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 flowed like a fountain from my eyes.

I had never told anyone, I had not even admitted to myself, but all my life I had diligently avoided our local men for fear of them. Thus I had never dated any of them as a form of preventive defense. I had not thought them idlers, alcoholics, beaters of wives and owners of other sins

³²² In Russian language there is a difference between formal 'you' and informal 'thou', similar to French's 'vous' and 'tu'

in which they are often accused by our women who bunked out of the country. No. I was just really afraid to hear any rough word from their lips. When people are rude to you in another language or even in Russian, in case Russian is not native for a person, it is not perceived so painfully. And it is easier to take down a peg of such a 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 that polished intelligent boy from the capital city:

- 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 that was rude.

My 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 the corridor how he could get new sneakers.

- Well, let's continue our dialogue with '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...

When I angrily looked again at Nikita Arnoldovich again, I suddenly realized with horror that he was drunk. Poor guy, probably, took in a little bit before my arrival for bravery, thinking that it would help him to overcome his shyness and start calling me 'thou'. But as he had never drunk, 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 'thou'. During the following lesson he hardly squeezed out the 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 decided, out of curiosity, to find out in the same place, when Nikita Arnoldovich had his birthday. The result struck me on the spot. He had his birthday on the same day as Said, of all the 365 days in a year... It seemed that it was the workings of fate on my life.

And even now it seems to me quite often that it is. As if someone from above has turned my life into an adventure play with an admixture of soap operas - without asking me if I wanted it or not. I can even imagine unknown to me spectators watching this play, with the laughter mixed with tears... 'My goodness, how it is all twisted!'

My lessons with Nikita Arnoldovich lasted till the middle of my fourth year when he told me that in general he gave me all the knowledge that he had, and he had nothing more to teach me. I considered it as a compliment. I thought that I would miss our intellectual communication very much, but my life without Nikita Arnoldovich appeared to be not so empty as I thought it would. Moreover, my long-awaited dream came true - I managed to arrange for a place for practice at the Institute of Africa!!...

... Traces of Nikita Arnoldovich were lost after the Perestroika commotion into which our country got, and it is just recently that I found him. Now he lives and works.... in South Korea!

... During that period my life was packed to the limit. Six evenings out of six evenings of the working week I spent out of my hostel: two - with Nikita Arnoldovich, two - in the English courses and one - at the sessions of the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship with Foreign Peoples in the Friendship House in Kalininsky Avenue. On Saturday after the lectures, as usual, I went home. I was very glad to have such a crammed schedule: I had no time to take a breath, let alone suffer because of some amourette.

I do not remember exactly, how I found the USSF- the Union of the Soviet societies of friendship with the people of foreign countries - it seems, from Vlas's Komsomol officials. And having found it, I was afire with enthusiasm: 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, forever remained a mystery for me. Did the 1980s-style Komsomol officials, such as Vlas, think that there wouldn't be enough people wishing to join those societies on an individual basis? I think they underestimated our people...

Nevertheless, I managed to assign myself to the African branch of the USSF, and I weekly came for their sessions on Wednesdays. There we 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 to be engaged in private labour activities. Many people were already engaged in it as it is, such as the Vietnamese; others were engaged in some business activity, that was hardly possible to name 'labour' - as some of my African acquaintances who brought almost containers full of things for sale from one country to another.... Those 'businessmen' should have better studied properly. Or at least should have questioned themselves first whether it was permitted for foreign students to work in their favourite 'civilized' countries. 'You know what the Soviet Union has proposed to us? ' - indignantly spoke Said once. - 'They found a gold field on our territory and offered us help with its extraction on the basis of 30 percent (to USSR) to 70 percent (to Ethiopia). Can you imagine such robbery? '

And can he imagine, at least in general, what percentage the Western corporations take in such cases? ...

In summer after the third year I asked the permission to work in the archives of the USSF in order to write a thesis on the Soviet-Ethiopian relations. I did everything according to 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 that archive. I do not know what kind of secrets were kept there, but the archive management told to me that I could work there only if I worked for them as a courier for the whole summer - dispatching mail. To be more exact, the driver would drive me around Moscow, and I would only deliver the letters and packages to various establishments. I had to agree.

But I held on to that place just for two days. I understood that I would not get to any archive: there was so much mail to deliver that we finished only by the end of the working day! ... What research could one speak about?! It was like a fairy-tale where a priest hiring a girl to do chores reads 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 day long about the city and cursed: not me, but his bosses:

- They keep this cosy place for their children! For autumn, in case someone fails to get a place at an institute...

Then I visited the 'White House' with the mail of the USSF. It was that very 'White House' where the 'democrat' Yeltsin would shoot the Russian Parliament some years later. If somebody had told us about it at that time, we would have thought them crazy! At that time nobody called this place the 'White House', unless only derisively (the local committees in our region were also named the 'White Houses' with the same humorous shade). There was no fencing around it that came after the execution in 1993; there were no guards, except for one old janitor woman at the door, the same as in our hostel: you could come in whenever you needed it. It's the first law of bourgeois democracy: the quantity of fences and security guards in a country is in direct proportion to the degree of the glorified-by-bourgeois-press freedom in it...

In a word, a week later I understood what I was in for, gave up those unrealizable plans and even the earned money which I didn't come to collect, and decided to go to Lida in Zhitomir. She had invited 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 Kolomenskoe³²³. I discovered Moscow for myself from an unexpected side. I looked with melancholy at its luminous windows in the evenings: people lived there, indeed, they had their homes, without any janitors, and worked where they wanted.... After all, living in Moscow enabled one to become anybody they wished!

Shortly before that we had celebrated Lida's birthday. For that 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 all about it. An hour later we heard a powerful explosion. The windows trembled. In a fright we all run out to the kitchen to see what had happened - and saw the sticky, sweet condensed milk falling in drops from the kitchen's ceiling... After that we had to be content with the 'Prague' cake³²⁴ 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

³²³ Suburbs of Moscow

³²⁴ Popular sort of chocolate cake in the USSR

had celebrated Lida's birthday together with us. There was a heavy rain outside. 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 from that correct Komsomol leader he had been as a sober man. When he learned that it was Lida's birthday he kissed her from the heart, having even forgotten about Galan's murder. Lida was on top of the world. She had not even dared to dream of such a gift!

Inspired, she went home and told 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!

The Chernobyl accident had occurred a year before that. Neither she, nor I worried about it. Even though the 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 in their own gardens. Almost with children's pleasure they told me their new local jokes: 'Zaporozhets³²⁵'s not a car; a Kievan's not a man', 'All Europe curses our peaceful Soviet atom' - and so forth.

The Western Ukraine is an amazingly beautiful land. I read so many books about it, on their partisan struggle with fascists, on Oleksa Dovbush³²⁶, the local Janosik³²⁷. Nikolai Ivanovich Kuznetsov³²⁸ was one of the greatest heroes in my life! I managed to visit his grave in Lvov.

We were often warned that in the Western Ukraine they treated Russians badly and did not reply if you started talking Russian to them. But I never came across it personally. I was in Lvov and in Zhitomir. Yes, there 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 Russian, and the neighbours answered them in

³²⁵ The smallest Soviet-made car

³²⁶ Oleksa Dovbush (1700- 1745) was a famous [Ukrainian](#) outlaw, leader of [opryshky](#), who became a [folk hero](#), often compared to [Robin Hood](#)

³²⁷ Juraj Jánošík (1688-1713) was a famous [Slovak](#) outlaw

³²⁸ 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](#).

Ukrainian, and nobody cared in the least. Where the fascist henchmen from the OUN³²⁹ had been 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 the settlement was slow, the geological expedition had settled there for a long time. Lida said that they even had an African trainee recently: a student from Kiev who did his practice somewhere in the local woods and scared some local old men - mushroom pickers, who had never seen black men in real life before.

Lida's father- with whom her mother had got acquainted when he got lost in the Turkmen desert of Kara-Kum during a sand storm - was very calm and silent and smoked a lot. Her mother was a polarity to him by her temper, and, having talked to her for five minutes, you well understood, whom their daughter took after: the same wit, the same thick glasses. If somebody said with a sad face: 'There is no happiness in life, Ulyana Grigoryevna!³³⁰ ', she exploded: 'Yeah, I will never forget my mother³³¹!' Ulyana Grigoryevna hated slang. Lida also had a brother called Sasha; he was seven years younger than she. He was also witty and looked like Dima Iosifov as Buratino³³².

Lida brought me to Zhitomir - a town which for some reason evoked in me associations with a thin wattle lace. Especially I was impressed by the old town and the park with huge ravines.

- I bet, you will not guess how that shop over there is called! - she checked on my knowledge of the Ukrainian language. I thought myself an expert in Ukrainian (because I easily understood it, while my Mum for some reason did not), but I really did not know. 'Gudziki'³³³ read the sign on the shop....

³²⁹ 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.

³³⁰ An expression frequently used in the tattoos of ex-convicts

³³¹ Another such expression

³³² Soviet children's movie 'Adventures of Buratino' (1975)

³³³ Buttons (Ukr.), in Russian 'pugovitsy'

In some days all Lida's family went for a seaside holiday at the Black Sea, to Tuapse. They took me along with them.

... Ukraine, Ukraine, what had happened to you? ... *'Oh, field, field who sowed you with dead bones.*³³⁴ ..? '

I remember the beautiful, proud Ukrainian land, which did not sell her children abroad through poverty, - from Kiev to Poltava and further - spread before us - and pain comes to my heart... None of our republics touches my soul so much, as this one. To those who say 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, a refined and somewhat nervous beauty, dreaming to marry her 'good-for-nothing son.' I immediately got into the 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. 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 had seriously asserted that she was a witch and lived in another dimension, but I was reluctant to search for her. Besides, we did not have time: we settled down in a boarding house called 'Spring' and rejoiced in 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 Adyg³³⁵ guys at once...

I looked at them and had such a feeling, that I had known them all my life, including the Adygs. I did not want to leave that place...

On the fifth day we went on an 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 Arm³³⁶, - she prompted, - When the deceased Papanov was fishing with late Mironov³³⁷...

³³⁴ Pushkin's poem 'Ruslan and Ludmila'

³³⁵ One of the ethnic groups in the Caucasus

³³⁶ Very famous Soviet comedy film from the 1960s

³³⁷ 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

We exchanged glances. We thought that we had misheard it. Papanov had died shortly before our departure, but Mironov? ... He was only a little past 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 - would soon happen in our country more and more frequently, and no new talents would take their places anymore... Their places would be occupied by utter ciphers.

Such was my wonderful stay in the Ukraine, in the autumn of my fourth year...

...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 was 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', rather than a 'lark', preferring to wake up late rather than early, I wake up if it is necessary at once, and it does not influence my mood in any way. And I had been thinking for a long time that Lida took umbrage for something every morning, so that it was impossible to get a word from such an ordinarily talkative girl.

But that morning her mood was even worse than usual. She was 'fretting and fuming'. However, she did it silently - it also happens sometime - though her facial expression was such that it was better not to come near her. At 11 o'clock, when she usually definitively wakes up, Lida suddenly asked 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. We can go to the ticket desk and buy the tickets right now. Well, will you go?

- And where will we spend the night?

- At the station....

And I agreed. When else would I get there, I thought.

To travel as 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 to the station of Krasny Liman in the Donetsk region, whence, according to the map, it was very close to Voroshilovgrad: it meant, that there should be some local transport. Then we had to spend the rest of a day in the town, spend the night at the station and the next day go back all the way to Moscow by the evening train.

We were able to buy tickets without any problem: after all, it was not the heat of the season, but cool October. Problems began to crop up when we were already on our journey: such as that Lida shouldn't have been allowed to approach the Tbilisi train within a firing range. And of course, we had hardly reached Tula³³⁸, when she already got acquainted with a Georgian passenger....

... For some reason when I speak on a train to a fellow traveller - 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. In our compartment below us an elderly woman was sleeping. She probably was so tired after running around Moscow that she did not hear at all how in the middle of night I beat off the attack of the hot *Genantsvale*³³⁹. He pulled Lida by the hand downwards, and I - from the top shelf next to hers - pulled her by the other hand back, upwards. Neither side scored, or, as we say in Russia, the friendship won. The *Genantsvale* apologized, but told us he would still definitely take Lida away with him to Tbilisi. And that he had dreamt of *such a dove* all his life.

- 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 get her breath after that unexpected flash of Caucasian passion.

- No, Kalashnikova, thank you... You know, he has such a weird 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

³³⁸ First big train station to the South of Moscow

³³⁹ Gentleman (Georgian)

the 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's also come...

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 pull out somewhat quicker, and that Mamuka would not notice that 'Vasyas' did not pay any attention to us. Such a desperate brave fellow would not have hesitated to leave the train behind, if he thought that he had a hope!

The train pulled off; we turned back and went to the ticket office.

- Lady, when does the nearest train to Voroshilovgrad depart? - asked Lida.

- To Voroshilovgrad? And there are no trains to Voroshilovgrad from here at all.

- Not at all?

- Yes. And there have never been any.

- And what are we going to do now: we have already got 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 going from 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 to get there, if we make a change of buses: first from Krasny Liman to Gorlovka, and then from Gorlovka to Voroshilovgrad. With the word 'Gorlovka' Lida's face suddenly became dreamy.

- Oh, how wonderful! Does the bus to Gorlovka go through Artemovsk³⁴⁰?

- It certainly does.

It turned out, the Basins family had also lived in Artemovsk some time before, and Lida even went to school there, to the first form. Since then she did not happen to be in that part of the country, and the bus route had stirred up in her a sea of nostalgic memories. From the bus window

³⁴⁰ Artemovsk is a city in the [Donetsk Oblast](#), [Ukraine](#)

Lida showed me her school, the street in which they used to live back then: I had never seen her so emotional yet.

Thus, that modification of our plans did not upset us much. The main thing was that we were going to be in Voroshilovgrad before the next day! And the tickets for the bus cost such peanuts that it was not worth mentioning. All the day long we spent on the buses, crossing half of the Voroshilovgrad region and nearly all the Donetsk region. We marvelled at the spacious steppe, neat small towns of mineworkers. Never had we felt so free, like birds, as in those days!

When we at last reached Voroshilovgrad, it was already dark. The bus station was closing for the night, and we decided to go down to the railway station for sleep. We knew nobody in the city and did not have a map with us. Some people explained to us how to reach the train station, and we set out walking along 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 strange city, at first it always seems to you for some reason that everything is totally different here than back at home, that life here is 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 in the trees, even though already yellow...

And still, it was insufficiently warm for a proper sleep on a station bench. We had taken a blanket with us and slept, of course, with all clothes on, but there was a draught that blew from somewhere under that blanket, and we were constantly waking up from cold. We were not alone at the train station. It was full of local residents who were late for the last diesel engine. Having learnt where we came from, they were surprised: 'Look at them, from Moscow! And what have you forgotten here (meaning why have you travelled here)?' When Lida spoke to them about 'the native city of the hero', they automatically thought that we were talking about Voroshilov³⁴¹, and nodded with understanding...

³⁴¹ 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.

How could we sleep, when all around us wanted to have a chat! And more than anybody - an old man in a Cossack peak-cap on the next berth. He was talking so much that had not noticed a station cat pull a piece of sausage out of his string-bag under the bench.... Moscow at that time was already run by Perestroika people with might and main, and streets became scary at night ever since Mikhail Sergeevich³⁴² and his gang had begun to enlighten us that '*sex is an art*', - and here in Voroshilovgrad people still lived their normal, quiet, Soviet life... It was a birthday cake of a city! And that is how that place remained 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!...

In the morning we got up shivering with cold. We had breakfast in some workers' canteen, shook off sleepiness a little and went for a walk about the city. Lida found the teacher college, in which her hero studied. All day long we wandered the 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 had got under way - into the deepest of the sleeps...

When we returned, it appeared that Mum had been looking for me. She had even phoned the hostel which happened very seldom.

-Darling, where did you vanish? I have been here entertaining your penpal for a third day in a row, and you are not even in Moscow!

- What penpal?

- 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 to the market with him, and he taught me to dance lambada there... And this morning he asked me with a severe face what I think of the politics of the United States in Latin America. '*One false step, and you will damage the esprit de corps*³⁴³!' - I thought. And it seems to me that he is in no hurry to leave us...

³⁴² Gorbachev: his Perestroika in the USSR has led to a rise of crime, virtually unknown in the 1950s-1980s.

³⁴³ Quote from the Soviet comedy film 'Big Break' (1973) where a policeman was forced to answer teachers' questions in a secondary school

I clutched my head and rushed off home. Thankfully, the weekend was coming..

I got acquainted with Pedro *through a third country* - through a GDR's magazine 'Für Dich' (or 'Neues Leben', I do not remember precisely already) where the addresses of both of us had 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 Mum had had time to find it out in person even before me. He studied in Tbilisi as an electric engineer and possessed an inquisitive mind and a frank tongue. He was short in height, but a very serious and even severe (by the look of him) Inca. When he and Mum came to the market in my native city, all the Azeri market sellers took him for one of their own and cheerfully moved on to him. But when Pedro turned to them his proud South American Indian eagle's face, the Azeri stopped on the move, having realized that he was something different...

A radio played loud, to the whole market, a Listeners' Choice concert. And at that moment they began to play something Latin American. Pedro's eyes sparkled.

- Nadya, now I am going to teach you our marvellous Latin American dance, lambada! - he declared.

- And what if somebody from work sees me? - Mum began to panic. But Pedro was relentless.

- You'll 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, to the enthusiastic glances of the Azeri. Mum was a full head taller than he.

- Yes, yes... That's it... Not bad, - concluded Pedro, turning her around in different directions, - Hips, it's hips that you have to move, Nadezhda, not knees. Here, here...here you go! Well done!

And then they had tea with pieces of cake at our place, and Pedro was asking her:

- And what is your opinion on the position of a woman under socialism, Nadezhda?

- It is good, - Mum said. - Of course, it is not ideal, but it is incomparably better than the 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 look at the Latin American continent today, it is obvious that, except for Cuba, in none of our countries women occupy such visible positions in the social and economic life in large numbers. But isn't it difficult to combine work with housekeeping? What do you think?

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...

A favourite phrase of Pedro was '*we, Latin Americans...*'. He was very proud of his continent, and he had developed a strong feeling of the Latin American unity. The questions that he asked, were capable to bring down or 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 all those questions, they really occupied his mind. For many of our students they sounded artificial, but it was because those students only uttered such words at meetings. And those questions would even annoy many teachers, because they would not know what to answer, as they had never reflected on those questions themselves... It must have been hard to live like that for our Latin American comrade. But he did not despond and continued to ask his questions.

All the tragedy of my generation was that for us Marxism was just something read in a boring book. And for Pedro it was not, because he knew capitalism not from some perverted imagination of the Perestroika guys. Life itself had taught him what 'market economy' was... But those 'early developers' who didn't know real tests of life and loved to fool about, those who had lacked only bird's 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 ones* (how it had occurred is a separate subject for a serious scientific research). Some mutant Ninja Turtles hatched from their eggs, ardently 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 they make about it. Every title of those films is a self-descriptive epithet: 'Swine', '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 that time!'

Modern mutants do not understand, are intrinsically incapable to understand what the essence of life of those people who lived in the epoch of Brezhnev was; even if they also lived in the same society, but mutated later on. One may wonder how a person can 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 the free education and medical care, about nearly free accessible to everybody holidays in sea resorts, about confidence in tomorrow, about low criminality, about privileges for mothers and children - they just cry out as if 'burnt by turpentine': '*There was no red caviar in the shops!* ', '*There was no multi-party system!*', '*Miserable sovoks!*'³⁴⁴ '

Mutation has interrupted the continuity of generations in Russia. I sensed it, when for the first time I met the post-Soviet people and understood that they spoke Russian like strangers. The problem is not just in their vocabulary. They have a different tempo of speech, a different intonation, a vacant look: sometimes it feels as if they do not even understand what they are drivelling about. And it is not because I am a '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 Nicholas at an already reasonable and conscious age. He grew up very much the way he had been brought up by his pre-Soviet parents, and not just by the Soviet school (he had still gone to a pre-revolutionary grammar school for a couple of years). The past was a natural part of him, all his life, - and it was passed on from him to his children, and then to me. And consequently I knew what it was like.

³⁴⁴ 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 Soviet people that that period had generated.

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 the 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 the war - it was just yesterday. When I went to school, only 30 years had passed since our victory. My parents are from the same generation as Shurik and Nina from 'The Kidnapping Caucasian Style'³⁴⁵.

For me, our past is a part of me. Many modern Russians are completely separated from our roots. Just look what kind of films they make about the past, what sort of books they write about it! It is a view of an alien, of somebody indifferent, who does not only understand anything in that time, but doesn't even try to do it. 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 models, making Anna Karenina's tragedy into an inane soap opera. Many fine movie directors of the Soviet period have excessively proved with their new films that they are not capable of creating any half-decent films without the Soviet 'censorship'. They had repudiated all inner culture. One such director who used to make fantastic films, had probably secretly dreamt all the Soviet years to bare in public his fat bum. He did realize his dream - but all good films have vanished and never reemerged. Who said it is unbearable to watch, of all the new films, only the new version of 'Quiet Flows the Don'³⁴⁶ 'because non-Russian actors could not attune themselves to the Cossack soul?' All of these 'new versions' are unbearable propagandist cinema-hacks! They are all perverted, shameful: the new 'Captain's Daughter'³⁴⁷, where Masha Mironova, contrary to Pushkin's plot, seduces Grinev on a mow, 'At Dawns It's Quiet Here ...' where unshaven Vaskov, dressed just in underwear, emerges from his house at night to send the antiaircraft gunners off to the front line....

³⁴⁵ Very popular Soviet comedy film (1966)

³⁴⁶ Soviet film of this name was made in 1957, the remake with foreign actors - in 2006

³⁴⁷ Classic XIX century Russian novel by A.S. Pushkin

Lyubov Orlova³⁴⁸ was a woman of a generation a way different from mine. But she is so much closer to me, more my own, and more interesting to me than the cops from *Gangsters' Petersburg...*

'Our curators and teachers should realise at last:

We are just little children, make merry is our must!' - sang a fandangle hero of the film 'Electronic's Adventures.' It was one of our most favourite films, when we had reached 'awkward age.' And these lines, 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 not only thought that the whole life would be same carefree pleasure cruise - we demanded it for ourselves as an indispensable right, endowed on us by the very fact of our birth.

We were among the first generations in our country's tumultuous history whose cheeks in infancy were literally 'visible from the back': so stalwart, white-pinkish robust babies and toddlers we were, to the delight of our parents, the people of the first post-war generation who still vaguely remembered the feeling of hunger. Yes, we can't be compared with the present kids: thin, pale and feeding themselves on 'what God has sent them.' We not only grew up without cares, but were also the first generation in the history of our country that didn't lack anything materially. But we did not appreciate the sacrifices, made by our grandmothers and grandfathers for the sake of our happy childhood, at all. From the cradle we got used to the belief that all of that was something that was due to us by itself. We got used to thinking ourselves exceptional, even if sometimes we did not realize it. 'Dima, get up, please, give your seat to the granny!.' 'I am not Dima, *I am Dimochka!*' - uttered a chubby boy of around 7 years on a tram, with offence in his voice. Some of us were even seriously surprised at the fact that new children continued to be born past us: how can anyone be younger than me? *For what do they still need children, if, after all, I have already been born?*

³⁴⁸ Lyubov Orlova, (1902 - 1975) was the first recognized star of [Soviet cinema](#), famous theatre actress and a gifted singer

But could it have been different? Our grandfathers and grandmothers (and to a less degree, our parents) who had suffered so much in their own lives, who had been through wars, blockades, hunger and the strenuous work for the construction of an absolutely new type of society in the history of mankind, not to mention that it was taking place in an environment extremely hostile to our country, threatening us from every direction, got used to tightening their belts and never asked themselves: 'Why does this all have to happen to me?' or 'Why me?': they simply accepted it, simply took upon their shoulders everything sent by their hard, but heroic destiny. But they wished to relieve us from the hardships that had come to their lot. They thought that by doing so they would make us happy. But instead they raised 'pigs' from small ungrateful 'piglets', precisely according to the poem of Mayakovsky³⁴⁹.

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 may 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 reprimanded us for that. They just melted looking at us. We were not Korchagins³⁵⁰ sacrificing our health and giving our last effort to 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! There is no hot water here and the mud is ankle-deep! And my hands are all aching ...' And mummies did come and took us back home. And then we grew up into coddled little Komsomol members who wasted everything that had been created by our parents and their parents: after all, we so got used to

³⁴⁹ Reference to Mayakovski's children's poem 'What Is Good and What Is Bad'

³⁵⁰ Soviet hero of the novel 'How The Steel Was Tempered' by N. Ostrovsky (1936) . Pavel Korchagin is a quintessential positive hero of socialist realism.

thinking all of it to be ours, though we didn't move a finger to make anything of it.

Of course, not all of us became Abramovichs and Khodorkovskys³⁵¹. Only a small minority. But unfortunately, a large part of our generation did take them as a model to emulate. It's just that we, over-aged children, immature citizens, who thought of ourselves in terms of '*we are just little children, make merry is our must*', had not understood what capitalism was all about: '*one gets a bagel, and another - a hole from a bagel ...*'³⁵² It was our generation whose hearts 'demanded change'³⁵³, and it was we who laughed at Nina Andreyeva³⁵⁴. It was we, Bananan boys³⁵⁵, who spent our meaningless lives on 'challenging the society' of those who really worked and were busy with real tasks. It was us, the generation of Serezha Syroezhkin³⁵⁶, who grew up into infantile idlers, loving to listen to fairy-tales that 'your money is working for you' - so that you didn't have to work yourself, as millions of investors of the infamous MMM joint-stock company³⁵⁷ seriously believed.

The majority of us, probably even the overwhelming majority, did not understand what we actually had done in our carefree spoilt rebelliousness even when it was announced for the first time that our country would cease to exist from January 1st of the coming year. A feeling of cheerful curiosity floated in the air: and what would happen

³⁵¹ 'New Russian' oligarchs

³⁵² Mayakovsky's verse: 'One gets a bagel, another - a hole from a bagel; this is what is called 'a democratic republic!'

³⁵³ Reference to Viktor Tsoi's song 'Our hearts demand change'

³⁵⁴ 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.

³⁵⁵ Hero of the late Soviet film 'Assa' (1989)

³⁵⁶ Hero of the film 'Adventures of Electronic' (1981)

³⁵⁷ 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.

next? And the most wonderful expectations... As if nobody had taught us what the bourgeois democracy was. As if it was still necessary to explain in detail to anybody well-familiar with the basics of Marxism, what the 'market economy' meant in practice. But we were too used to giving a deaf ear to those 'boring old men' at whom we cynically sneered. Many of us seriously believed that with the failure of the August coup and with Yeltsin's triumph, with Gorbachev's resignation and the destruction of 'the authoritarian system' in Eastern Europe we would just 'cease to feed those dependants'³⁵⁸, and further we would, as in a fairy tale, 'live happily ever after.'

How was it possible to be so horrendously naïve, with all our splendid, free of charge education? Were we like that really only because nobody had ever given 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 to happen!³⁵⁹'. Like a Muscovite lady, who shouted at Mum on a bus in 1986, when their conversation fell on Gorbachev. 'His actions are tantamount to High Treason. They just have to hang him before it's too late!' - Mum declared. 'Lady, how can you say such a thing! You should be ashamed of yourself!' - The Muscovite, whom Mum recollects to this day, was indignant. 'Mark my words, it won't take ten years that you'll remember them', - Mum told her then...

It would be silly to blame the generations that had spoilt us for today's situation. 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

³⁵⁸ Propaganda of Perestroika time made many people believe that European socialist states, as well as developing states of socialist orientation and even the Soviet republics within the USSR were 'a burden' to Russia and that the Russian people 'would flourish' without them.

³⁵⁹ Reference to a Perestroika joke, with a Russophobe smack to it: two workers discuss the rising prices. 'Have you heard, the milk price is going up by 2 kopecks?' 'Oh, that's bad!' 'And the meat price is going up by 10 kopecks.' 'That's horrible!' 'And the vodka price is going up too!' 'No, that cannot be! Academician Sakharov will not let it happen! It is against human rights!'

raising us, 'democratic' goofs-off and freeloaders of Perestroika. 'Not to create, but destroy, is their craft...' ³⁶⁰ - it was about us what Nekrasov wrote. 'Go away, you, grandma!' - roughly shout young women of my generation from behind the counter at 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 who is visibly ashamed that she has to survive by begging by the entrance of one of so many 'supermarkets', thrust on us. They don't seem to understand that they will themselves become such grandmas, and much faster than they think. And then their own children and grandchildren will deal with them on their own example: just like a little boy from Leo Tolstoy's story who, after observing for some time how his parents maltreated his granddad, made a wooden plate to feed his own parents from, in a dark corner of the room, when they get old ...

The generation of Onegin and Petchorin ³⁶¹ in imperial Russia was called 'unwanted people.' It's interesting how they will call my generation, whose best and most productive years fell on the years, which are, using Alexander Blok's words, '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 our country. Not forgetting about beloved themselves and their own bank accounts abroad, of course. They think themselves 'heroes of our time'. What a pathetic novel it would be, with such 'heroes!' What low feelings, what total absence of thought! You won't need either Pushkin or Lermontov here, but Gogol or, even better, Saltykov-Shchedrin ³⁶².

What is left for all of us to do, for those who not just couldn't but actually never wanted to join in the ranks of Abramovichs and Khodorkovskys? For those who have other purposes in life? Who live, 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

³⁶⁰ From Nekrasov's poem 'Railroad'

³⁶¹ 'Unwanted people' was famous Russian literary critic Belinsky's term for heroes of 'Yevgueni Onegin' by Pushkin and 'Hero of our time' by Lermontov

³⁶² Gogol and Saltykov-Shchedrin are famous for their satire

not simply our material means, but all our heart and all our energy, for they are our only hope. To tell them more about what kind of heroes their great-grandfathers and the great-grandmothers really were. **Not to hesitate to say to them that a different life is possible!** That their school textbooks of history, written on Soros's grants, shamelessly lie. To show our children and grandchildren films about fearless Kamo³⁶³, about elusive avengers³⁶⁴ and about the five girls-antiaircraft gunners who gave their lives in 1942 protecting our native land³⁶⁵. To read them Sergey Mikhalkov³⁶⁶'s verses *'My friends, hark to the story of our Motherland's glory... And not all children had back then (before the Revolution) an abc-book and a pen...'* However, unlike us in our childhood, many of them have already known hard life not from poems...

... Perestroika did not loom large at once. For the first couple of years people simply waved away, like autumn flies, various importunate campaigns of the immoderately zealous new secretary general who had received a nickname *'the mineral water secretary'* because of his anti-alcohol campaigns. Who, except for a narrow circle of historians, still remembers now that before Perestroika there had been *'the acceleration'* and cutting down vineyards all over the country? *'A new broom always sweeps clean* - people said.- He'll fool around with his silly games and eventually calm down.' People did not know yet that it was more of a case of a dirt-driving brush, rather than a cleaning broom...

And what scattered actions, given up half-way, what lack of willpower, clear vision and constructive plan! One day there was a campaign for

³⁶³ 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

³⁶⁴ 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)

³⁶⁵ Reference to *'At Dawn It's Quiet Here...'* film (1972)

³⁶⁶ 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](#)

sobriety. The next day there was a campaign against bureaucracy, with a promise to reduce the number of bureaucrats sharply. The following day it was bringing the 1920s into the fashion (*'returning to Lenin's roots'*, all those numerous timeserving theatre plays by Shatrov³⁶⁷, like *'Further! Further! Further!'*, over which the intelligentsia was fussing around like a chicken with a hand-made feed bag³⁶⁸), when models of Slava Zaytsev³⁶⁹ were dressed up in Red Army overcoats with Budyonny³⁷⁰ hats, when books of Trotsky and Bukharin were republished in huge numbers. They were nothing new; you had been able to read those books before, in the Lenin Library in Moscow, if you really wanted it so much. But people were grabbing them from the shelves of bookstores like hot buns, without even giving them a page-through (and often without reading later on: after all, they were just a fashion!).

There was only one prophetic phrase in *'Further! Further! Further!'* It was *'Why did I not die in infancy?'* Now I quite often feel exactly like this... Though, it would have been better if the masterminds of the sufferings of millions of people, on all continents, had died in their infancy. Those who had untied the hands of thieves and paved the way for the onslaught of *'civilised'* gangsters from transnational corporations.

At first people took an interest in the new Secretary General, because after so many years of a fairly monotonous life some sort of movement had begun. But they soon lost their interest, having got to the core of that empty gab-tongue. Only the shallow-minded intelligentsia, enthusiastic as a newborn calf, 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:

³⁶⁷ 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)

³⁶⁸ Russian expression meaning being totally obsessed about something, its rough equivalent is *'like a child over a new toy'*

³⁶⁹ Famous Soviet couturier

³⁷⁰ Red Army soldiers' 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](#).

- So, are we going *to accelerate* first, and *to get reconstructed* later, or the other way round?

As I remember it, Perestroika began with paid toilets and beauty contests. That was quite logical if you come to think of it: after all, from now on everything, from human beauty to human discharge, was involved in the market exchange...

And it also began with errors in the newly-edited encyclopaedias which, to my horror, nobody corrected anymore...

In the Soviet Union there was an army of proof-readers, and no book was issued without a careful check on the reliability of facts and absence of typing errors (earlier they had even regularly pasted a special leaflet with amendments of typing errors in each book). All that disappeared during Perestroika. For example, in the late 1980s there suddenly came out a new encyclopaedic dictionary on Africa, in which even such a beginner in this field as myself, found more than ten errors. I admit I was in a state of shock. After all, that wasn't just a simple book, it claimed to be an encyclopaedia! People would refer to it. An encyclopaedia should be accurate, as a pharmacy, as we say in Russia! With the best of intentions, I made a list of the mistakes I had noticed, and sent it to the publishing house.

Then, still in Soviet time, there was a rule 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, up to a month). And you'd be in trouble if you just attempted to ignore it! I received my reply on time, as was required. But what an apology for a letter it was! It was an impudent come-off in which they didn't even thank me at all for my help. Its tone was reduced to 'yes, there are some errors, *so what?*' Nobody was even going to correct them. Who cared that under a painting by Afewerk Tekle³⁷¹ 'Beauty' was written that it was 'Soldier'!

It was a harbinger of the fact that very soon the whole country would be managed by the people who were engaged in things they had 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

³⁷¹ Afewerk Tekle (b. 1932) is one of Ethiopia's most celebrated artists, particularly known for his paintings on African and Christian themes

daughters of governors becoming TV presenters and sonnies of secretaries of the Communist Party committee of universities who would be declared 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 absolutely revolted by the fact that one suddenly had to pay for using them: and not because I was money-minded (though one visit to 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 they have to pee on some street corner then? And in general, why does one have to pay for the natural relief of his needs? Perhaps, we should also be charged for breathing air? As to the cleanliness maintenance, firstly, we already paid taxes for that purpose. Secondly, who said that a paid toilet was going to be clean? And I proved to be right: they didn’t stay clean for long... Soon those paid toilets looked exactly the way the free of charge had looked, but charging money for entrance continued. I declared to the paid toilets a resolute boycott and essentially avoided them (luckily I knew, where there were the free ones in Moscow, and then it was possible to come into various offices and use them freely: because during the ‘communist dictatorship’ there was no need for any armed security guards in each building and there were no terrorists with bombs, wandering about the town...)

As to the beauty contests, suddenly various Mashas Kalininas³⁷² 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 was the same ‘bad communists’ as Stalin, Yegor Kuzmich Ligachyov³⁷³ and Nina Andreyeva who had not provided them with a sufficient amount of stockings! That is how the marketeers began their *artillery preparation* for a psychological attack at the growing up generation of the Soviet girls

³⁷² The very first winner of a Soviet beauty contest, ‘Moscow Beauty’ in 1988

³⁷³ Yegor Kuzmich Ligachev^[1] (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

whom they already then intended to deliver to the brothels of Europe (and forthcoming domestic ones)... Nobody remembered anymore that during the war there had been cases of our women, who, having slept over with fascists- not for stockings, for food, in order to feed their hungry children!, - committed suicide afterwards, unable to live with the shame. And we were supposed to feel sorry for those modern ***, suffering from the shortage of imported stockings?? Also, do I need to remind you of strip-tease suddenly being declared '*an integral part of world culture*' and the importunate brainwash that those who had not experienced an orgasm, had lived all their lives in vain?...

... In the early 1970s, when Mum was in Moscow one day on a business trip from her factory, a woman approached her in the street and offered her to work as a *mannequin*³⁷⁴ in Moscow Fashion House.

- Who do you think I am, comrades? - Mum was indignant, - I have a profession, and you are offering to me to become a *clothes hanger*!

She refused. And to this day she has never regretted it. Another matter was 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. Up to this day we have her photos at home, in which she, like a real actress, together with a male colleague from the design department, pretend to be an enamoured couple collecting maple leaves in the autumnal wood, next to a scooter produced by their factory...

In the Soviet time there was a fine TV show called 'Come on, girls!', in which nice Soviet girls competed in professional skills, as well as in cookery, various domestic tasks and ball-room dance. I remember the faces of those girls, lit from within by their intellect, dignity and inner beauty: it was a pleasure to look at them. But today teenage girls are being taught that to be a beauty, you don't need anything but a big bust almost falling out of your brassiere, the skill of wiggling hips, like a mare in the field, and, to crown it, some childish babble on the 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 examine the condition of their teeth...

³⁷⁴ Model (Fr.). In the USSR this French word was used for it at the time

Never mind beauty contests... People in the West - even those who believe themselves left-wing , - in their overwhelming majority are unable to understand, why most of our people did not like that clever and all so fashionable Raisa Maksimovna Gorbachev³⁷⁵, coming up with no other than our '*congenital savagery.*' And it is plain impossible to drive home to them the fact that in our culture we are used to appreciating people by their character, personal merits and contribution to the society, rather than by somebody with whom they share their bed or whose surname they carry. And it is also beyond their comprehension that the Western concept of a First Lady - *woman who is considered to be somehow outstanding only by dint of her being married to a president* - was deeply insulting to a Soviet modern, intellectually developed, independent, clever woman, before whom all the ways in life lay open. It is no less offensive for us, than burqas 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 on a man and an impossibility for her to realize herself in a society otherwise than to become an appendix to another person.*

... Now, with my life experience, I look back at that time and see just a mass insanity. When I recall the writer Yulian Semenov (that very one who already in the 1980s believed that McDonald's was a luxurious restaurant where they served you a real coffee!) assured his readers with a straight face, that if we just started paying our physicians for medical treatment, they would, as if with a wave of a magic wand, begin to treat their patients and look after them better... How people stood in a queue at night (!) in order to get to Ilya Glazunov³⁷⁶'s exhibition, to see his one and only 'unprecedentedly courageous' painting (yeah, right, 'courageous'- after a new campaign of 'destalinization' had been spun out!), his Russia the Eternal... How people forgot about work and whole collectives in their working hours sat in front of the TV-sets like Bandar logs from the 'Jungle Book'³⁷⁷ in front of the boa Kaa, listening to the

³⁷⁵ Raisa Gorbacheva (1932-1999) - Mikhail Gorbachev's wife

³⁷⁶ Ilya Glazunov -contemporary Russian artist (b.1930). His paintings have mostly historic or religious themes

³⁷⁷ Monkeys from Rudyard Kipling's 'Jungle Book'

deputies practicing in eloquence... How people were ready to kill to get a new issue of Korotich's 'Ogonyok'³⁷⁸ (where is he today, that Korotich?...)

It is all so shameful. After all, we were all adult people! But still we revealed the psychology of a naïve small-scale conman, Vasily Alibabaevich: 'Everybody ran, so I ran too!'³⁷⁹... When in our Institute 'for the first time ever' there was a public lecture on 'Stalin repressions' (now I don't even remember who was giving it!), Lida and I, too, rushed there: they intimated to us that it was going to 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 the ceiling... Well, just exactly like Bandar logs³⁸⁰! And who remembers now, how we read in the Perestroika media that 'the Black Sea is about to blow up because of the presence of hydrogen sulphide in it' and were seriously afraid of that to happen, or what hysteria, what psychosis was kicked up around Abuladze's timeserving fantasy Repentance³⁸¹? When some Italian newspaper wrote that Yeltsin was an alcoholic, we all were indignant together at *such an insolent lie*. After all, he personally came to work a couple of times by trolley-bus (or by metro) and even ostentatiously paid a visit to two or three shops!...

... As far as I can remember, some people in our country had always been engaged in some 'individual labour activity'³⁸², as Perestroika men named it. I remember from my childhood the predecessors of modern businessmen, trading in self-made sugar candies and other paraphernalia on electric trains. Before getting onto the train, they usually slipped on a white apron of not the best cleanness: in order to gain some trust to their

³⁷⁸ 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.

³⁷⁹ Quote from 'Gentlemen of Fortune', Soviet comedy film (1971).

³⁸⁰ See p. 426

³⁸¹ '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](#)

³⁸² Perestroika-time term for private business

goods, made God knows where by God knows whom and God knows of what. They carried their 'cockerels on sticks'³⁸³ around the trains, praising their sweets by drunken voices. However, I never saw anybody buying them. The state and everything 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 certainly prefer the former to the latter. And they had plenty of choice in sugar candies.

Remember the so-called co-operative societies, which 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? Those people bought up all the cheap state-set priced raw materials for their production which they then offered to the people highly overpriced, and, because of this practice, shops began to suffer from chronic shortages, unprecedented neither under Brezhnev, nor under Andropov, nor either under Chernenko³⁸⁴. Then an exotic foreign word was added to the great and mighty Russian language: 'a racketeer', and sportsmen of martial arts in increasing frequency became gangsters. The ration system was introduced in the country: first on soap, and then on vodka. Even for the blind it should have already become clear that our newly appointed Susanin³⁸⁵ was leading us to some wrong destination. But instead the intelligentsia still perversely accused in all of this Stalin and Ligachyov³⁸⁶. 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 one a

³⁸³ Sugar candies usually had that shape

³⁸⁴ Konstantin Ustinovich Chernenko](1911 - 1985) was a [Soviet](#) politician and the fifth [General Secretary](#) of the [Communist Party of the Soviet Union](#) (1984-1985)

³⁸⁵ 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, referring to the leaders: somebody who deliberately leads you up the wrong way

³⁸⁶ See footnote 374.

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 the appointment of a new Rector (Chancellor): an impressive, graying-haired handsome man wearing a foreign raincoat and suit. He seldom made his intramural appearances, and each occurrence of it 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.

The old rector was really already very old. There were some rumours that he was on very friendly terms with Gromyko. After 'the wind of change' had blown, I saw him in the Institute just once. Nobody greeted him, all scurried away from him as if he was leprous: though he was simply coerced to retire, not fired for any offences. When I said 'Hello!' to that old respectable man and also opened a door for him, he was nearly in tears. I felt so sorry for him.

The first months since the appointment of the 'young Reagan' passed without major events. Probably, all that 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 occurred around New Year were a planned provocation.

During the first two years, as I have already said, most of our students had lived in Sokolniki, and the minority, including myself, - in another Institute hostel, near Rechnoi Vokzal metro station. When we started the third year, our Institute decided not to rent the floor in somebody else's hostel anymore: because the construction of our own new hostel was coming to an end, and there was no sense in renting it only for a few months. All of us moved to Sokolniki, where I ended up in another room, not together with Lida and Lyuba, but 'at 15 sisters': that's how my new habitat was informally called. The 'Sisters', of course, were not 15 - no room would hold that many people!, - but only six. From Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia and Armenia... I was lucky: the girls in that room were quiet, of normal behaviour, in addition, they had already known each other for a long time. They treated me kindly. There was a long-established order there. It had been accurately divided into

'corners' - by means of wardrobes. Nobody there was disturbing others in our studies, nobody made a noisy uproar at night. The only noise reaching us in the evenings was from the corridor when a group of our Chechen students proceeded from one side of the building to the other and back, exchanging words loudly. We didn't treat them any differently from the rest of the students, but they did keep themselves to themselves.

All of this even imparted a certain charm to that hostel. Anyway, we only had a couple of months to endure, so one could well survive queuing up to boil one's kettle in the kitchen. Nobody knew exactly when the new hostel would be ready, but, naturally, we all waited for that moment very much.

With melancholy we recollected our quiet inhabited blocks at Rechnoy Vokzal, having forgiven even the cockroaches appearing in the toilet and light bulbs sometimes stolen by someone there. (We had developed a technology of a survival among the cockroaches in the dark. The door in the dark bathroom had to be opened sharply, jerkily and then you'd have to wait till cockroaches scurried away, and only after that you could use it.) Rest assured that it was not the 'bad communists' fault that we got cockroaches: it was our own fault- to tell the truth, we did not keep the place tidy, we blocked refuse chutes full with rubbish... Though it was exactly the 'bad communists', who periodically did free of charge disinfection, insecticide and deracination for us. Ask, for example, the inhabitants of apartments on the posh French Riviera how much the charges for such services are there...

... Ah, what fun it was, when enamoured Lida poured out on Nariman a bucketful of water from the seventh floor.... When we sat on the radiator casing near the lift, having covered our heads with head scarves in an old Russian way, singing beautiful folk songs! How the home-made sunflower-seed oil smelled, -the one that our Zaporozhye neighbour brought from home: the aroma all over the corridor! How Verochka from Ust-Kamenogorsk and I went to see the Australian ballet, how I went with a Muscovite, Anya Bobrova, to the Operetta Theatre, and with Zhenya from Yalta - to the concerts of Toto Cutugno³⁸⁷... How we made our own skating-rink in winter in front of the hostel and went skating there. And

³⁸⁷ Salvatore 'Toto' Cutugno (b. 1943) is an Italian pop singer-songwriter and musician.

how we didn't want to say goodbye to the place with which all those memories had been connected... But we did not have much choice.

In the new hostel, we were told, we would live in threes and even twos in a room. We even went to look at that building, still under construction, in the summer, and some cheerful builders joyfully let us inside: to look at our future habitation. We walked on wooden planks: there were no steps at the entrance yet. The new hostel was divided into two-roomed apartments - a big room was meant for three persons, a small one - for two, each apartment having a separate bathroom and a toilet. It was a palace!

... The squall broke out, when just before the New Year's holidays we had unexpectedly heard on the radio that we had allegedly already received our New Year's gift, in the form of house warming! Apparently, we had even already moved in! That was enough to get our blood up.

It remained unknown who had spread that information and how it got into the radio news. As well as who was behind a small students' revolt which burst out the same evening within the walls of our old hostel in Sokolniki. But it was obviously not spontaneous: it smelt too strongly of future 'coloured revolutions', not familiar to us back then. Strange that no TV crews had arrived to shoot it!

But I do remember well who shouted most loudly. Perhaps, we should ask them today about the technology of organizing such actions...

Someone phoned the members of the Institute's Communist Party committee, the trade-union committee and so on, they all arrived at our place straight away to calm down the passions. But the students were in a rage, like *Fantomas*³⁸⁸. 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 were sunk in an indignant chorus of voices:

- We are not in the army!
- Down with them!
- Give us our new hostel!

And there he came to the foreground, our movie-like handsome man, our Reagan manufactured in the Ural. To complete his image of a knight

³⁸⁸ Reference to the French film 'Fantômas se déchaîne' (1965) ('Fantomas is raging')

rescuing poor students only a hot fighting horse was lacking. The horse 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 that was a disgrace which he would personally take under control; that he would sort it all out; that we would move in in the nearest possible future, and that those responsible would be punished.

That's what all that tragicomedy had been started for: to get rid of the 'undesired' colleagues and to replace them with his 'own guys.' Well, and to lift his popularity, of course. That was happening approximately simultaneously to Yeltsin's legendary trips on public transport and his checks on shops. The times were restless: we, students, (as most people of the country) had a delusional feeling of waking up from some hibernation; without having had time to understand what was really going on, we took the newly appeared Perestroika men's words for granted, worried when Yeltsin had been dismissed and got into a hospital, unconditionally trusted all rumours and gossips. While they were just impudently carrying out their large-scale psychological experiment on us, malevolently manipulating our consciousness. And, alas, every time it worked: the psychological laws prompted us that 'if everybody says so, it must be truth' and the already mentioned *'everybody ran, so I ran too.'*³⁸⁹ ...

... Our dean was demoted the next day, though he personally had had no relation to the radio-lie whatever. But, in our view, he hadn't promoted the construction of the new building in good time! And the students were ready to carry their newly-emerged hero on their hands. People looked at him with admiration, upon him they rested their most improbable hopes (like cancellation of the state examination in foreign languages!), his name was 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 in Red Square, Lida felt she had to pitch a tale to our companions from other colleges, who were alternating our rows in their neat spick and span suits, that the abbreviation of our

³⁸⁹ From the Soviet film 'Gentlemen of Fortune' (1971)

Institute's name meant 'Institute for Nuclear Research', now she 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 bad quality tapes of tape recorders the song began to sound:

'I've forgotten all they taught us many years,

Won't I find all answers by myself?'³⁹⁰

And, of course, the immortal Tsoi's words:

'Our hearts, our eyes are demanding change...'

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 an 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 Isaevich³⁹¹, isn't he?

Michael Yevseevich strictly looked at him:

- Yes, Isaevich. And what are you trying to say?...

And gallant Bortnikov got confused and squeaked:

- Me? No, I didn't mean anything...

If it had not been a lesson, but a hockey match, he'd probably have got a bird.

Michael Yevseevich had a good sense of humor. I remember how someone from our group was reading out in 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 love for Nariman:

- ...And he stood there, at the refuse chute, looking at me, and his eyes were like two wet plums...

³⁹⁰ Words from a disco song by the pop group Mirage

³⁹¹ Hint at the Jewish origin of Solznenitsyn

And then suddenly she felt that two more wet plums were looking at her: it was Michael Yevseevich with a tragic face, propping his chin with his hand, listened to her story with great interest, without paying the slightest attention to the report...

He told us a lot of interesting stories. For example that Rina Zelyonaya³⁹² did not accept the existence of the Belarusian language: she insisted it was broken Russian. But the matter was not in stories, but in the fact that he was able to teach interestingly one of the most boring, if also necessary, subjects in our profession. And I, having listened to him, very soon decided that I wish to write my thesis under his guidance...

The Perestroika infection had not bypassed me as well. Though I understood faster than others the real price of the 'marked' Teddy Bear³⁹³, I too, as well as my classmates, - oh monstrous nonsense!- worried about Yeltsin's destiny when he was sick in hospital and laughed along with others when he declared the sovereignty of Russia: 'Here you go, Misha, take a bite!'. That is, at that time the form for me appeared to be more important than the substance. I had been so disgusted at that stage by that 'comrade' (Gorbachev) who would turn into a 'mister' within a couple of years. I didn't even want to go to demonstrations in Red Square, because I did not want to see him... No, thanks! *'I have such an opportunity, but I have no desire'*³⁹⁴.

My first encounter with the '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 I had read on that subject, in addition. I named the book by our teacher whom the examiners had only just managed to get rid of. 'It's not *that* literature, young lady!' - they grinned impudently to my face. Their dreamy look showed that they, apparently, mentally exhilarated, re-winding before themselves how they had humiliated and insulted that person, 'not duly reconstructed by Perestroika.'

³⁹² Ekaterina Vasilyevna 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.

³⁹³ Gorbachev's first name - Mikhail - is also Bear's name in Russian fairy-tales

³⁹⁴ Quote from the film 'Kidnapping Caucasian Style' (1966)

I suddenly felt that there was something new in front of me. Cynicism which was flaunted as a virtue. No matter themselves had not written any books whatsoever: either on that subject, or on others. Those people were certain that they were an ultimate authority to decide what was right. A mixture of cynicism with aplomb must have been on the list of 'universal human values'...

I have never been 'a New Russian' myself. In all my body there is not a single 'New Russian' bone. My organism pushes away any New Russian feature 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 moved to the new hostel in February. There was a general euphoria. Our country in the meantime, at first slowly, but soon all faster and faster, was plunging into still cheerful chaos.

- *'Mother the Anarchy, Daddy the Glass of Port!'* - shouted the tape-recorded Vitya Tsoy's voice from the windows of our new hostel. We now have freedom!

Chapter 7. When bombs fall

*'Monica was good, but Tony is better!'*³⁹⁵

(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 Agnya Barto³⁹⁶: 'Me and Tam are thick as peas. We are medics, orderlies ³⁹⁷...' - 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 declined 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

³⁹⁵ Monica Lewinsky and Tony Blair

³⁹⁶ Agnya Barto (1906-1981) was a [Soviet Jewish](#) poet and [children's writer](#).

³⁹⁷ One of Barto's well-known children's verses

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 officials' 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, 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 all too 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 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'³⁹⁸ from the Moscow suburb, Lyubertsy, became popular.

'I am not so fond of science,
And I really don't know why.

³⁹⁸ A well-known Soviet and Russian pop-group. The name is 'un-Soviet' because it takes its origin in a slang word

Mummy, make me chequered trousers,
Looking swagger and in style.
Make a pair of trousers cute,
Half an inch above the boot,
And with chequers big and nice,
Envy of the local guys.
Chequers, chequers, chequers,
Like wagons in the metro,
Chequers, chequers, chequers,
You are like chocolate bars.
I am walking with great caution,
People stare in surprise.
One could play chess on my trousers,
Yeah, my chequers're great device!
And when chequers are out of fashion,
I will put on steamboat chimneys!
And now compare this silly verse with, for example, my favourite Soviet
song by Pakhmutova and Dobronravov³⁹⁹:

'Our care in life is simple:
That our dearest land should live on,
That our land should happily live on -
And no other cares we have.
Through snow and wind, through stars' eternal flight,
My heart calls me into the deep and disturbing night.
Even if one trouble after another
Awaits us in that faraway distance,
But only our death is able
To take our friendship from us.
Through snow and wind, through stars' eternal flight,
My heart calls me into the deep and disturbing night.
So long as I tread the ground,
So long as I see the light,
So long as I breathe the air,
I'll staunchly walk on and on,
Through snow and wind, through stars' eternal flight,

³⁹⁹ 'Song about Restless Youth'

My heart calls me into the deep and disturbing night.
And just as we all in this life,
One day you'll meet with your true love,
She'll walk by your side with courage,
Through tempests and storms of life.
Through snow and wind, through stars' eternal flight,
My heart calls me into the deep and disturbing night.
Think not all the songs have been sung yet,
And storms have thundered before now,
Brace up for a goal great and lofty,
And glory will come after you.
Through snow and wind, through stars' eternal flight,
My heart calls me into the deep and disturbing night.'

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 those 'Jumpy Dragonflies' from Ivan Krylov's⁴⁰⁰ 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, Cherie,
Has been singing all the summer;
But before she knew it, oh,
Winter - an unwelcome comer!
(...)
'I did different things, my dear!
In our soft grasses we had
So much joy and so much cheer,
That it's gone to our head.'
'Oh, so you...' 'I sang along
With abandonment all past time.'
'Sang along? A laudable pastime!
Now it's time for a hearty dance!'...

⁴⁰⁰ Ivan Andreyevich Krylov (1769 - 1844) is Russia's best known fabulist

For principles of socialism to work in practice not only relevant orders from the above are needed. At the grassroots level, we ourselves 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 him read my diploma thesis, in which, as it was a wont at that time, I used Marxist methodology, and suddenly express 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'⁴⁰¹, 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

⁴⁰¹ Well-known Russian folk song

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 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, the 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 Tamarochka's favourite saying: 'Never rush in getting married, beware of trials 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's 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.

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 Alexeevna 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 Mum.

Eleonora Alexeevna was sympathetic with Africans. That also 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 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, Bulgakov⁴⁰². 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 cosier place in the whole of 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

⁴⁰² Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov (1891 -1940) was a Soviet Russian writer

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 Bulatovich⁴⁰³'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!'⁴⁰⁴ without tears. 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.

⁴⁰³ Alexander Ksaverievich Bulatovich (1870 - 1919) [tensored](#) Father Antony, was a [Russian](#) military officer, explorer of [Africa](#), writer, [hieromonk](#) and the leader of [imiaslavie](#) movement in [Eastern Orthodox Christianity](#).

⁴⁰⁴ In this song a woman asks a man from another land to take her with him, but he declines.

The name 'Kweku' meant that he was born on Wednesday. He also had a Christian name: Gabriel or simply Gaby. Kweku Sokpor was Ewe⁴⁰⁵ 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 that film, had 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 slightly 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.

⁴⁰⁵ Ewe people, an ethnic group in Eastern part of Ghana, Benin and Togo

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...

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. 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 than 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 accordeon 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, book-worm!

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. Vybegallo⁴⁰⁶ from Strugatsky brothers' book *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,

⁴⁰⁶ This was an artificially created man who had 'constantly unsatisfied appetite'

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 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'⁴⁰⁷? 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, 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 Mum. But she was still very upset and the whole summer tortured me

⁴⁰⁷ Pop-song by Vyacheslav Dobrynin (late 1980s)

with questions why it had happened and what hadn't been good enough for that bastard.

- 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 Spartakiad⁴⁰⁸ - 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 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

⁴⁰⁸ 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.

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 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 cyclists' 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 to the nines, 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 Mum's work for this occasion, and that caused a cheerful flutter among the cyclists. Zelinsky's coach - a fiery native of Odessa called Matvey Georgiyevich - liked 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 winning 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 at the office: scoring 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 had 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 personal 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 any photos for us too?

Mum waved that we did. And Matvey Georgiyevich 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 on 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 anybody 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 irrevocable sense of humour. But Lida was telling the truth, apparently. I, together with three more students (I was the oldest), were really selected to be 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 had been 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 definitive 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 song⁴⁰⁹. 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 that they are always so painted by the same kind of people: exactly by those against whom they have warned us...

⁴⁰⁹ 'Instructions Before Departure Abroad'

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 Tulips' 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.

'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 Taoiseach⁴¹⁰ 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 the 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...

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 Heil⁴¹¹, 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

⁴¹⁰ Taoiseach - Prime-Minister in Ireland (Irish)

⁴¹¹ Nazi greeting

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 the 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, 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 Kandinsky⁴¹²). 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 girl-friend? 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.

⁴¹² Wassily Wassilyevich Kandinsky was a Russian painter, and art theorist. He is credited with painting of the first purely abstract works

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?

-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, Melinal!', '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 Albright⁴¹³'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 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

⁴¹³ Madeleine Korbelt Albright (b.1937) is the first woman to become a United States Secretary of State, held his post during the NATO aggression in Yugoslavia

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,⁴¹⁴ 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

⁴¹⁴ 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).

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!

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 Nosov⁴¹⁵. 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 shareholders’ 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.

⁴¹⁵ ‘Dunno on the Moon’ (or ‘Neznaika on the Moon’)- Satire on capitalist society written for children in 1966 by the Soviet writer N. Nosov

(see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neznaika_on_the_Moon#Neznaika_on_the_Moon)

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 Cacak⁴¹⁶ 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

⁴¹⁶ Cacak - a city in Serbia

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 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, mommy, 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 capitalists' 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 Mayakovsky⁴¹⁷'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 Fein⁴¹⁸!

⁴¹⁷ 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

⁴¹⁸ 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

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 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'⁴¹⁹, 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

historically been associated with the [Provisional IRA](#). [7]

⁴¹⁹ 'Republic' (Irish); full name is AP/RN ('An Phoblacht / Republican News')

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.

It was not a real lesson, though. For that Fionnula was too chaotic. Someone had 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, for what 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*⁴²⁰: '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'⁴²¹...

⁴²⁰ 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.

⁴²¹

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 ...

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 ...

- Mark? But why Mark? - Melina looked surprised.

- 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 to 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*'⁴²² 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

⁴²² Henry Joy, Irish rebel song about Henry Joy McCracken, hero of the 1798 rising

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*⁴²³ 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 immediately accepted for a job, and that practically everywhere. He continued to assure himself

⁴²³ Common name for the volunteers of the Irish Republican Army (the IRA)

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 Plantation⁴²⁴.) But Geoffrey was not going to leave

⁴²⁴ 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

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 years' 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 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*'⁴²⁵, 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

'British tenants' (a term applied to the colonists) were mostly from [Scotland](#) and [England](#). They were required to be [English-speaking](#) and [Protestant](#).

⁴²⁵ ' 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)

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 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, people's lexicon overflows with them only through intellectual poverty and laziness. And in that office only such language was spoken! How was it possible to memorize in two days' time which of data cards was called by which abbreviation, without knowing its full meaning, and, most importantly, - for what purpose it was really needed? Ours was a predominantly female staff. All the young girls had higher education, sometimes with the 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. However, infected by the bacillus of 'civilization', Yugoslavs instead ran away from Kosovo, under the pressure of the real ethnic cleaning - 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 the 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, so are you and he. And I am a Chatlanian, and they are Chatlanians, too! So you put your cak on and go sit in the pepelak, 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 a Chatlanian! Well, do you understand?

- What?

- Plyuk is a Chatlanian planet. So we, pacaks, should wear a cak...

Irina Malenko

- Yesss! And you should make curtsies to us, Chatlanians, like this!

- Vladimir Nikolaevich, this is extreme racism.'

'Excuse me, these Chatlanians and Pacaks, are they some kind of nationalities?

- No.

- A biological factor?

- No

- Individuals from other planets?

-No.

- But in what way do they differ from each other?

- Are you color-blind, Violinist - can you not distinguish green colour from orange? A tourist that you are... '

'The society in which there is no colour differentiation of trousers, is deprived the purpose'

(*'Kindza-dza'*, Soviet science-fiction movie)

... What cherished memories of the Soviet Union shall I tell you? 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 my mind envisions for some reason the botanical garden and the park near Timiryazev Academy⁴²⁶. Here my friends and I passed by every day on a tram when we worked in a stroyotryad⁴²⁷ in Moscow in summer: they were so boundless, green and quiet... The Station of Young Nature Lovers in our city where I planted and tended for nasturtiums in the morning before going to school... Then - the abatis near our town where we went twice a year: in April, to pluck the first flowers of spring, those yellowish little chicks of coltsfoots, opening so early that there was no even grass around yet (or in May to collect bird-cherry tree flowers), and in autumn - for coloured maple leaves... The damp and tart smell of those fallen maple leaves, flaring with shades of yellow, red, orange, with tiny green veins... How they rustle underfoot... An obelisk of the unknown soldier showing between the trees: erected for the defender of their Motherland, not for someone who fell a meaningless death somewhere in foreign entrenchments so that someone else's purses could swell out, like the British and Irish 'heroes' of the First World War...

My grandfather once lost me there while he held me in his arms and I slid out into the verdure: 'My God, where is Zhenya?' I still remember my grandmother's ringing laughter... Now half of this forest is cut down for private garages. They may be about to get to rid of the monument too...

⁴²⁶ Reference to famous USSR Timiryazev Agricultural Academy

⁴²⁷ *Stroyotryads* -students' work teams that worked in construction or agriculture in the USSR

... I remember Tamarochka moving into her 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 happened in winter, and we moved her belongings on a sledge... I remember how cheerfully we dragged her things to the sixth floor as the lift did not work yet and the joy with which opened the tap on her new 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 had gone to the cinema together before the war, had become a pilot and twice the hero of the Soviet Union. 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 spruced it up, including painting- it goes without saying, free of charge - the fences of all the private houses in its passage, unless they had already been painted yet, and private old houses quarters were shining military green, the most accessible paint in our town at that time, because of all our military factories... The question 'how much it cost' simply did not arise, as long as something was necessary for the people; 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, the etiquette rule that still obtains with most Russians even now. 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 are all 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 the mentioned 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 incapable 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 let pass the rubbish that floods onto us today from the screens of our televisions! For example, like this 'patriotic' junk:

*'My Vanya has exactly what any girl requires.
In business he's like a wolf; in bed he's ball of fire,
That's right, he's got all qualities are needed for a guy:
The pockets full of money, good looks and heart inside.
Besides my dear Vanya is such a homely guy,
So tame and unpretentious, so ready to oblige.
Mum, what do we need these States for,
You can be rich here too,
Mum, there is no sense crying,
I love a Russian guy!'*⁴²⁸

For the Soviet people these are some 'couplets of aliens', and aliens that are intellectually and emotionally underdeveloped.

I see before my eyes the slope of the ravine bathed in the sunrays, all red with wild strawberry. I run down it, and my heart sings like Mum's portable receiver:

*'The sun is painting with its beams the endless railroad steel,
It's nice to watch the scenery to the chugging of the wheels.*

⁴²⁸ Carolina' song 'Mummy, it's OK!' (1994/95)

Irina Malenko

*Woods, Russian plains and endless fields, green hillocks, cattle droves,
And city platforms, bridges high, tall buildings, lanes and groves...
Beloved and familiar, so green, and vast, and free,
You are my life, my native land, I love and cherish thee.
Oh, how much I have traveled, how many things I've passed,
And everything I see round is mine, from first to last!
That factory hard-working with chimneys of red brick,
That whitewashed hut, that farmland, those meadows and those
ricks...*

*And all of this is dear, there's not a single town,
A settlement or a village that wouldn't feel your own!
Beloved and familiar, so green, and vast, and free,
You are my life, my native land, I love and cherish thee.
Oh, how much I have traveled, how many things I've passed,
And everything I see round is mine, from first to last.
The evening dew's come down, the moon, a shiny bell,
Is up, but I'm still standing, unable to break the spell...
The night light's on, people dozing, the tranquil end of day,
I'm looking at the twilight and quietly I say:
Beloved and familiar, so green, and vast, and free,
You are my life, my native land, I love and cherish thee.
Oh, how much I have traveled, how many things I've passed,
And everything I see round is mine, from first to last!⁴²⁹*

Here, this song demonstrates exactly how I felt in the USSR!

Why would I need 'pockets full of money', like some cretin!...

... Yet there is an event in that past life I don't like to recall... It is my first trip to Holland and the preparations for it. It had been arranged for by the young Reagan, on Western grants, apparently intended to brainwash our youth, the fools, agog with new experience...

But sometimes it is useful to recollect such events. You have to learn from your mistakes.

⁴²⁹ 'Road Song' (music by I. Dunaevsky, text by S. Vasiliev) (1949)

... Eventually we were ready with all the necessary paperwork and began to wait. However the trip was postponed again and again. It was not clear at all 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 announced, but there was still no news about Holland. Lida and Lyuba even began to gently gibe about it at me, but I did not fret, because after all, I had not asked for that trip, somebody had decided to send me there.

I told my friends that at least, my winter vacation had begun earlier, while they still had to pass all their exams. As I had a great deal of free time, there came to my mind something that I usually didn't dare to think of. It was repeating Lida's 'feat' of travel to the 'home town of the hero' - only this time not of Lida's romance. 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 an hour. Now I knew also his patronymic and his birthday. He had not lied to us about the fact that his birthday was on New Year's Day. I had thought that it was a joke and that he had not wanted to tell us the truth...

In Odessa, if you remember, there also lived my favourite school teacher: Emilia Veniaminovna. And I asked her if I could visit her for three days: naturally, without telling her the real reason for the 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 had been once so afraid of. 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 on my trip to Odessa by train from Kievsky station in Moscow. 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 a magical place, more than any other city I had seen. It was a pleasure, while traveling on a local tram, to listen to the unc customary and unique local patois of the Odessans. I also took delight in the walks on Deribasovskaya street⁴³⁰ and on the quays, in the Potemkin staircase and the famous local Opera... 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. Before I knew it, Zhenya bought us tickets for a performance at the Opera: for the Ukrainian opera 'Zaporozhian Cossack beyond the Danube⁴³¹', from which I knew by heart two or three arias. This opera was often broadcast on the radio, and at home Mum sometimes sang those arias. The Ukraine in general was reputed for the musicality of its people among our republics.

.....I remember, long ago, when I was ten years old, on a hot afternoon a tenor of the Kharkov Opera introduced himself to my mother and me, while we were strolling along the street. At that time he was on tour in our town and obviously felt like romancing with a beautiful woman that my Mum was. The tenor ate ice-cream (!) with zest and swaggered about his singing the part of Jose in Carmen that night. He insisted that we should come to the performance, which we were reluctant to do, and we had some trouble palming him off with some story or other.

⁴³⁰ Most famous street in Odessa

⁴³¹ Ukrainian comic opera by the [composer Semen Hulak-Artemovsky](#) (1813-1873).

- If he sang Escamillo⁴³², I would have probably considered his proposal! - said Mum- But I have not liked 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 as preschool kids 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 tremble 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 line from the aria of Ivan Karas of the above-mentioned Ukrainian classical opera Zaporozhets beyond the Danube in which he especially liked the words: 'Now I'm a Turk, not Cossack, yes, into Turk I've turned!'. At these words Shurek somersaulted, because, being an infant, he took words of the Cossack hero literally.

(Curiously, Mum told me that she, as a child, too, misheard many songs and interpreted them in her 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 horsey!

- Which horsey, Nadenka?

- The one those two both climbed up on: 'Lovely friend, on the horse we are together'. They will be too heavy for it! (*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, dark blue smoke of China...' instead of 'Beloved city disappears in the dark blue smoke' (*'siniy dym Kitaya' instead of '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'⁴³³.)...

... The 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

⁴³² Escamillo- Toreador, hero of Bizet's opera 'Carmen'

⁴³³ Popular Soviet song in the 1950s

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, proved not so scary after all. We ate traditional Jewish gefilte fish, and I told them about life in Moscow.

The Opera in Odessa was excellent, but after it 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, even though it was empty at that hour. It amazed me, as I had never seen one before.

I asked Emilia Veniaminovna for a map of the city, but had not found the street I was looking for. I braced myself up to ask about it, on some far-fetched pretext. The street appeared to be in a 'sleeping district', a newly built residential area, which was not on the map yet. I managed to find out how to get there.

- And for what would you go there, Zhenya? - asked my cultured namesake, - It's an ordinary 'sleeping area', what's so interesting about it?

Oh, Zhenya, if only you knew..., I thought.

But I was as silent as a guerrilla under questioning. In an hour and a half I managed to escape from her and made my way to Volodya's home.

...I was to go by bus to the terminal station. 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 mustered my will 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 the tempest of emotion in my heart.

... When later on Mum told him that I had been to Odessa and virtually inside his house, Volodya said guilelessly:

- Oh! Why didn't you come in? We could have had a cup of tea together...

He did not realize what that trip had meant to me...

This was my last time in the Soviet Ukraine. The Soviet Union disintegration hurts, but the treachery of the 'orange' Ukraine hurts as a

treachery of the dearest and nearest person... ‘- *To sell out like this? To sell your faith? To sell your own people?*’⁴³⁴...

... That autumn I found another good friend: in our, Soviet, sense of this word. Mamadou, a Fulbe⁴³⁵ from the plateau Fouta Djallon⁴³⁶.

He came to the USSR for two years’ training at the Department of History of the CPSU⁴³⁷. 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, dragonfly-like eyes and a half-toothless mouth. It was probably too expensive for teachers in Guinea to have dentures made. I am not scoffing at them: it is just that in those days dentures would have been well 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 the language he understood, Mamadou cheered up, and within ten minutes I learnt about his problem.

That autumn was cold and he had no warm coat. 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

⁴³⁴ Nikolai Gogol’s ‘Taras Bulba’

⁴³⁵ Fula people or Fulbe are an ethnic group of people spread over many 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%)

⁴³⁶ Mountainous plateau in Guinea, Africa

⁴³⁷ Communist Party of the Soviet Union

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 paid attention to 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 was already coming to an end. He had neither bread, nor milk.

- Well... - I said resolutely, - Make out 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 that situation, and I intended to redeem her honour.....

Half an hour later Mamadou was greedily eating a grilled chicken with a fresh long loaf of bread and was telling me about himself...

His native village was called Tountouroun. In my mind it somehow associated 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 that song, and I regretted having afflicted him with even more unpleasantness.

Above all Mamadou loved his mum: '*J'adore cette femme-la!*⁴³⁸' He grew up in a Muslim family, his father had three wives. Mamadou had already graduated from university some time ago and taught history. After his current training he was going to be promoted to the position of a principal of a high school.

- Then I will build for myself *une petite villa* and buy *un cheval blanc*⁴³⁹, - he used to say pensively.

- And what do you need a white horse for? - I asked perplexed.

- What do you mean 'what for'? My dad had a white horse, and all the village envied him..., - replied Mamadou.

⁴³⁸ I adore that woman (French)

⁴³⁹ A little villa and a white horse (French)

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 *le cheval blanc* was a mere tribute to tradition.

- 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 divest 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 Russian 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: artless, gullible and somewhat helpless. But on my authority as a witness I declare that he was an exception from 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, myself 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 Sirs: the future authors of financial pyramids and other *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 on our way of life. I knew where to buy *du poulet*⁴⁴⁰, books on history of the national liberation movements and how to prepare a soup with macaroni quickly. In spite of the fact that he had begun intensive lessons in Russian, our language still gave great difficulties to Mamadou, and he was often compelled to ask for my translation services. My French was becoming better and better by the day. What no tutor was able to

⁴⁴⁰ Chicken meat (French)

achieve, became reality: I began to speak 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 that 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. At that awkward moment Mamadou assured me that 'if you wish, you can become my second wife.' 'It is allowed in our country.'

I thanked him for such honour, but politely refused. Since then there was no further misconstruction 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 had thrown a farewell party before leaving home to begin his training. His friends and relatives were seriously considering 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!

That was an absolute. Our country had an excellent reputation among Africans.

Mamadou would have probably allowed his guests to take it all and would not have complained: because that would contradict African traditions of hospitality. However, at that point Fatou interfered: she reminded the guests that she and Mamadou's future baby would actually need all those things as well...

Soon Mamadou charmed all the hostel watchwomen, although one of them was a genuine racist, convinced, like above-mentioned Martin, that 'all Africans had AIDS.' Nevertheless even she could not resist his human charm. Mamadou called her 'Madame' and brought her Pepsi-Cola from

the shop in small bottles. Mamadou had begun to settle, and I began not to 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 news of our trip to Holland.

No sooner had we decided that the trip had been a practical joke, than they called one of us at 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' Eve⁴⁴¹, 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 some 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 that dish annually at the hostel for the date of the battle of Adwa (1st 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 plangent Russian folk songs, mainly of unhappy love (after all, one would not sing *chastushkas* in a choir!)

That time Mamadou had told me that he also wanted to come to my birthday party. I tried to explain to 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 that year we would have to make an exception to our unwritten rules. We celebrated my birthday the day after it: just before the departure. My plane was leaving at 8 p.m.

We were almost graduates, but nobody thought of the fact that we would all part soon, '*and forever' as may be*⁴⁴².' 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

⁴⁴¹ Reference to the film 'The Irony of Fate' where heroes had such traditon

⁴⁴² 'Clouds are hanging over the city', Civil War time Soviet song

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 have imagined that we would be set apart by borders, that civil wars would break out in different parts of our vast country, and that we would learn what unemployment, the unbridled rise in prices, gangsterism are... We could never have imagined the terrible truth that in the near future they would begin to buy and sell human beings in our beautiful Moscow.

After that cataclysm has occurred, you come across Western 'well-wishers' who strongly try to persuade you that you should be grateful to Gorbachev because he 'gave you freedom' ... could you help me to find some suitable words, without the use of bad language, to respond to them?

Lyuba only murmured something 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 the 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. That 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 New Year, and that was something totally different. None of us drank vodka. Soviet girls would only drink wine and even that 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 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 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 made acquaintance with the other three students for the first time. Ruslan was a fourth 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 at the Historical Museum. Both girls were Muscovites: Tanya was also a fourth 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 be in charge of all the others). She had a happy, but modest disposition and was firm in attitude. Lastly, there was Yelena - the youngest of us, a third year student. Judging by her appearance, she was a spoiled daddy's girl.

There were very few passengers proceeding to the flight registration. A couple of foreigners, the TV sports commentator Sergey Cheskidov, who must have been going to Holland for the next skating championship, and us. We looked at Sergey Cheskidov with a kind of hope: his was at least one familiar face on our otherwise unfamiliar plane! The feeling of being abroad had come about once we had been through passport control, and it never left us on the plane. Our internal passports were locked away in the Higher Education Ministry. Instead of those, we had been issued foreign passports, given Dutch entrance visas and, as it was required back in the late 1980s, were also given our own, Soviet, exit visas.

We were going to an unknown country without a penny in our pockets (not counting the five dollars that Ruslan had secretly put 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 we could discern small lights shining below under the plane wing. Copenhagen! Amazed, we looked through the windows at a foreign city - the first we had ever seen in reality. It was for real, not on TV, in TV Travellers' Club⁴⁴³. When the plane started to land, we clung to the windows even closer.

A Martian landscape spread beneath. There were huge advertisement posters of Coca-Cola, Philips and other companies, about which we only knew by hearsay. At the sight of it I felt almost sick. To this day, although so many years have passed, I hate advertisements. It calls forth in me associations with an importunate fat summer fly: you wave it away, and yet it returns and flies over you, circumnavigates and tries to sit down on your knee, while buzzing disgustingly. In the Soviet Union only those things, which were not really that necessary, were advertised. For example, insurance services, without which it was quite possible to live during that time. It escapes me how advertisements manage to influence Westerners so much: I have never bought anything in my life simply because it was advertised on television. On the contrary, there are goods that I deliberately shun 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 commercial advertising. I marked it when I saw how their eyes began to shine with familiarity, when they returned to their habitual glossy 'billboards' from the countries, where advertising had not reached yet that level of pervasion (oh the blessed corners of our planet where it is possible to have a rest from all this rubbish!).

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 stout man was waiting for us at the exit, neither exactly a Comrade, nor exactly a Sir: an employee of the Soviet Chamber of Commerce in that country. There we were going to live for the first couple of days: we had

⁴⁴³ Popular Soviet TV program

arrived in Holland on the eve of a public holiday, and the Dutch, who had invited us, had a day-off.

- Nikolai, - presented himself that man, shaking hands with us.

Our visit at that time was such a rarity that everywhere we went, we were stared at. Not only did the Dutch stare 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 presented us to visitors who were frequently invited to their place, 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 sour 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 winter! Moreover, the grass had already turned green and the first flowers dotted the earth here and there. The Amsterdam streets were so different from ours; what amazed me most was the number of cyclists and bicycle paths, the houses that stood so densely and the multi-ethnic urban population. In the Soviet 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 frequently!' As though it was our authorities who had established the prices for treatment there! And why use the Dutch system and pay all those bills when any necessary medical treatment back at home was free of charge, if one had a 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, and all the way there gushed over his favorite museum in Amsterdam: The Sex Museum...

The market was called Albert Cuyp-markt. Interminably long, located not in a place specially designed for the purpose, as back at home, but in an ordinary street, with houses along its perimeter. Market dealers, inviting buyers, shouted so loudly that I thought the windowpanes in the houses almost trembled. That experience was entirely weird and not very pleasant for us...

...In our city the market was open all the day long, except for Mondays. Thursday was the main 'market day'. Our market was the type that sold groceries, while the market for clothes and other consumer goods (called 'stumping place', as there were no tables there, and people often stepped on each other's feet) was situated in another place. At home our market was called 'the collective-farm market', and people traded there in fruit and vegetables that had been grown in their own gardens: Georgians traded in tangerines, Ukrainians in sweet cherries, apples and pears, Azerbaijanis in grapes and persimmon, Koreans in August traded in water-melons and melons, and local peasants sold different local vegetables and fruit, meat, milk, sour cream and honey. There were also second-hand dealers, who, having bought items in shops at state prices, tried to re-sell them more expensively - Moroccan oranges, for instance. However, that was illegal, and if they were caught, they could run into serious trouble. If people noticed that sort of trade happening, they would put such resellers to shame:

- Where are your oranges from?
- From Sukhumi, my dear, from Sukhumi!
- So, do they grow out there in Sukhumi right with the 'Maroc' label on them?...

At 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. Judging by the labels on the boxes, it was mainly imported. The same applied to most other products and goods: they were sold by professional hucksters. I wondered how much they added to the real price of the goods and what the difference between markets and shops actually was, given both of them were in private hands. It seemed that only the prices differed. Here they were lower than in shops, but frequently the quality was poorer, too...

Quite often we hear 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 a strong impression on me. Yes, the choice in the West was wider than at home, but look at the prices! And when I tried to imagine choosing from some 30 types of cheese, the quantity so overwhelming... Yes, all that abundance seemed to me such unnecessary excess.

But Nikolai's eyes sparkled. He began to tell us, almost slobbering from excitement, about his expeditions to another market - 'the flea market'. Comrades, isn't that diplomat but an ordinary junkman!

My fellow students got gloomy somehow. Probably, they were expecting him to tell them stories about Van Gogh and Rembrandt, instead of being brought to look at some second-hand rags. But we tried to be polite and 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. For me, a car is just a means of transportation, not an indicator of my public status. But the car question obviously itched Nikolai's heart.

- Look, guys, here all unemployed Negroes have a Mercedes! And what do they give us to drive? Shame on our State!

Deep anger rose inside me. It might be excusable for a semi-educated boor in the street to shoot out his neck 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! 'Does this scoundrel think our State is obliged to fork out for a Mercedes for him?' I thought.

I simply could not keep silent. That would have been 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 turned red. I could see it, because I was seated at the back of his 'not posh enough' car. All our student trio stared at me, mute with horror: how dared I say such things to an official?

I had a dual feeling about the incident: on the one hand, I was proud that I had not kept silent, on the other hand, my mood had been definitely spoilt by that tirade of his. After that I could not wait for Monday to come. (Monday was the day when we were to be taken to the Dutch families.)

On Sunday it was just too much for me, and, first in our company, I decided to take a walk alone in the city, despite instructions given in Moscow. That was largely 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 should go together.

- Tanya, - I replied, - Just imagine: a person knows even me only from letters. And then we suddenly appear at his doorstep, all the four of us!

Tanya thought it over and admitted that I was right.

She told me to leave the address with them, so that in an emergency they might know where to search for me.

I left her the address, and we agreed that I would come back by a certain time.

- Luckily they'll treat you to lunch there! - Ruslan said.

I had to walk through much of the city: the trade mission was in the south, at RAI metro station, and my pen friend lived near Artis, the Amsterdam Zoo. The distance did not frighten me. I had a map and was well used to long walks guided by maps. On my journey there were so many quite unfamiliar and interesting sights that I constantly had to turn my head from right to left, to soak up the views.

I shall forever associate Holland with the smell of grilled chicken that was done right in the streets, in front of shops fronts. The smell was mixed with the smell of sticky, melted-plastic-like, chemical-tasting candy. 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 were covered with dogs' excrements. Before visiting Holland I had never seen that much excrement on the streets, nor had I seen people letting their dogs drop in the streets. Here it was all in the day's work, nobody ever 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 the street I was looking for was. I had to ask a little girl. It appeared that it 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 the street I was looking for was on the inside, between two other houses. I had never seen anything like that before! The houses in that area had been altered from old port warehouses, and weren't they beautiful indeed! The Dutch, owing to the limitation of their resources, 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 good that my pen friend was not ethnic 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 back then. In our city unexpected visits of this kind- 'I was just passing by and thought: why not come round...' - were in the nature of things. Unlike the pedantic Dutch, our life was not planned by the minute, so we were not shocked by unexpected visitors!

Tony was only surprised a little, and met me hospitably. He was much older than I - the same age as Mum, - and somehow looked like a dried up grasshopper. He smoked too much and coughed too much as well. 'Independent businessman on import and export' - that's how he had introduced himself to me. 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 with him, and Tony did not offer anything, except for a cup of coffee, to either of us. By the sight of his kitchen (the kitchen and dining room combined) he had fallen on hard times: I saw that there was nothing there, except for some mouldy bread...

That was the first Western habitation that I had seen on the inside. It was large, more than enough for one person. It was a duplex apartment that consisted of a living-room-cum-kitchen downstairs and a bedroom, a shower and a toilet upstairs. Naturally, I did not know how much it cost, nor how much rent was charged. When the windows were open, screams and howls from the zoo animals resounded from the distance, and that made the atmosphere somewhat eerie. Most of all I was surprised at the practicality of the local arrangement: the light switches were both up and down of the staircase, so that it was possible to turn the lights on while downstairs, walk upstairs and switch them off. In our country we, by and large, did not think of such things, not because we couldn't make them,

but because we had mental priorities other than little tricks making life more comfortable, in which the West had so succeeded (not because the Westerners cared for people, but to create new markets for such things!). No, we thought about solving global problems, we reflected on the purpose of life, on the happiness of mankind and other things that had meaning for us. It seems to me that this is the most typical 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.

I presented Tony with some souvenirs: all of us had come to Holland with suitcases full of gifts for our future acquaintances, not to do so was unthinkable! We drank a final cup of coffee, and I went on foot back home, gnawed at by hunger.

Well, who out there had been envious of the well-to-do Blacks and covetous of their Mercedes?...My experience taught me that the case with them was quite the opposite...

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 described our job to us. The museum was getting underway an exhibition on the historical relations of our two countries, and we were to help with its preparation. But the organizers had expected us in the autumn, and by the time we had arrived the work related to the exhibition had been more or less completed. So we were to translate some writings into Russian and then enjoy walking round 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 1,000 guilders pocket money a month (in small quotas, each two weeks, so that we would not spent all the money at once).

That was quite a large amount of money at the time, especially considering that we did not have to pay either for our place of sojourn, or for electricity and water, or even for the public transport (all expenses for it were paid back to us, backdated). Actually it appeared to be a vacation, pre-paid by strangers. A popular proverb says that 'free cheese can be only in a mousetrap.' But what the main reason behind that trap was, I only understood 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 to remove the students and, thus, the financial burden from her care. Then girls were moved to a magnificent private residence belonging to an officer of the museum. He was an heir of a family who owned one of the largest networks of high-class department stores in Holland. We constantly saw his surname on store signboards in the city. His house was like a palace. Here the girls were able to eat jam and butter without restrictions and take a shower (or even a bath - a luxury in Holland!) for as long as they needed.

I was placed with a Jewish family, I understood it straight away by the name of my landlady. When I saw her, any doubts disappeared. Oh, it was so interesting! After the war there were very few Jews left in Amsterdam.

My hostess, Marietta, who also worked at the museum, was Jewish on her father's side, and her husband, a programmer and mathematician Hans, was a quarter Jewish. In the 1950s Marietta had travelled to the USSR with her father who was a journalist and communist. However, the only thing she could remember about that trip was how her parents illegally smuggled a surplus of alcohol into Holland, hiding the bottles in her children's satchel. Marietta was not a communist, although she believed herself to be left-wing. She and Hans had been part of the rebellious *flower-power generation* but now, having settled down, they had left their rebelliousness behind and turned into ordinary bourgeois *burgers*. They lived in a three-story house on a quiet small street far enough from the city centre, in the western part. Hans had his own living space on the ground floor, Marietta occupied the first floor - with a separate entrance door. Their two daughters, aged thirteen and eleven, lived in the attic, and there was a room there for me, too. The house basement was also inhabited: someone was renting it. The narrow staircase that led straight upstairs, twisted in such a precipitous spiral that I felt dizzy looking at it for the first time. Dutch houses were narrow, the doors and stairs were narrow too, and new furniture was usually brought into the house through the window: there was a special hook nailed over the upstairs room windows specifically for the purpose of threading a thick rope through it.

When the youngest of the girls ran out to meet me, I must admit, I felt a bit nervous: '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 with Esther and Maritsa surprisingly quickly. The girls spoke English and a little French. The hosts themselves spoke freely both of these languages, as well as German. Maritsa adored Madonna and her hamster, which lived in a big glass box along with Esther's rabbit.

- *Hou je mond!*⁴⁴⁴ - Maritsa screamed at her sister. And then, seeing me, gently translated:-Keep quiet!

Esther and Maritsa took classes of 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 somehow concluded that everybody in Holland lived like my new hosts:

⁴⁴⁴ Shut up! (Dutch)

worked for just four days a week, and the fifth day was set aside 'for intellectual development.' They went on vacation 2-3 times a year, had dinner at a restaurant at least once a week where they discussed the latest literary opuses with their intellectual friends, over a glass of good wine. They also frequented art exhibitions and other cultural functions. That is to say, life there appeared about the same as ours, only with more comfort and plenty of amenities. And our first cardinal mistake was to believe that idea that our 'little Reagans' wanted to implant in our heads so that we would come back and gab about it to others. So that in our clouded minds we would accept and propagandise '*more democracy and long live the cooperatives!*'⁴⁴⁵

It would mean to conjugate all the advantages of socialism with the Western levels of consumption. In real life they proved incompatible, owing to different vision of goals and ways to them. '*Either I bring her to the registry office, or she brings me to the prosecutor.*'⁴⁴⁶ - we had forgotten that jocular saying, as well as the wisdom that '*you cannot climb a lime tree without getting your butt scratched.*' And very soon we were deprived of any possibility of choice. We could not even choose whether or not to climb that damned lime tree.

Today it is common to chaff at the fact that foreigners in the Soviet Union were let to visit only with 'special families.' Ha, do you really think that in the West they lodged Soviet visitors in average working persons' homes?

For example, in the house where I was placed a movie had once been shot! Marietta had a lot of affluent friends and was on friendly terms with the family of the choreographer of the Dutch National Ballet. (The Dutch aren't remarkable for their ballet skills, and it seemed only too natural that the lady in question was Yugoslav). Once Marietta took me for a visit to another friend, a theatre producer. We stayed there till late at night and when darkness fell, that friend's husband came home - a cheerful and easy-going 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

⁴⁴⁵ Cooperatives in the USSR in the late 1980s were basically first private companies

⁴⁴⁶ Quote from the Soviet comedy film *Kidnapping Caucasian style* (1966)

singing and fancy dancing, and then cook them in a frying pan. A week later, I saw that same blond-chef on television. He was well-known in Holland, being the lead singer of a famous rock group. In addition, he was a poet, an actor and an 'anti-capitalist'.

I noticed that those people liked to call themselves 'anti-capitalist', though they were quite satisfied with capitalism in general. As for fighting it, obviously, it seemed enough for them to peel your own potatoes. Marietta's family were the same: proud of the fact that they rode bicycles to work, rather than go there by car. Well, that was all well and good, but why so inflate the value of such trifles? They portrayed that action as almost an 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 even sat down together with the Moroccan cleaner, after the latter had finished cleaning, at the same table for 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, with braided grey hair and rabbit-like teeth. Her father was a Russian language specialist, and so was her husband; who looked much younger than his wife. She was affiliated with the pro-dissident and pro-Solzhenitsyn clique of Slavonic languages experts, who, throughout their lives, lived off the fake martyrdom of the Soviet 'dissidents'. To study the Soviet Union in the 'free world' and 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. Those 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 Pegasus - an Eastern European literature shop, 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 latter: 'Will the Soviet Union Survive till 1984?'

- Is this science fiction or something? - we wondered.

You may laugh at it, but Nikolai's ilk were already digging deep under the Soviet Union, with the endorsement 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 declined that offer, only buying the plays of Yevgueny Schwartz, at full price. But our girls did take back to Moscow volumes of Solzhenitsyn and other gory stories, taking as many of them as they could carry, and Nikolai, of course, knew about it.

Speaking about Solzhenitsyn, it will be wrong to say that 'I have not read, but still condemn him': I honestly have TRIED to read his works. At least in order to know what some intellectuals admired, and why it was forbidden. Having read with great exasperation roughly one chapter, I realized that I would not lose anything if I did not read the rest. Reading something just because 'everyone read it' was not for me.

We met our immigrants in the bookstore for the first time, mostly 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. That was the time when that angry 'sunny clown' Oleg Popov⁴⁴⁷ emigrated: the one who claims that he *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

⁴⁴⁷ Oleg Popov (born 31 July 1930) is a famous [Soviet](#) and [Russian clown](#) and [circus](#) artist.

tents'⁴⁴⁸ instead of a good, permanent circus building⁴⁴⁹. Apparently, *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 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 had been exterminated in the concentration camps. I tried to tell myself after visiting Anne Frank House that it was probably because the Dutch themselves had not suffered from the Nazis on such a scale as we had, that's why they felt 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 on history. We lost in that war not six, but more than twenty million people, of all nationalities! This is the worst of the worst: *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: *'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*

⁴⁴⁸ Title of a Polish pop-song by Maryla Rodowicz (born as Maria Antonina Rodowicz, in 1945), well-known [Polish](#) singer.

⁴⁴⁹ In the USSR there were numerous permanent circus buildings around the country. Circuses did not perform in tents, like in the West.

*Soviet people. Just as our citizens of any other nationalities: Kazakhs, Ukrainians, Russian, Tatar, and others.*⁴⁵⁰

We walked to the museum every morning. We did not use the public transport, because when we learnt how much it cost in Amsterdam, we were so horrified that made a pact to walk everywhere on 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 the time and the 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. That system was too confusing for us because back at home we simply punched our ticket and could ride on that tram even to the very terminus. If you changed tram, you bought another ticket.

Although the Dutch reimbursed our travel expenses, they were only backdated, and as things stood, we would not be able to 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 simply said 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, not without some misgivings initially, 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 the husband and wife lived more or less their own separate lives.

- Oh, we got so fed up with each other over the years, that this state of affairs is quite satisfactory for both of us,- said Marietta.

Marietta and Hans quickly began to feed me not only with breakfasts but also with dinners, especially because I didn't really eat much. It

⁴⁵⁰ Tamara Lisitsian 'The war was grinding us'

happened after one hilarious misunderstanding that emphasized the differences between our cultures. When they first asked me to join them for dinner, I, as is common for us, politely declined, although I really was starving: expecting that, like in Russia, they would repeat 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 had happened, and we 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 saw: if you began to open it immediately, it looked as though the material side of it was the most important thing for you. It looked 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 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 them now. For example, the fact that one and 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 use liquid soaps for dishwashing in the USSR, 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 barely 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*'⁴⁵¹ 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 those two months, Marietta and Hans became almost like a family for me. I looked at them with Soviet eyes and believed them to be my friends - in the Soviet style, too.

However, I was not aware of the fact that I was, in a way, a sort of exotic animal for them - to parade 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 made her and her guests unknown to them foreign soup, *Borsch*, and the guests ate it from little cups, later asking me for the recipe. Marietta introduced me to her friend from Aruba, who told me where I could buy the textbook of Bobby's language - Papiamentu. Once Hans took me to an old, ramshackle Amsterdam Olympic cycling track - after I told him that many years before their countryman, Jan Jansen, had performed on the velodrome of my home town. Another time Hans showed me a game on his computer which responded 'aptly' (computer-way) to any sentence you typed. Then Hans took me to visit his sister, where I spent hours stroking her cat, and, 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 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 trying to locate on the map the nearby Bible Museum when, lifting my head from the map, I saw where I was. I almost fainted! I ran through the Walletjes like a gauntlet, so ashamed I was 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

⁴⁵¹ Look At The Week - weekly satirical political program on Dutch TV

.One day Marietta's gay co-worker, a Protestant, took 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-Zee 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 existed, we were approached by an elderly man, who had been waiting for us since the early morning. He spoke 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 did not find time for her, but I felt sorry for an elderly person, and 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, as 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 those years did not want anything to do with her because she had married a Dutchman. 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', as the Russians would put it, to get to know her better and come to visit her in the West.

That and other changes aroused in her sinister premonitions. When I described to her what was going on at home, she said that that confirmed her fears. When parting she gave me to read a children's book from Stalin's time, which had miraculously survived all the troubles... Goodness gracious! I had never seen anything like that, so pure and wholesome, if I may say so. We had been told about that era many times, but it is one thing to listen to stories, and another - to read the authentic documents of those days with your own eyes...

In Holland we were asked a lot about Perestroika, and we did not paint the situation in rosy colours. It was the Dutch who saw it through tinted glasses. They believed in their own tales of the good Gorbys and really

could not understand why we preferred Yeltsin at that time. We honestly tried to explain it to them.

When the Dutch first raised that issue they said, '*You have that Perestroika of yours there, probably now it has become so cool...*' and so on. We just glanced at each other, then Ruslan opened his mouth and began:

- Oh yeah, it is so 'great', you cannot even imagine! ...

Taking the lead of Sakharov and other dissidents and brainwashed by Perestroika-people, we already tended to look on the Westerners as some wise and highly moral people who really cared about us, and with whom we could be frank, as with true friends, and complain to them openly if something bothered us. That is what I am awfully ashamed of to this day!

The Dutch treated the idea of the independence of the Baltic Republics with even more skepticism than we:

- They cannot survive economically, they are too small! - argued the Dutch.

- And what about your own country, can you call it big? - we asked.

In response to that, the Dutch looked at us with a deep-rooted sense of superiority:

- We have centuries-long experience of democracy!

Would anyone remind them about that 'experience' now, that their own government is so fearful to organize a referendum over the Lisbon Treaty in the Netherlands!

In the Netherlands I discovered Bob Marley⁴⁵². I mean, I had known of him 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, as in the USSR).

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 songs in the Soviet era was not so much about the fact that his rebellious ideology was non-

⁴⁵² Bob Marley (Robert Nesta Marley) (1945-1981) - most famous Jamaican reggae singer

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 will almost certainly answer that reggae is some sort of joyous music for never downhearted, tropical indigents, who smoke weed for fun, and that Jamaica is a sort of island like in a classic Soviet cartoon, which Sonny, by the way called downright racist: '*Chunga-Changa, green and blue around, Chunga-Changa, summer all year round...*'⁴⁵³. It was exactly that sort of interest - in 'grass' - that our Soviet censorship didn't want for our youngsters to develop!

An average citizen, both in our country and in the West, does not care for the historical roots of the Rastafarian movement and its essence, nor knows the fact that the ritual use of marijuana is only a superficial part, so far from being the main manifestation of Rastafarianism. (Latin American Indians, too, use coca leaves for medicinal purposes!). It is convenient for them to think that Rastafarianism is marijuana, moreover, they have been brainwashed into such beliefs. 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 T-shirts with his image, being completely unaware of the fact that in those stores they actually sold 'light' drugs, and various devices for their use. If I had found that out, I would probably have got embarrassed, blushed, quickly bought that book and taken off. Now that I already know it, I think that European drug addicts like to hide behind the name of such celebrities as Bob.

⁴⁵³ Soviet children's song from the cartoon 'Cutter'

I listened to his songs at night through headphones and froze with the sweet pain caused by what he sang. I did not understand the Jamaican patois (a dialect of English) and did not know much of the Bible, which he quoted in his songs so often, but even what I heard was enough to 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 was always associated for me with Gorby:

*'Them crazy, them crazy -
We 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 for any person these songs may be theirs, regardless of the place and time they are in.

Shortly before his death, the American CIA asked Bob to work for them, realising the force of his influence on the Third World. Bob stayed true to himself: not only did he refuse to cooperate with that infamous institution, on whose hands there 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 is not the fact that he was not a Marxist, but exactly his stamina!

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 were 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 Mutabaruka⁴⁵⁴ in Amsterdam.

Hans decided to accompany me to that concert in Amsterdam's Melkweg⁴⁵⁵ 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 ingenuously, making him almost shed a tear over my innocence. Sweet smoke filled the air, to which I did not pay the slightest attention. It turned out that the people were smoking weed.

There chanted Mutabaruka, a fat, very dark-skinned easily moving middle-aged man, with a very colourful appearance (in Rastafarian colours: the colours of the Ethiopian flag, and with the proper 'dreadlocks' on his head).

Many of his songs were directed against both 'empires of evil', both the USA and USSR who, in his opinion, were not allowing the world to develop, not permitting everybody to live in their own way. I did not take offence, but tried to understand it. I think that one of the problems of our past lay in the underestimation of the original character of the development of various countries and in the pedantic attempts to impose on other nations those forms of solving problems that might be effective under our conditions, but not necessarily operable in others. Just imagine our typical party apparatchik, like Nikolai, who haughtily thought he knew better than others what they really needed, - and you can probably understand Mutabaruka.

At that concert I got acquainted with Katarina too. She was later to be the maid of honour at my wedding with Sunny. It was Hans who noticed

⁴⁵⁴ 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.'

⁴⁵⁵ Melkweg ('Milky Way') -well-known concert stage in Amsterdam

her, as he had already known her a little: she worked at the library from where he had borrowed the Bob Marley records - and he introduced me to her.

Katarina was the Dutch variation of me - the only essential difference being that her interest in the black part of mankind did not have any political character. Katarina was 29 years old at that time. She was an impressive, tall, 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 had boyfriends who were all from Surinam or from Nigeria. She helped one of them to stay in Holland, having effected a sham marriage with him! Katarina was a good judge of 'black' music and '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, telling her my story with Said in its entirety.

That was what Holland had 'bribed' (captivated) me with: not shop counters with 30 types of cheese and salami, not stereo-systems, but the fact that there 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 work is was and on whose behalf you could actually work in Africa, being assigned by Holland, I hadn't thought back then!*). I liked the way 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 others' faces and still continue to discriminate them!), that there was the Tropical Museum there (it was there, of course, because of the colonial and slave-trading past of that country!).

... In those 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, both 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 the carefree life*, where there were no problems and all was presented to you on a silver platter. We had already begun to imagine that that 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 had to refuse the honour. He had to go back for his work as a watchman in the Historical Museum, and I had to write my diploma thesis! There were only two months left before I the defence of my thesis in front of the commission, and I hadn't even begun to write it yet, not a single line! Although I did like it in Holland, not even for a second did I think of remaining there. Besides, for what had I studied all those 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. Like Khrushchev, I decided to 'show him Kuzma's mother'⁴⁵⁶! 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 State!' It should really have been filmed on video. In addition, you should have seen the face of our official at the passport control desk when I arrived home in Sheremetyevo! I was examined for at least ten minutes. He sighed, then uttered: 'The noxious influence of the West' -and allowed me to pass.

⁴⁵⁶ 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 give them a sound chastisement.' 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](#)'

The Soviet Union had altered considerably during our absence of two months and it was as if Ruslan and I had arrived in another country. Something invisible had definitely transpired here over the last two months, and we could not recognize Moscow. Instead of our a bit dour, but overall kind-hearted and sympathetic people, we met some zombie-like humanoids in whose empty eyes there was only one thing: thirst for money!

We were not seen in 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 huge 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 rubles. This figure amounted to nearly three of our monthly grants! We did not have such a sum of money on us, not even in the hostel. Thus there they were - the state employees, who were supposed to be working with state tariffs, and the counters in their cabs still operated. Previously, maybe, a driver would have asked for a little tip, but for only about five rubles, no more. We thought it quite reasonable in some cases. But if anybody had ever dared to ask such an enormous price, - obviously to line his own pocket, instead of the State's, - then the militia would have figured things out for 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 the 22 years of my life I had never seen anything like that. Was this supposed to be 'freedom'?

- What stuff do you have? We can barter! - offered the taxi drivers 'graciously.'

Stuff? My books about Rastas, my textbook of Amharic in English or Ruslan's LP's of opera music? What cheek!

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 a day for her to come and pick me up. I would have had enough patience for that. *The matter wasn't even so much of 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 would return half of that sum to him. I had to acquiesce.

I felt awful. I had anticipated my homecoming with such pleasure, and there we were, in that new and absurd Moscow where everything seemed to have turned upside down.... I had to go across Moscow in the taxi of some 'business shark', myself 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: the wide streets of Moscow, the monumentally-grandiose houses in the centre; there was something Maoist in them, it seemed to me that they held the same spirit. At that moment Moscow suddenly seemed to me so awfully Asiatic. I remembered the sophisticated Dutch in whose circles we had rotated for the past two months. They would have never dared to rob 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, unaware of the fact that what I was witnessing in Moscow those days, was in fact just 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 it was on that shirt. Eventually he came to a conclusion that it was no other than Valery Leontyev⁴⁵⁷. I did not try to unsell him on it. What do all of you understand?...

Since I had returned home 'from there', inside of me there was a feeling of 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 'Wehkamp'⁴⁵⁸ catalogue, tasted then unknown to us bars of Mars and quickly lost interest in all that Western stuff. But my heart was heavy. It was because I saw that something was happening around me, something bad. I felt it, but what it was exactly was difficult to define and even more so to put into words.

On the radio they continuously told us how different Western statesmen praised the wisdom of '*Mister* Gorbachev and read laudatory quotes from the Western press.' This change of term- from 'Comrade' to

⁴⁵⁷ Popular Soviet pop-singer (b. 1949)

⁴⁵⁸ Wehkamp - Dutch postorder catalogue company

'Mister'- did not escape my attention. I recollected all the last agreements signed by Gorbachev and the feeling of growing disaster still amplified. *The detente* and disarmament which had been implemented before step by step, preceded by decades of delicate negotiations, in the mode of 'one step forward - two steps back', suddenly came to be achieved completely effortlessly, with the ease of a goose plume let soaring in the air.

And what if... What if the matter was not in any especial wisdom of a newly-baked 'Mister' of combiner's assistant background; what if he had simply unconditionally agreed to everything that was demanded of him by our foe? When that thought unexpectedly dawned upon me, I felt terrified. I tried to drive it away. It just couldn't be! What then was the whole Politbureau doing? And in what direction were the KGB and the military people looking, instead of their direct duties?

The alarming feeling did not pass away, but lingered. It seemed that in our country everybody began to 'pull the blanket over himself', without thinking about others around him altogether. Miners, justly indignant because soap and washing powder had disappeared from free sale (a thing that had never happened in all my life under the '*command system*' and '*stagnation*'⁴⁵⁹!), suddenly started to demand absolutely strange things:

'A group of apparently reasonable people managed, with their own hands, to destroy the system, in which they had existed as an exclusive social group. They also demanded the establishment of a system, in which they as social group should be inevitably pitched into misery. The miners imagined (not without the aid of manipulators) that if the mines were privatised and they became shareholders, they would be able to sell coal for dollars. They thought that all the rest, that is to say, taxes, energy prices, cars, transport tariffs -and so on would remain as they had been under the Soviet system.'

*'Either the right to employment/work - or the right to strike, that was a fatal choice the miners were facing.'*⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁹ 'Stagnation' was the term that Gorbachev used for the period of the 1970s-early 1980s.

⁴⁶⁰ Quote from Sergei Kara-Murza (b.1939) describing these events of the late 1980s

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, then I realised that it was a sort of nurses' strike. At the word 'strike' our imagination traditionally pictures angry workers with clenched fists who chant their demands and move along the street as a terribly powerful stream. But that strike came about as pathetic clownery! Those people, the nurses, were cheerful, almost singing, dressed in carnival-like suits, and brandishing balloons as they walked 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 lived an easy and cheerful life and struck just simply for entertainment, out of boredom.

After returning from Holland, faced with the mirthless reality of Perestroika, against the background of Gorby's hypocritical appeal of '*more and more socialism*'⁴⁶¹, I was walking about Moscow with a feeling of having been initiated into some secret knowledge. *I knew something that was unknown to mere mortals: I had seen what 'the real capitalism' was like'...*

Although that stage of my life only lasted a few months, to this day I feel qualms of shame recalling how I tried to argue in letters to my Brazilian pen-pal who was rather indignant at my words that there existed some '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 made a similar error; that the majority of our population at that stage, fooled by Ogonyok magazine and 'Intergirls'⁴⁶², suffered from the same delusion, does not take the blame off my shoulders. To this day we still have some imbeciles who believe in such nonsense, though their numbers seem to have dwindled drastically.

I did not realize four facts back then:

- Firstly, capitalism in Indonesia, Zaire, or the Philippines is 'normal capitalism' as well;
- Secondly, 'good' capitalism in Holland and other colonial European countries is 'good' because it can afford to throw crumbs from its table to workers in its own country at the expense of the rest of the world. And

⁴⁶¹ Gorbachev's slogan at the time was 'More of socialism!'

⁴⁶² Reference to a popular movie of that time whose heroine was a prostitute providing her 'services' for foreigners for hard currency

the whole world cannot construct such 'good' capitalism because there are no aliens from other planets, at whose expense it could exist!

- Thirdly, as soon as our socialism stopped existing, 'good capitalism' also ceased to exist, as capitalists had no more deterrents to stop them from forcing their own workers to tighten their belts.

- The fourth and most important reason for all my mistakes was the fact that I did not know the reality of life and work for ordinary people even in the same Holland, though I was absolutely certain that I've learnt all about it.... Eternal shame on me and all of us for those days, for the decisions that we made!!!

Within a couple of weeks of my homecoming, Kweku returned from London. I honestly waited for him, without admitting even to myself that I much more frequently thought of Volodya Zelinsky. Looking back, whenever Mum started the subject of Volodya saying 'Such a good guy he is', I only blushed and interrupted her, assuring her that I did not look on him from such a perspective at all, and that he was simply my sports idol.

I still stubbornly intended to connect my life to Kweku's and leave with him for his native country. Holland did not appear in my dreams as my future residence even once. It was just a place where 'people had so much fun', no more.

Joyful, I went to meet him to Donetsk, familiar to me already! To stop at Galya's that 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-statured Abkhasian, who almost at once left for his home on business. If I tell you, that even after that nothing happened between Kweku and me, you probably won't believe me, but nevertheless, it was so. You just have to behave with men in the right way.

I arrived just for three days and was very glad to see him. He was also glad, though too preoccupied with selling all sorts of junk that he had brought with him from London. To me he presented a couple of dresses. At first I refused, because it seemed to me inappropriate, but then I recalled the Dutch habit not to refuse when offered anything. By a twist of fate, I later got wedded to 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 normal life.' However I observed

all his transactions with local black marketers who I would normally skirt within a mile and felt increasingly uncomfortable in his company. 'Is he really the right kind of guy for me?'- this thought was nagging at me.

Just like myself, he soon was to defend his diploma thesis, but didn't give a damn about it and continued on 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 in Marxism-Leninism - and not because the examination was difficult, but because he had not even prepared for it properly! - I understood that it was time for me to go back home. That was also because I had to finish my diploma thesis, and, unlike Kweku, I took my studies very seriously.

But I had given him my word to wait and was loath to be the first to break it, so I decided to test the ground before my departure. I asked Kweku about his plans for the future, what he was going to do when he returned home to Ghana. His reply was so vague that I understood: something was wrong.

Hurt and dejected, I got on the train and returned to my native city. To crown it, on the way I got so poisoned with a shish-kebab on the dining-car, that I barely reached home alive. The dining-cars, it appeared, had already switched ownership from the state to private hands. For private owners nothing on Earth mattered except profit: neither professional honour, nor conscience. 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: our 'young Reagan' intended to arrange student exchange in a big way. Joyful, I hastened to them - full of warm memories about their country. I wanted to show them round Moscow, to make sure they liked it there.

Alas, the students appeared to be far from intellectual, to put it mildly. They cared very little for museums or art galleries. The only thing that amused them was drinking beer and descending to our local supermarket with a video camera, to film the shelves that had become empty thanks to the economic sloppiness of the shiftless gab-tongue Gorbachev. 'Ho-ho, just look at it! And we thought that was a Superpower!'

It was unpleasant to see them gloat over our misfortune. There was something morbid about it. I did not know yet that *the Dutch were the brave European champions in the sport of kicking dead lions.*

There was among them a person, though, who seemed averse to such behavior, just as much as I - a law student, Guus Jansen. Tall as a watchtower, blonde, with a classical face, he seemed to have stepped down from an old Dutch painting. He squeamishly looked down at the nursery-school level activities of his fellow countrymen. Perhaps, it was because he was a bit older and smarter than they. Guus was already 27, and he had travelled almost half of the globe. Latin America was the only continent which he had not managed to see properly, having been robbed in Nicaragua and thus forced to come back home.

We fell into talk.

- I would like to see ordinary daily life, - Guus said to me, - You know, all capitals are somehow alike, all around the world, and I'd love to see how people live in some place where local traditions still obtain...

I braced myself up to bring him on a visit to our town. That was a daring step, because Guus, by the looks, speech and conduct of him, was so obviously a foreigner. Although he spoke a little Russian, even if I had said that he was 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, please?

You think he was really interested to know that? I bet not, he simply wished to hear what Guus would answer - to check whether he was 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, a quarter to two! - The grandfather was delighted.

- No, - said Guus stubbornly with the same accent. - It is 13 hours 45 minutes.

I hastened to pull him away.

Our town delighted him. He wandered in the streets, photographing old log houses, some of them real pieces of wooden architecture, which no longer existed in Moscow, drank water from anachronistic street pumps, almost entirely replaced by centralized running hot and cold water, 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 Granny, 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 the bed. And when he saw a woman with buckets on a yoke, Guus got so delighted that he nearly frightened her to death. We didn't have many gangling foreigners with expensive cameras wandering around our quarter!

- What a life! - He exclaimed continually.- All is so natural, so real, and so serene! 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 the open mind and the outlook not limited by blinkers of primitive consumption!

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 cared to eat. However, later they changed their mind and took that half-empty jar back home. 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 mind and take the scraps back to their own country. Ridiculous! Yes, to be that way you surely needed 'a four-century experience of democracy'!

I completed writing my diploma thesis surprisingly quickly. Its defence also came smoothly, like clockwork. That was probably also because none of the professors were experts in my subject and did not know what questions they could ask me either. The subject was too exotic - *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 throw some farewell party in our hostel. I pictured it to be a large and good farewell junket. After all it was a serious parting with each other and with such an important part of our life! To my astonishment, it didn't happen. The spirit of 'pulling the blanket over oneself', or 'hogging the covers', as they would say in the U.S., had already started to transfer itself to our students. They stopped caring about each other. At the end of term everybody quickly collected their own belongings and left. Even Lida, who was going to join her spouse in our 'second capital'⁴⁶³, started to feel so self-important as though she had

⁴⁶³ Leningrad

won a lottery. I could not understand it. I thought that she would be the first to want to spend that last day together.

The last thing I remember from the life in our hostel was my farewell to my foreign friends. It was all the more sad that the chance that we would ever see each other again seemed slimmer.

With tears I parted with 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 the 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 the hostel window. I saw his haunched back when he, with suitcases, got into a taxi; I could barely check a desire to throw a big raw potato at this back from the seventh floor. I am sure he was happy at last to be leaving 'those 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 blokes of criminal look stamped on other passengers' feet. They were playing loudly some lousy criminal slang songs on their tape recorder and already at that time nobody dared to say a word against them. I was 'untouched by Perestroika' as yet - and when one of those hoodlums, (who had probably just 'sprung' from 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.

Even after that I was unawares, I did not understand anything yet, I still thought 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 we were drawing near my town, it was already so empty that in the whole carriage there remained only myself, those morons and one other person. I was still not afraid of them. I had never even seen that type of people on the street. I couldn't get into my head that those 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, and so many more in the world around me, it could not be possible that they would just simply sit and concede our common life to those criminals without a fight.

I could well have been in for big trouble - the kind that doesn't shock or even surprise anybody in Russia today. Still unsuspecting that I was in danger, I was rescued by a man - not even a man yet, a boy of eighteen or nineteen, a Georgian from the market - the only other person that remained in that carriage. He sat down next to me and said:

- Let them think that I am with you! - and he started to teach me the Georgian alphabet and tell to me how nice his newborn baby son was. The bastards did not dare approach us.

I didn't even understand then that I had to be rescued! I only understood it about five years later when I returned to the already 'free Russia.'

I was assigned to work in my native town, which suited me well: all the same I did not plan to stay long at that work because I decided to sit for the postgraduate exams in the autumn that year. I even planned to attempt two of them at once: at my own Institute and at the Institute of Africa: I hoped to pass and get into at least one of them!

It was the last state-arranged assignment of graduates in the history of our Institute, but we were then unaware of it.

I still had a free month before going to my first work place. Not exactly a vacation, but all the same better than nothing. At that time the national championship of track cycling had just begun in our town...

I was so nervous on the eve of another meeting with sprinter Volodya Zelinsky! Not less, even probably more, nervous than he before the start! I literally did not sleep all night long. When I had come back from Holland, I had gone straight to the post office and with a fast-beating heart posted to his home address in Odessa a magazine about cycling that I had brought from Amsterdam...

The cyclists at that time stopped at a small hotel close to 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.

- Oh, Mum, I can't, I'd be embarrassed!

She pushed me towards the door, and I resisted, until finally that door flew open, and a medium-height young lad came out. He looked so much like Pushkin, with curly dark-hair and a snub-nose.

- Are you looking for someone? - he asked.

I felt as if I had 'swallowed my tongue', but Mum replied as if nothing had happened:

- For Volodya Zelinsky.

The boy looked surprised.

- He isn't here at the moment, he's training.

He kept silent for a moment, thinking it over, and added:

- By the way, I am his brother...

That's how we got 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 look 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 there was quite different from the previous competition, there were even some Olympic medalists! Nobody took Volodya really seriously, because he wasn't outstanding, he was an 'average' cyclist. But not that time!

On the first day of the competition he made everybody's eyes bug, including his coach Matvei Georguievich (who apparently thought that the previous September Volodya had won just owing to the lack of strong opponents) and the venerable Olympic winners. 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 admit that some cycling officials didn't like Zelinsky for his nettlesome, 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 very soon had an inkling of how difficult his character was from the words his boisterous, easy-going and cheerful Polish team-mate Pavel.

- This comrade is *really complex*! - He said to me about Volodya.

Well he might be, one would never think that Cossacks could be easy-going. 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 to reveal his talent in its full glory? Is it really that important for a man?

Because the umpires liked him none too well, they often tried to 'fleece' him. He was a brave cyclist, and even though he didn't really violate the rules, he was frequently on the very verge of it, so it was always possible to find some fault. Oh, did he make us worry at that time!

It was quite an unforgettable week, the culminating point of which came with the 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 thought to be already over! And there was one more thing that none of us knew at the time: Volodya had also become the *very last champion of the Soviet Union...*

But for now Volodya, Alyosha, Pavel, Matvey Gueorgievich and we rejoiced all together! We invited them for a cup of tea at our place, as their good old fans. Now we came to know him a little bit better. Tanned, almost dark-skinned Volodya had the same southern accent as my Cossack Granny Stenka, and dark brown, almost black eyes, that reminded me of ripe cherries (they didn't reach the size of Lida's Nariman's eyes to be compared to 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 parting shyly. - I'm in Sports Faculty.

...Ah, good, happy time! When the war in Chechnya was something unthinkable, when you could fully trust people, when genuine human happiness, which can never be measured in money, was possible! I have changed, our country has changed, Volodya has changed too, but I still feel tristesse limpide, when I recall those days, and I cannot help smiling through tears...

I was not greeted in a friendly way at work, although one could not call it hostility either. It was 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 conspiracies. I didn't come to work for that. I came 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 in the field of work as I did). But when they realized that I wouldn't and that I was going to take a post-graduate course, they didn't like that either: it aroused their envy. I got an impression that some people simply had nothing to do and had an excess of 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 manuscripts! In the Institute we were told that we would do research and scientific study after graduation, and I came to a place where people had to draw self-made forms for some documents with a ruler, because the copy machine had been broken down! I got sick of such work very quickly, and worse still, I didn't have any real friends there. I went to the pancake cafe near the circus building for lunch and sat there until the very end of the lunch break every day. I did not respond even when the boss permitted us to shop for some 'deficit' during the working hours. I did not need to do that.

I was counting days before the October, when the entrance exams for the post-graduate course were to be held. I really had to fight for a leave from work, and if it hadn't been for the director general, a man, who knows how it all would have ended.

I was lucky that none of the examinations at one institute coincided with the day of the exams in the other. Even now I don't know how I managed to pass them all.

I have already mentioned the philosophy exam at my Institute - the one at which I faced the New Russian examiners. I got a B for it, and A's for History and languages at my Institute. At the Institute of Africa it was more difficult: right before me the examination panel had brutally 'knocked out' a guy from Alma-Ata, who had come to stand exams without knowing anybody at that Institute in person. They seemed to recognise me, though, probably because my Eleonora had intimated something about me, so nobody attempted to fail me. I sat for that 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 reading for Philosophy?'

Comrades, dear, it was one of those houses of which we heard such an earful on the Voice of America! Outside it was an ordinary dusty old mansion, which remained inconspicuous to a 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 one can easily imagine what I thought when I saw that she had got an A for the exam, and I - only a B.

Although I was passing my exams successfully, that incident had laid a bad trip on me...

Life in the late Perestroika's Moscow was becoming more and more loathsome and cynical. It resembled the lyrics of the pop-group Lube's song dedicated to combating crime in post-revolutionary Russia:

'Different gangs making havoc around,
Different bastards all running amok,
There's no bread but a lot of shoe polish,
And the humpback⁴⁶⁴ is vile in his mock.'

But foolish youngsters still frolicked to a jejune song composed by Lube a few years earlier:

'I will be living quite a different life,
We will be living quite a different life,
Ah Lube-Lube, Lube
Ah Lube-Lube, Lube,
Ah Lube-Lube-Lubercy!
Get up quick for your gymnastics now,
Struggle for the détente more staunchly now,
Harden both your soul and body up -

⁴⁶⁴ Reference to the Soviet thriller 'The meeting place cannot be changed' and at the same time - a manifest hint at Gorbachev: 'gorb' means 'hump'.

Watch out, capitalism, we are bracing up!

Ah Lube-Lube, Lube

Ah Lube-Lube, Lube,

Ah Lube-Lube-Lubercy!

At my sixteen I accelerate⁴⁶⁵,

Kolkhoz Dawn with me accelerates,

All my country now accelerates

Renovates and quick rejuvenates!

Ah Lube-Lube, Lube

Ah Lube-Lube, Lube,

Ah Lube-Lube-Lubercy!’

The last two exams were taken not at the Institute of Africa, but at a special centre of the Academy of Science, so people there were not so exigent. I recall two things about the philosophy exam: my strong toothache and the facial expression of a lad who went to answer to the examiners right before me. He sat for the post-graduate exams at newly created Institute of Europe. I had never heard of such an institute before (*‘The establishment of this new academic centre has been caused by the need to scientifically revise the important changes in Europe, to estimate their prospects and consequences, the problems of developing a new security system, to cooperate with Europe in economics, politics, information science, human values...’*- the typical Gorbachev’s bla-bla-bla). What surprised me was how pompously, to the point of burlesque, that lad declared his option for that institute. It looked as if he was just about to burst with conceit! As if Europe was something a full head higher than the rest of the world! I, after visiting Holland, never thought so. If I were the examiners, I would have failed him just for that attitude of his! He reminded me of a country bumpkin from Vysotsky’s song A Letter to One’s Fiancée from an Agricultural Exhibition:

‘There is a well-groomed park by the riverside,

I walk round and I spit in the garbage bins.

But of course you won’t see that, in your countryside,

⁴⁶⁵ Acceleration (*‘uskorenie’*) is the slogan introduced by Gorbachev before *‘perestroika.’* In a different sense, it was also a typical physiological and intellectual feature of the Soviet youth, who were taller and better developed than their ancestors.

Sitting there behind your oven, with your needles and pins...'

But the French language exam was a kind of balm for my soul. Thanks to my long conversations with Mamadou (who kept his fingers crossed 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 happened to enter both the post-graduate courses!

Now I had to make a choice...

It wasn't a very easy thing to do. I was eager to study at Institute of Africa. I had been dreaming of it for so many years! That dream seemed so unattainable to me. So there I was, finally achieving that aim, even without being a Muscovite (which was considered 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 study in Moscow until he returned home or in a hostel belonging to Institute of Africa, where there would be undoubtedly a lot of interesting and talented people to socialise with?

-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 picture that? - she said - You've only got one employment history book. And your scientific theses: are you going to write and present two of them? And your scholarships: perhaps, it's illegal to get two?

The postgraduate scholarship was about 90 rubles. If I refused one of them it would have looked at least suspicious.

The good thing was that I had still a few weeks to think it over. As I understood, the studies 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 had 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 OVIR⁴⁶⁶ to apply for it. I was scared to death. I waited for an array of different catchy questions, and

⁴⁶⁶ Office of Visa and Registration in the USSR

who knew, if they would let me go or not. My mother still worked at a military factory, though I personally had no idea of 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 at the office looked at me almost with envy because I had already been abroad. They asked me different questions on how I had got to know my Dutch hosts and what life abroad was like... Some time 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 gave him beer to drink and once broke a pretty plush toy which he had bought for his kid. Then they felt ashamed and came to apologise:

- Mamadou, we'll buy you another toy! You just tell us what you want, okay?

- Ça va, ça va⁴⁶⁷! -He tried to reassure them - saying, 'I do not need anything, I'm okay.'

- Oh, you want an owl? - his neighbours asked. - Okay, we'll seek for it in shops! ('Sova' is 'owl' in Russian.)

Only Lyuba stayed in our hostel at that time: her husband was still a student, and she was pregnant and decided not to travel according to her job assignment after graduation: to Latvia, 'to those Nazis,' as she would already call her husband's fellow-Latvians, having had a closer look at their behaviour. In the autumn she gave birth to a daughter.

I pulled myself together and finally opted for Institute of Africa, although I had already been given a room in my old hostel, together with a post graduate student from China.

I went to the post graduate office at Institute of Africa- to find out when and where the classes would begin.

Unexpectedly for me I was shouted at, and quite rudely.

- They wander into here, all sorts! - a red-faced man named Yuri Ivanovich yelled at me. -Classes already started long ago! Eleonora Alexeevna takes in some unknown provincials, and I have to deal with them! She has buzzed my head off about how much she needs you. She

⁴⁶⁷ It's OK (French)

said you would even marry a Muscovite, if necessary. And you haven't turned up for ages.

Perhaps I was too sensitive at that time but I was offended to the depth of my heart. Who the hell does he think he is? He is just some kind of a caretaker here, not even a scientist! Have I done him wrong 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 started 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 sat for the exams, just because of where I was born. Had he ever tried to scream at her? I bet he wouldn't have dared. 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 seemed to me sort of doused with dirt. And my memory peddled the image of the Dutch, polite, thoughtful, and proactive people: they would have never talked to me like that!

While I was recovering from that visit, Kweku arrived in Moscow. He still had not left for Ghana and had come to apply for another UK visa at the embassy. He had always spoken vaguely about his plans and for our future together. And then he suddenly blurted out:

- I think it would be better for you to live in Europe!

I was struck dumb with indignation. Another well-wisher, who knew better than I what I needed! So he thinks that I'm such a sissy that I would not survive in Africa? And he thinks I'll be enticed by all that resalable Western junk?

I got immensely angry and suffused with the spirit of defiance. Oh, so you say in 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 well on my own!

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 come out with that 'better-live-in-Europe' provocation, I often wonder what would have happened then. And could I

live in modern Moscow which is much worse than any Africa in its hopeless heartlessness?

This was not the kind of Moscow where I studied.

Would I have to write scientific articles on Africa from a non-Marxist point of view? The very same researchers from that time, who spoke of how popular Marxism-Leninism was in Africa, now wrote about quite the reverse. Would I too have to start writing about the 'red terror' of Mengistu, instead of the outstanding success of his campaign against illiteracy, about which now all these Africanists modestly kept quiet? Did I need such a job which would have required of me to become a turncoat?

Moscow is not the only place in the world, I told myself recalling how during the summer before entering the postgraduate school I met one of my former classmates at the market in my home town. One who had been nicknamed Professor. She had graduated from our local pedagogical institute and was about to start work at a school as a teacher of physics. Having discovered that I was sent to work in my hometown she said sarcastically:

-Well, could they not keep you in Moscow? - with a look that meant to say that it was my complete failure in life. I got 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?

That thought crossed my mind more and more often...

I will not describe all the steps of obtaining a Dutch visa for three months, how much effort it took 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 in History of CPSU that year, on which all the results of his training depended, but how could he well 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 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 stubborn 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 was unable to properly express in words my premonition back then, but in my heart there was a mixture of pain from the growing realization of my own irrelevance and the anxiety for some troubles, unknown yet, but clearly impending over our country. The problem was not so much that *'the fiddler was no longer required.'*⁴⁶⁸

I felt something that my mother couldn't see yet. A catastrophe was looming. Such one after which the realization of all my dreams would lose all its meaning. I did not know exactly what it was going to be, I did not quite know from which side to expect it, but I was sure that it was going to break out soon, I had no doubt.

Of course, it was cowardice to leave my country at such a time. We all know the proverb who leaves the sinking ship first. It's meaningless to justify your actions in such cases. The only thing that remains to do is to try to explain why it happened.

I did not see anybody to rely on and to join in order to prevent the upcoming catastrophe. The voice of Nina Andreyeva⁴⁶⁹ 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 it

⁴⁶⁸ Quote from 'Kindza-dza', Soviet science fiction movie (1988)

⁴⁶⁹ 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.

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 there were no longer any revolutionaries in our country. 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 things that were unfolding before my very eyes, deserved all that would happen to them. But I felt it was all false; 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 sought political asylum in the West, 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 only one who felt that way at the time (for example, Nikita Arnoldovich felt so, 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, hurled it down and said: 'Nobody will get this goddamn ring, neither you, nor me!'* I gave up both my postgraduate schools and on one chilly November evening got on a train and left Moscow.

...On 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 having already become something I could not afford.

-It's even more interesting - to go across the whole of Europe! - Mum said.

I had to change the train in West Berlin and I was worried, since I didn't speak German. But I had an acquaintance in Berlin, guess who? - correct, a pen-friend, Detlef, who had written to me a letter, where he volunteered to accompany me to my train (East Germans had just been allowed to visit West Berlin).

Mum and Mamadou accompanied me to the Belorusskaya train station. All three of us were sad. Before the departure we went to a cafe on the fifteenth floor of the Moscow Hotel - my favourite one - for a farewell

dinner. I asked my mother not to leave Mamadou alone and help him until he returned home.

When the train began to move, Mamadou burst into tears and threw himself on my mother's neck. Mum could not stand it either and began to wipe her tears, I got a sharp tingling in the nose, ready to cry.

What am I doing? Why am I doing this? What would happen if I do not go ahead with it?

All those 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 of 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, early in the morning, Detlef and I crossed Checkpoint Charlie, and he put me on my Dutch train.

The Federal Republic of Germany was a 'country of contrasts' - judging by the diversity of the successively unfolding sceneries. I communicated in gestures to a German family who happened to be my neighbours in the compartment. I have always wondered how Germans could fight with us during the war, but I thought that subject was better not broached in an actual conversation...

When the train crossed the Dutch border and stopped at the first Dutch city, Hengelo, I felt relieved, and my heart thumped with joy. I recognized the familiar yellow trains and red mailboxes outside. Life ahead seemed endless and problem-free; it 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 avowedly advocated the freedom of movement for Soviet citizens, those tolerant Dutch, were not pleased when we actually used that freedom. Of course, one could have started to lie and claim that they had been persecuted for political reasons at home and thus obtain the refugee status. Especially that at the time it was not so difficult as it is now. Later

I met a lot of people who had remained in Holland in that way, having lied about their persecution. As for me, I would not have done it for the life of me. I could not insult my country. My principle is: even if I am not satisfied with anything at home, it is strictly our own internal business.

Life in Holland disappointed me a lot. I was almost ready to go home when I met Sonny...

What happened to the other characters? Oh, they were all right, except for Detlef. After the unification of Germany, which he had looked forward to, his factory was closed down, and, being a certified 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 the returning pre-war owners. Eleonora Alexeevna is still working at her old place. Mikhail Yevseyevich, having fallen out with the 'young Reagan', left the Institute. They say that he has now radically revised his Perestroika views on Stalin. Better late than never! Mamadou who had taught me the difference between *réfrigérateur* and *congélateur*⁴⁷⁰, successfully survived his academic year in the Soviet Union. He defended his report 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 is raising two 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, causing some stir in her Personnel Department. 'It's Kweku from London' - he said with Churchill's air of self-importance. - Please tell Zhenya that...' - 'I can't tell her anything, she lives in Holland now!' - my mother replied. 'Oh'...

Yes, I managed to impress him by that act, but was it really worth moving into a *terrarium*?

... Next stop is the Hole in the Hedge! - Bus driver announced seriously.

⁴⁷⁰ Fridge & freezer (French)

I thought I misheard.

-What?

Geoffrey laughed

- Yes, it is really called so. You see a hole in the middle of those bushes?

Geoffrey was a cheerful biped. Sorry, but I cannot qualify him differently. I did not have any illusions about Geoffrey. He did not reach the level of a human being. He had his spells of bad mood, but it 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 that word with a peculiar expression, protruding 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 something once than to hear about it a hundred times! The very first time I came there was on a three-day tour designed for young Americans, Australians and New Zealanders who looked for adventures. Our driver was a native of those places, though he was now living in Dublin and so described the local life to us in a vivid way. They can really do it so skilfully! I remember how tense my neck muscles and spine got when our minibus crossed the border for the first time. That was near Newry, and my emotion was 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 Portnova⁴⁷¹ on the very first evening.

Our tour passed through South Down with its 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

⁴⁷¹ See above

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 parades⁴⁷² during the Soviet times, the parades which often deliberately passed through Catholic neighbourhoods. Somehow it had not stayed in my memory. There our guide told us in detail about the features of local life. Looking closer at the Shankill residents whose behaviour was not altogether unlike that of the inhabitants of a zoo, I felt even more sympathy for the indigenous Catholic minority.

I was pleasantly surprised by the fact that, despite 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 with pride that when he had been 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 black as he is painted, I thought! At least we have common enemies.

I really wanted to get to know the life of that land better.

Before our first meeting Geoffrey was nervous. Strictly speaking, there was nothing to be nervous about, but he could not help himself. He had never been in that situation before, had never seen in at the train station a person he had got to know in the Internet! Besides, I was a foreigner, moreover a Russian. No, of course, Anna Kournikova was great, but for some reason he pictured to himself a hefty strong woman like Russian kernel pushers whom he had seen on TV as a child. Somewhere from the depths of his subconscious the face of the evil Rosa Klebb⁴⁷³ from the James Bond film floated in his mind and he could not obliterate that picture, although he had got my photograph by email, and I was neither the like of Rosa Klebb, nor a kernel pusher. His mind played games on him: what if?

⁴⁷²For more information see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orange_walk#Form_of_parades

⁴⁷³ 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. He was eager to learn about life in the country which had only recently been for him as far away as Mars! It was like communicating with an extraterrestrial: Geoffrey, like most Western men who had 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 in 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 some Faina Melnik⁴⁷⁴. Although I didn't reach Anna Kournikova's level either.

Geoffrey was a stocky, heavy-headed guy with a very Irish face and prematurely greying hair (which was caused by the shock from a car accident that he had been in when drunk). The day was unusually warm for late April and Geoffrey took me for sightseeing about the city. No, it was not the Belfast of Bobby Sands, Kieran Doherty and Joe McDonnell, but respectable south Belfast, with its university and cosy little cafes, where Geoffrey's friends, Craig and Paul, and his brother Danny had settled.

We talked incessantly and by the end of the day we felt as if we had already known each other for ages. He treated life with ease, and his stories about life there seemed to me very interesting back then. His ease made me relax and put my worries to one side. That was the feeling I needed a lot at that time.

My nerves were almost at a breaking point. That was because of the tensions at work, because of the war in Yugoslavia and because of the uncertainty of the reunification with my family. I did not tell Geoffrey about it. If our friendship had turned into a serious relationship, then of course, I would have told him all that. But having talked to him, I quickly realized that '*we do not need such Geoffreys,*'⁴⁷⁵ and decided that it

⁴⁷⁴ Faina Grigorievna Veleva-Melnik (born 1945) was a Ukrainian-born [Soviet discus thrower](#), a [1972 Summer Olympics](#) champion in the discus event

suiting me just fine simply to socialize with him, on friendly and pleasant terms.

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 reason and sometimes quite unexpectedly. This concerns not only relationships between men and women, but the attitudes to friends, colleagues, comrades, business partners 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 in Russia. Of course there are exceptions to this rule, but they are just exceptions.

We parted at that time in a friendly way, and since then I often came to Belfast. I practically spent every weekend there, so that I didn't have to sit at home alone yearning for Lisa and feeling sorry for myself! Geoffrey listened to my eager questions about what, how and why, and deep inside was proud of himself that he was helping me to get to love his native land!

Geoffrey opened up a new world for me. He told me the things that were ordinary for him, but I listened to him with wide open eyes. I learned that, unlike in Russia, people there did not talk to each other about politics, that Protestants in the bar or disco could be recognised not only by their names, but by some inner greater stiffness and reticence. I laughed heartily at the story about his father, who, when handing the documents to a British soldier at a check point, tied them to his sleeve with elastic, so that when the soldier reached for his passport, it 'ran away', and the upset soldier just mumbled: 'Very funny, Sir...'. He did not dare to beat up the Antrim village school headmaster, of course, it wasn't some unemployed Taig⁴⁷⁶ from West Belfast!

It turned out that the relations between Catholics and Protestants here were not so straightforward as I had imagined. I became aware of it when

⁴⁷⁵ Nikolai Ozerov's 'We do not need such hockey!' (about Canadian ice-hockey players) in the 1970s became a classic expression in the USSR

⁴⁷⁶ Traditional Irish name that is being used as an insult by Northern Irish Protestants for Catholics

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, and 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,' that I understood why and myself got as red as a tomato. I did not mean to offend him by comparing him to those Shankill dudes!

I had a big deficiency, according to Geoffrey. I was 'too interested in politics.' I supposed that was due to my origins. I tried to explain that, to me, it was not something pleasing, but unfortunately politics defined the lives of all of us and we ought to 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*⁴⁷⁷!). He did not believe that someone was able or even wanted to change people's life. And he told me that in no uncertain terms.

- 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 chafed. 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, in O'Connell

⁴⁷⁷ 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](#).

Street, in a political demonstration! Perhaps he was ill? Or, God forbid, had fallen in love?

I realized that Geoffrey disliked 'politics', and tried hard not to speak to him on those 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, just like Ilya Muromets⁴⁷⁸ who had spent 33 years sitting in his hut: watching television for days on end, without turning it off as long as he didn't have to turn it off, watching no matter what till 3, 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. I wanted to visit West Belfast where the famous Feile ⁴⁷⁹ Festival was held at the time, I wanted to climb the Black Mountain, rather than sit in his 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 after he repeatedly said about his nephews, who, by the way are totally healthy kids: 'I don't like weens⁴⁸⁰!'

Sometimes I broke down. For example, at the time when he began to retell a story that he had seen on television in a programme honouring two British soldiers, who went to Kosovo to fight on the Albanian side. He did not understand why I suddenly 'shrank into a ball': was it not the Serbs who had been destroying the poor Albanians? And why I threw into 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 it?

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

⁴⁷⁸ 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 a 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](#).

⁴⁷⁹ Feile an Phobail - West Belfast community festival, held annually in August

⁴⁸⁰ Weens - Northern Irish word for 'kids' (from wee - 'small')

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 to choose the right place; he knew which areas were good and which 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 those houses. House prices were ridiculously low there 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 were those where the curbs were 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 on 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. Those 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 - 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 Protestants' 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 - a girl and three boys, stubborn as oxen! 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 in their house on the main street, where buses stopped en masse with Yankee tourists in search of their ancestors' graves at Antrim Glenn.

Until his father's death, his mother's life was spent in her husband's native village and, as I understood from Geoffrey's stories, although he did not realise it himself, she lived the way that his father had wished her to. Perhaps that was why after his death Geoffrey's

mother did not listen to anyone anymore, but sold her wearisome house-shop and returned to her own native coastal town in South Down. That town was overwhelmingly Catholic and awfully beautiful.

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 also because of Liam Neeson⁴⁸¹. Geoffrey's uncle, by the way, taught him boxing.

Everyone there 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.

- It's... - I gasped. Geoffrey laughed:

-All people think so! This is our local Protestant minister! Well, he's shameless enough to wear his beard in such a way that he looks exactly like Gerry Adams!

I refused to believe that it was not Adams, but Geoffrey assured me that it wasn't.

It was a pleasant Sunday afternoon and families 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 was irate; it felt as if 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 some day buy his father's old house back from its new owners... no, perhaps, he had better build a new one, on the shore, such 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,

⁴⁸¹ 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](#)

without stopping in Larne⁴⁸², 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 spetsnaz⁴⁸³, which he asked me to tell him. If only I could 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 that year he would look best of all, with my assistance!

Geoffrey did not notice that I was turning gloomy, but even if he had, he would not have understood the reason. He was not aware of the immortal tale by Saltykov-Shchedrin about the wise gudgeon⁴⁸⁴ 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 those soldiers that looked like Nazis, without those 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. -You know what my dream is? How wonderful it would be to take a road-roller - you know that one with which they paint lines on the road- and smear it with the three colours of the Irish flag and ride it all the way from Dublin to Derry! To paint the road in three Irish colours! Can you imagine how angry the Loyalists would get?

But that didn't cheer me up. Still grim, like a cloud, I went into the pub with him. Yet, Geoffrey still 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 brighten the situation.

- Do not think of anything, - said Geoffrey. - I was brought up by Aunt Melda from Rathfriland⁴⁸⁵ -you remember I've told you about her?

⁴⁸² One of the sectarian hot spots in Antrim, with overwhelmingly Protestant population

⁴⁸³ Russian Special Forces

⁴⁸⁴. Classic Russian satiric fairy-tale about Gudgeon who is afraid of everything and only cares about his own life

⁴⁸⁵ Rathfriland is a [village](#) in [County Down](#), [Northern Ireland](#). It is a hilltop [Plantation of Ulster](#) settlement, with a Catholic minority.

Well, her entire family was killed by the Black and Tans, including her husband and little son. We 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 as the heroes of the 1920s, you know!

‘Being a Northern Irish man is so hard,’ - could be easily read in his brow.- ‘Whether you’re Catholic or Protestant. You just want to live your life, eat dinner from a Chinese takeaway, drink Harp or Guinness, study, buy a motorcycle and a new stereo and... dream of climbing a mountain someday instead of looking at it through the window. You don’t disturb anybody. It is possible to dream of 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 one also needs courage! 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 fast motorcycle ride with Anna Kournikova on the back seat, like any normal person?’

All that was written in his rustic face so clearly that one did not have to be a gypsy fortune-teller to see 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 was then going to pour out into the main street of the village and continue frolicking...

I walked towards the former summer residence of Churchill thinking how long it all was going to continue. My patience was shrinking ‘like shagreen skin.’

After that night Geoffrey and I did not see each other for several weeks. I responded absent-mindedly to his emails, the content of which, as usual, reflected his puppyish infantile joy of life. 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. That was despite the fact that I was working in the South, in another jurisdiction. The broker had told the bank that I worked for a company where my duties included frequent business trips to the North! Now I had to exercise patience at work: it was impossible to look for a new job until I found a house to buy and 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 did not permit me to go anywhere at the moment. So it became necessary to resolve all those issues as soon as possible! Every weekend I viewed the houses in Belfast, but they were not what I was looking for. The child couldn't 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 if they would 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 property in his portfolio that was in that area. 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.

- Well, what about Protestants? Do they annoy you?- I joked.

- No, it's even better here than among the Catholics. The Protestants 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 wish to invite some Irish friends to visit me?' - I thought. Anyway, why should I live with the people, among whom it is better for the Irish not to show up?

Experience proved that I was right. Foreigners in South Belfast did not run the risk of being beaten up 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. Meanwhile, the local residents take a familiar stance: '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 had 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 sit for his exams soon, and then - hurray! Such a well-deserved summer vacation! He could spend it at his brother Danny's in Belfast, who 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! Nor 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 or 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 everything over and, frankly speaking, was quite proud of himself. Why not be proud? Maybe by the end of the summer he would finally dare to ask if I wanted a trip on a motorbike about the North. If, of course, Danny would lend him his bike.

I came only in July to see him when his vacation had 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 you didn't really have to leave the house during those days. You'd survive somehow...

On Sunday, when the infamous parade at Drumcree⁴⁸⁶ 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 craic⁴⁸⁷!’

‘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 realised that my face did not promise any good. But he did not think: he was too busy with what was going on on the screen. A scuffle was going on there. The Orangemen were attacking the police officers and the police, in their turn, behaved so, as if they had colluded not to 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. Hmm... 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?

⁴⁸⁶ 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.

⁴⁸⁷ Craic - Irish word meaning fun, good time

‘I’ll go for a walk,’ - I said - ‘I have a headache.’

...When I came back, after half a day, Geoffrey was still sitting at his TV-set, in the same position in which I had left him, now watching courageous Rambo fight cruel colonel Zaytsyn in far-away Afghanistan...Yes, such was the dude!

...Now we were going to his mothers again. I had found on the Internet what 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 dark-blue mountains. When I first went for a promenade along its only embankment and looked around I was really astonished at the beauty of the view. The town itself was a seaside resort; three quarters of the residents there were Catholics, and the Protestants here were pretty quiet. It was half-way between Belfast and Dublin. I could find no 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 those marvellous mountains, and there was a big, green lawn 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 that town, so for now I had to come there 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 it 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 cost, even if I got fired. *Que sera, sera*⁴⁸⁸. She had already been through too much in her short life.

Lisa was lying in bed with fever from quinsy, when I arrived, casting sad peeps 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 Mum right away. - He sent a birthday card for Lisa, sent from Suriname, and signed both by himself and his new wife.

I looked at the card. His wife's name was Chinese. Apparently, that card was intended for me rather than Lisa. Sonny will never grow up!

Well, if he intended to upset me, it was in vain. Quite the opposite, I heaved a sigh of relief. All the time I had tried not to think how hard it must have been for him to recover from what had happened. After all, Lisa was with me and was going to be with me, and he remained there, all alone with his painful thoughts and emotions. When I imagined how he might have felt, 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, lest I should go mad.

Maybe at least now he would be happy. I really hoped so.

When I was visiting with my Grandma, I heard about Drumcree on a Russian television channel.

Well, well, well, what would they say? It would be very interesting! 'Goodness gracious! 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). And felt like pinching myself to make sure I wasn't sleeping, when I heard him say in a lively and totally airy 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

⁴⁸⁸ Whatever will be, will be (French)

Ormeau Road⁴⁸⁹ in Belfast. A few years before, loyalists had shot five people there at a local bookmaker's office⁴⁹⁰.

There it was, on the screen: the police unmercifully beating unarmed civilians, who were staging a sit-in in protest, while the 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 Soviet-style professional international journalists left in our country. Their place had been taken by an army of *second-rate English translators* who were drawing for all their knowledge of the world on the BBC and CNN websites.

The Soviet Union had its international correspondents and analysts, who expressed anti-imperialist, prevalently quite objective, viewpoint on the events in every part of the world. The new regime in the non-sovereign, defeated country was not interested in such journalists, because our own opinion about the state of affairs in the world was no more. There was no independent in-depth analysis in the subjugated Russia's mass media either, very rare samples of which may sometimes be found in the Western press, because any objective analysis had been uprooted, and the lackey scribblers, newly appointed by the West, often found it much more simple just to translate (*with the help of a dictionary*) some BBC's reporting instead...

Ireland is not 'the country of Guinness and terrorists!'

The present-day Russians could learn much from the Irish: how to love and respect our own country, how to be proud of our culture and how to remain resilient under any circumstances. They know how to stay strong and remain humane at the same time.

A lot of things will have to be revived and learnt anew by us, now that a great part of our identity had been crushed underfoot since the demise of the Soviet Union.

⁴⁸⁹ Lower Ormeau Road - street in South Belfast

⁴⁹⁰ In 1992

Chapter 9. Untied broom

'A father ordered his sons to live in peace; but they did not listen. Then he told them to fetch a besom and said:

- Break it!

Whatever they tried they could not break it. After that the father untied the besom and told them to break every twig separately.

They easily managed to do that.

The 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 the 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)

'Lukomorye⁴⁹¹ is no more,

Oaks chopped down to the earth:

Used for coffins in the war,

In the time of troubles and dearth.'

(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 squeak. My grandfather had his own special sound to call them for feeding; no one could ever make it like he did. It is even impossible to spell out 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.

⁴⁹¹ Forest in Russian fairy-tales

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 her letter Mum 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 their way to Lima. Sometimes Volodya Zelinsky came round, sometimes his brother Alyosha and sometimes their parents, who became refugees. At least they were happy to have managed to sell their flat to the Chechens, although nearly for nothing. After that they saw on TV their home in Grozny completely destroyed by a bomb...

Then Verochka from Ust-Kamenogorsk visited my mother; her life was the most sorrowful of all of us. That gushing young woman, who had gone with me to an Australian ballet performance in Moscow, had to flee from her home in Kazakhstan with her mother. What had actually happened there no one knew, but she was really scared to death about something. After that Verochka and her mother 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 trembling all over.

- Silence! - she shouted when she saw my mother. - There they are, right behind the window, I know that...

We lived on the 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 5 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, worked somewhere as street cleaners and lived in a one-room flat (both had a higher education!). And then we lost their track...

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: some turned fanatically religious, became drunkards or even committed suicide...

Those who claim that all those things had also happened in our country before, but we just didn't know about them, must have been misled by the 'democratic' press or simply lied to. And it had nothing to do with glasnost. We had always had a lot of acquaintances, but there had never been so many of them (or of their parents and even grandparents for that matter) to whom something dreadful had happened.

The wife of my mother's colleague had embraced religion. While she was praying hysterically, her son climbed the church roof, 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 had known since childhood and who had become a security guard in a bank, was shot dead 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 inconceivable that someone would even have a gun. Only inveterate bandits, hard-core criminals, 'bound for the gallows', had guns, but there had been negligibly 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 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...

So, who out there had promised to go and lie down on the rails?...⁴⁹²

⁴⁹² 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

Zhenya from Yalta stayed in Moscow, too, after many trials and tribulations: at least she wasn't insane! One of our teachers helped her to get a job in a library. She was 35, but never had a home of her own. Yet she toughed it out, went romancing with her students, and never complained of her life. One day she wrote to me: *'Zhenechka, you know when I go out walk I see that the houses are the same - well, everything is the same, nothing has changed, but I can't shake off the sensation that some Martians have taken over the streets...'*

Vitalik Reznikov from Rostov, another groupmate, with whom I had had common memories and the only one who hadn't got a diploma, tried to make ends meet by teaching kids to play chess. He was Jewish - tall, nervous, a grown-up mother's boy, whose nose often bled. He was the one who had somewhat ostentatiously declared his Jewishness, not a fashionable thing to do - yet. His father had emigrated to France during the Jewish emigration wave in the early 1970s, but the living conditions there had so terrified him he came back. That's why some laughed at Vitalik in the tumultuous Perestroika and thereafter, 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 the theatre together when we were in our third year, and he even took me to visit his aunt in Zelenograd. Vitalik was Said's roommate in the new dormitory, and I once attempted to date him- to make Said angry. But when I realized that for Vitalik it was going to be more serious (he even tried to kiss me), I got jitters and began to evade him. I was absolutely not ready for that. He was a smart guy and understood everything very quickly... I have always remembered Antoine de Saint-Exuperie's words: *'We're responsible for those whom we tamed...'*

...Anechka Bobrova had been the most exemplary student in our group. Even more pious than I, because I lived in the dormitory where I had seen a lot, while she lived with her parents all those years. Hers was a well-educated, serious and quite prosperous family. Her parents used to take her student grant money and give her one rouble a day, so we often took her to a café and paid her bill there, even though we were less

4 times, I will lie down on the rails myself...' Yeltsin never kept his promise, although prices increased a hundredfold and the people's standard of living decreased sharply.

comfortable, moneywise. 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.

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 groupmate in the third year, as I have told before, she decided to learn Swedish. And she did it!

But her beloved Estonian didn't requite her feelings and married another Moscow girl. However, soon his family life went awry, 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, when he timidly asked permission 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.

...Perestroika came rattling along, 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 on the verge of her death.

- To ruin such a country one had to try really hard!

Somebody shushed at her, not seeing that she was talking about. And my heart sank...

I haven't seen her for many years, receiving only a few short letters sometimes. At the beginning she worked in her profession, then came to work at a bank. She never boasted of her new life, but it was clear from her last letter that she was quite well-to-do under the new regime as well. But she wasn't happy. The new life wasn't right, and she felt deeply averse to it. All she could do was shut her eyes to everything that was happening all around her. There still were some good things that she could venture, such as pleasures of a Mediterranean Sea cruise, or her favourite hobby, photography, and then having a second education in a faculty of law. All her relatives were adjusted to life one way or another. Her brother knew an exotic Eastern language and 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 on history that disproved all they had known and witnessed 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 got married. I tried to reassure her that she hadn't lost much. It's better not be married than suffer from an unhappy marriage or other family 'pleasures' like divorce, but she took a deep breath and... 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 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...

Then, of a sudden, Anechka became unemployed, because her bank had been closed down 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 had 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 a young secretary any longer (it seemed she didn't want to think 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 of life and even complained about it for a while. As soon as Anya got a new job (well, her good old family of Soviet times still had some contacts!), her radicalism had vanished again without a trace. She had fallen back into place, as well as into her favourite hobbies, embroidery, books, conversations with her intelligent friends...

I was amazed at how she practically had repeated my American pen-friend Mark's progress, but in a Russian way. At first in his letters to me he evinced a typical American bravado, bragging how he would make money when he became a successful solicitor. But 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 of his government, the American way of life and of the United States' course on the international scene! And then Mark suddenly lapsed into silence - as soon as he had an opportunity to work for the very same government, having got a not dry work of some civil servant...

But if those, who themselves lived more or less well, suffered from an 'adaptation syndrome' in post-Perestroika Russia, what can be said about those who were less lucky?

'We live in terrible, almost unbearable living conditions', Lida, another university friend of ours, with whom you are already well familiar, bitterly admitted to me in a letter. She had managed to settle in St. Petersburg in the last years of Soviet rule and worked her way up to a high rank in the militia. 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 eked out a miserable existence, half-starving all year, sending any money she earned to her unemployed mother and brother. And all year she tried to put some money aside to go home to the Ukraine on holidays. Sometimes she managed it and sometimes not, and then she wasn't able to see her mother for a year or more...

You remember how we used to travel to the Black Sea together: Lida, her parents, her brother and I? We used to live 'in clover' for two weeks, were totally carefree! Lida's family used to tour to the Black Sea annually. But today her mother sometimes even lacks money for bread...

So do you really think that Lida had time to be concerned with social changes?

She lived 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 fall ill and stay in bed, not to be left on the street or to lose her mind...

After all, the worst thing was to sit down and think for a second that your life was 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 about the next day. There would be fewer and fewer free services available to any citizen. And our daughters would 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. Did we realize that they had nearly exterminated any vestige of self-respect in us? That there would be new Chechnyas for our boys? And there would be the same life for our yet unborn children and grandchildren, if nothing be done now? Of course, it is more pleasant to dream that there would be a nice future for them where they would meet 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 wouldn't forget their mummy and daddy as well. But that is just not going to happen.

...I have been trying to understand how our people, who grew up in our Soviet society, the ones who, unlike Westerners, have something to compare the present life with, can get accustomed to all the abominations of our life nowadays. If I can't accept as normal all these abominations and infamies even after 15 years in favourable conditions (when you are not dying of starvation at least).

It's because I have always remembered the previous life. Not the hedonistic waste of life, with animal-like cravings and needs, full of self-seeking and consumerist boredom, but the life, which was full of something that nowadays no young people from the West or here can ever have. Namely, of infinite spiritual and intellectual progress, respect for other people, being useful for them, working for the common boon, rather than pursuing self-centered purposes in life. It is because of the lofty humanist purposes that one could feel like a human being, who did deeds not for money but for the will of their heart. There was a joy of truly meaningful work, a feeling that life opened up every road to us, so that we didn't have to be afraid for our children's future. The neoliberal bourgeois sub-humans, who don't have that feeling of lofty selfless dignity, are subconsciously jealous of it and try to destroy that feeling in us so stubbornly...

So how can one get used to all those abominations instead of fighting them tooth and nail? How can one tolerate them? It still remains a mystery to me. I've tried to convince myself to do this. I've huffed and

puffed trying 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 those 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: Perestroika and post-Perestroika turncoats, former Comsomol 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 lived up to the hopes the Western 'civilizers', who appointed them as oligarchs in the 1990s and decoyed them with their first pair of jeans and bubble gum in the 1970s. But they'll end up the same way as in the short story by Prosper Merimee⁴⁹³, where the African chieftain Tamango sold not only half his tribe but also his own wife, and eventually he himself was captured and sold... These obese comprador compatriots of mine think, of course, that they are much cleverer than 'some Negroes', but still they will all end up like Tamango: in a boat in the middle of the ocean, not knowing what to do...

...Once in the late 1980s I watched a film, *A Man from the Capuchin Boulevard*, by Alla Surikova, where a man of genius, the Soviet actor Andrei Mironov starred in his last role. I was sure what it depicted was just a grotesque caricature: it's impossible that under the influence of some stupid films, shown by the rival of the kind and generous character of Mironov, the whole population of a small town abruptly got stupid and wild in a matter of hours: by imitating what they saw on the screen.

⁴⁹³ Prosper Mérimée (1803 - 1870) was a [French](#) dramatist, [historian](#), [archaeologist](#), and short story writer

Unfortunately this grotesque scene came so close to our reality that sometimes my hair stood on end. How could such empty, cruel, indifferent children have possibly come into the world, having mostly normal humane parents? How was it possible to shuffle off such a speedy conversion of the advanced humans back into primates so easily within 10-15 years?

Our society today is 'levelling' down. In the past we were supposed to develop, aspired for highness, and even those who had some difficulties with that were pulled up by their head and ears, not without considerable results (even though not always to the pleasure of those who were made to develop). Remember some characters in *The Big Break* movie or Fedya the Boor from the *Y-Operation* film⁴⁹⁴. '*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 have been forced to lower our intellectual, moral and spiritual levels. Now we are pushed down by the head and ears into degradation. Myriad of pipsqueaks, who mostly occupy 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, if imaginary life. Lida tries nothing but survive. She has no time to think about anything else. And she would be terrified if she had time to do it...

So people get used to things that must not be reconciled with or tolerated. And we and our kids are being transformed into half-slaves, who are ready to make coitus in public for a bowl of soup. And to be even proud of what they've done...

⁴⁹⁴ 'Operation Y and other Shurik's Adventures' is a 1965 [Soviet comedy film](#), starring [Aleksandr Demyanenko](#), in which lyricism and moral are combined with some elements of slapstick. The film consists of three independent parts: 'Workmate', 'Déjà vu' and 'Operation Y.' The plot follows the adventures of Shurik, a naive and [nerdy](#) Soviet [student](#), who often gets into ludicrous situations, but always finds a way out very neatly.

Memories, memories...

...- And now, guys, who could tell me what made Egyptians sell items of historic value found in pharaoh's tombs to foreigners so easily? Do you know? - asked Professor Mikhail Yevseevitch, looking at us cunningly.

- 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 came to tombs of somebody's ancestors who had been strangers, there was a different sort of attitude towards them... By the way, does anybody know, which group of the inhabitants of modern Egypt are descendants of the ancient Egyptians?

I knew that for sure! The only one in whole group, 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, of all the class, had known about the Copts, but because no one had thought then that in a few years some of us would overshadow Arab Egyptians in such a trade. But while Arabs permitted to pillage things from the graves of 'somebody else's ancestors,' we permitted 'gravediggers' to steal from our own ancestors...

...- How many train carriages did one have to strip for this! -Mum and I exclaimed, while unpacking a parcel from a company in the United States that specialized in reselling things from the USSR. We saw a huge metal National Emblem of the USSR torn out of Soviet passenger train sheeting. Pillagers had even broken a little piece of the Emblem in their passionate desire to get some cash quickly. I can imagine them using foul language when they learnt that they would get less money for damaged wares, which were sold to Westerners for a mere \$70, while *suppliers* got even less!

Somehow noone has asked the question what has happened to all those metal Emblems from train carriages, to all the Young Pioneer's flags from our schools, to all the Lenin busts from offices etc. Among all the other national wealth of the USSR.

Meanwhile, there is a never-stopping gripe of Russia having become a 'pauper country', where 'nothing has been left to sell except for oil'...

Do they reason all those things are just former people's national wealth, 'leftovers' of communism and noone's property? Or, more likely, the victorious enemy's trophies? Rent by nostalgia, I asked Mum where all

those slogans, some of them hand-made, and flags in their factory which we used to go with to First of May and November parades were? How was it possible that nothing was left? Or had they been destroyed in indignation at the 'crimes of communism?'

Not even close: all of them had been 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 had been taken apart. After which the new owners closed down the factory and rented manufacturing facilities to trading warehouses. Those gauleiters are so much like Skuperfield⁴⁹⁵ in N. Nosov's *Dunno on the Moon*, who fouls one room after the other and never cleans after himself. But what would happen when all rooms are fouled up? 'Then we shall see!'

...Western Internet auctions are packed with Soviet watches, lamps, military outfits, valenki, cameras, night-vision devices... Are all these things are also just leftovers of communism, 'everybody's property' that has cost nothing, and trophies? 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 advertise them loudly 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, with American thugs selling on E-Bay 'Saddam Hussein's stuff' and treasures of Baghdad's museums. The only difference is that in Russia the job of 'grave-digging' was farmed out to locals, those of them who made no bones about selling off the Soviet heritage, trading in things created by their own grandmothers and grandfathers, by their parents. Selling their ancestors' dreams and ideals by weight and takeaway.

Ilf and Petrov⁴⁹⁶'s little 'blue' thief Alchen blushed when he was stealing, but post-Perestroika thieves were quite proud of themselves and their 'entrepreneurship.' They stole things and sold them abroad without compunction. Here are some of them, praising his wares. '*The portrait of*

⁴⁹⁵ Skuperfield (skupoi means scrooge in Russian) was a rich factory owner who had to make his own living after there was a Revolution on the Moon

⁴⁹⁶ Ilf & Petrov's novel *12 chairs* (1927)

a heroic Soviet woman! It's socialist realism! A rare specimen! Remarkable quality!' -touts he customers to Internet auctions. But if one saves a picture on one's computer's desktop it will turn out that the petty tradesman, advertising the heroic Soviet woman in word, has named this file in a derogatory way. 'Stalin_s_tetkoy.jpg' ('Stalin with a peasant broad') he rudely called his article of trade (apparently sure that his customers do not know Russian and would hang that portrait somewhere on the door of the ladies' room in their pub...).

Each thief sold whatever he could: some dealt in stolen paintings from schools, some in desperate women who didn't know how to feed their children. Some made profits from Soviet orders and medals, buying them up from starving old veterans who rooted in rubbish dumps...

Others sold themselves. For example, the Olympic champion Olga Korbut took part in a fight with another woman for \$70,000. Another blissful 'blue' thief of all times, M.S. Gorbachev, sold at an auction a live dinner with himself (for a mere 7,000 pounds sterling!). I saw an article about it on the Internet in 1998.

...'This is a unique thing made by man's hand! Men will never be able to make anything like this again!' - extol the pillagers their articles, created by their grandfathers and fathers, grandmothers and mothers. They say it, apparently, because they haven't created a thing in their life. They are only able to sell things made by others.

Don't be so sure! There will be even more perfect human-made creations in a coming society.

But only after the sanitization of these parasites and rodents, which is absolutely necessary for our country.

...I remember a little boy to whom I spoke on a train in Soviet times.

- What nationality is your father?
- He is Uzbek!
- And your mother?
- She is Ukrainian!
- And 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 'New Russians (not Soviets!) have come' when for the first time I saw a huge Russian bad word of three letters painted on the wall of one of Dublin's newly-erected building. But those were absolutely different Russians...

...From the beginning he refused to talk to me, claiming that I was a 'KGB agent.'

- Where do you say you are 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 at once contact the relevant authorities.'

I watched without any emotion. I didn't even want to try to persuade him that I had left the USSR many years before. That the cause of my leaving wasn't political, 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 on purpose. He stayed in Dublin, looked at the 'cheerful chaos' around him and wished for 'civilization.' He got on a bus and after three hours arrived in 'civilized Great Britain', where he handed himself over to the British police (similarly to Ivan Vasilyevitch Bunsha from the film *Ivan Vasilievich Changes Profession*, save that the latter surrendered to the Soviet militia: 'I happily hand myself over to our dear militia, hoping for the best...').

Kostya was from the Urals. 'An ordinary, ordinary story'⁴⁹⁷, as the Soviet song goes. It was an ordinary story for the majority of refugees from our former Soviet Union who ended up here. Most tried hard to convince Irish and British officials that they had left for political reasons.

⁴⁹⁷ An Ordinary Story, sang by Sophia Rotaru

As a matter of fact, in 98 per cent of cases there was not even a hint of political reasons for their flight. Many of those people were of the so-called 'middle class'; in Russia they were called 'entrepreneurs.' They didn't flee because of the policy of our authorities, but rather from the 'showdown' with their ilk in the wild capitalism environment...

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. After all, I am just an interpreter. Well, I have seen a lot, for example, speculators running from 'the revenge of Chechens' (probably it was the revenge of gangsters of that particular ethnic group, but again, with no connection to politics whatsoever!). I have seen elderly women from Russia's out-of-the-way places who had been 'hired by some Azerbaijanis in the market to fetch them some young girls, because girls trust old women', and so that old woman came to Ireland and staged a scene weeping, complaining that those Azerbaijanis had taken advantage of her weakness, too, and raped her, and motivating it by their ethnic hatred for Russians...

By the way, as soon as she left the room, the old woman calmed down surprisingly fast and informed me cheerfully that she was going 'to marry an Irishman' because she simply 'couldn't be alone.' And looking at her I had no doubt that she would! Even though she didn't speak English and was no longer young and attractive...

I have seen people who thought that it a sufficient reason to get political asylum for having been enlisted in the army 15 years before when they were studying at the university. Or people who claimed that they were not allowed to work as cooks at a rural canteen because of their Jewish origin and had to work as janitors instead... Somehow all of that did not fall into the pattern implied in the word 'refugee' by the Geneva Convention.

The common thing among all those people is that they can do things that I am not able to do. They fabricate or distort things to cast slurs upon their own country in front of the officials of another country, which deals with its own 'dissidents' in a not less harsh manner than in the USSR or Russia.

Even if I was not satisfied with some things in my country, it remained my country. And my problems with it were always only mine and never a matter of foreign officials' concern.

How many people behave as if our country weren't theirs at all... I cannot do it!

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 had arrived in Britain through another country, he was to have asked for asylum in the country of transit, and if he hadn't done it, then he could be deported back to the country from which he had arrived. In his special case - back to 'uncivilized Dublin'...

It appeared Kostya had been 'forced out' by the militia, which had become very corrupt in Yeltsin time. Not the sort of guys to mess about. As he claimed, it was because of his mother's Caucasian origin (his mother lived in a different town and he himself changed his surname to his father's and hadn't socialized with his parents for many years). But as follows from his story (since he had dealt in the most dangerous 'business' in post-Perestroika Russia - 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 a six-month 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 a coveted refugee status. And he certainly would be declined by a court of first instance. So he would have to appeal on grounds of his infirmity, for example, because he had got a stomach ulcer. Or that he had had an operation on his knee-cap and if he would be deported back to Russia, he would suffer great physical pain since the world's 'worst physicians' practiced there...

If Kostya were a woman he could have got pregnant and given birth to a child. If your child was born on 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?⁴⁹⁸ (That old lady who had been delivering sexual slaves remained in Ireland because she had a little Irish grandson...).

...Dublin. Bus station. Late evening. I was waiting for my friend who was going to give me a lift. I lingered at the bus stop 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 was Moldavian. She was in her fifth month of pregnancy and just got off the bus with her brother who didn't speak English either. They made the way reverse of Kostya's: from London via Scotland and Northern Ireland to 'uncivilized Dublin' where they were going to ask for asylum.

It was Saturday night so all offices were closed till Monday. And they didn't have a single acquaintance there, moreover, they only had 30 Deutschmarks with them. However, they didn't complain or ask for help. Aurika only asked if she could see a doctor. When they had arrived in Dover in a lorry, a border guard noticed them, so they had to run. And when she was climbing over a fence she cut her leg. The wound was deep and had to be stitched. As it had been three days without any antibiotics, it started to fester... She had sprinkled it with salt - it was the only 'medicine' she had.

The day before they had 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 unbearably hard,- she sighed quietly. I looked at her with compassion, picturing to myself the life conditions under which nothing was left for an expectant woman and a mother of two to

⁴⁹⁸ Nowadays the laws have been changed, and it is well possible to deport them

leave her kids at home and do what she had done. She hoped to give birth there and then, God knows when, collect her two other daughters...

I was happy to help her find a lodging to settle for the night. And 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 don't feel too good about the sudden influx of refugees, don't see the connection between the activity of that 'remarkable' politician and the above-mentioned trend. But there is a direct connection.

As a human, I feel sorry for Aurika. But, honestly, I don't feel for the likes of Kostya, who had believed it right back at home to benefit from other people's dire straits, buying up their property and pushing them into abject 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, I had lived in the West so many years and knew a lot about living there. I saw which way the wind blew and informed him that I was 'married.'

The ugliest thing about our compatriots abroad is that most 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 in one's married life, it's unnatural. Then apparently something's wrong!'

I felt too lazy to argue with him. The weather outside was lovely and I didn't want to be rude to a person I hardly knew.

He started telling me about himself with inspiration. He used elegant, but completely meaningless words, like a 'half-baked magician'⁴⁹⁹, which reminded me of a famous Khlestakov's⁵⁰⁰ monologue: 'Well, everything is somehow like this... like this anyhow...' He was speaking about what a person should do to be happy, and of gangsters he

⁴⁹⁹ Title of a popular song performed by Alla Pugacheva

⁵⁰⁰ Khlestakov - main character of N. Gogol's satirical play *The Government Inspector* (1836). The play is a [comedy of errors](#), satirizing human greed, stupidity, and [corruption](#) in [the Russian Empire](#). Khlestakov personifies irresponsibility, light-mindedness, absence of measure.

had to mix with during his career. It seemed that he was almost proud of it.

I listened to him for about ten minutes and I was really surprised at him being such an empty two-legged creature. What was he wasting his life on? 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 were or had been 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 such people just swarmed in post-Soviet Russia.

People who replicated such Kostyas ruled the roost in the government, forcing on people the most crude, vulgar, profane views and tastes. They were trying to make us watch a Russian variant of 'Big Brother' where someone has sex with another person 'live.' And they call it 'culture!' The Soviet people's lofty spirit and reach of thought were a curse to them; they sought to uproot them and instead foster limited imagination, for which nothing more than food, drink and sex existed.

They bred not just mediocrity, but militant mediocrity. If such Kostyas knew they were narrow-minded and at least aspired for some self-development! But no, they believed that all others had to degrade themselves to their level!

Kostya's ignorance was awful! Even unbelievable, because I started to doubt that he had studied in a Soviet school, although he was two years older than I 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 story from my own experience: how in Holland I was fed up with daily visits of a social worker, who was a native of Bolivia, but felt uneasy about telling her not to come. Once 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 Mum. ‘Then just interpret word for word what I say and you’ll see what happens!’

- So you are from Bolivia? - asked Mum.

- Yes, I am.

- So was it you, Bolivians, who killed Che Guevara? - Mum taunted.

Conchita vanished after five minutes and never returned.

Guess what Kostya’s reaction to my story was?

It wasn’t even the fact that he didn’t understand what I meant...

- Who is *she*, this Che Guevara? - he asked with such a touching frankness that I was moved to tears.

Well, how can I explain it to you, Cheburashka⁵⁰¹...

Kostya liked it that the police in Northern Ireland were armed and patrolled the streets with guns at the ready. ‘They can protect me better if armed!’ He did not envision the possibility that the police themselves were capable of ransack and racket.

Kostya liked the fact that ‘it’s civilization here’, not quite realizing the manipulative character of that label (he had read in the obeisant Russian liberal press, that England was a ‘civilized country’ (which is clearly the projection of English self-esteem!). Nor did he realise that he wasn’t even in England. Dublin being ‘savage’, now Kostya was placed in Dunmurry, on the southern outskirts of Belfast. He hadn’t seen anything there yet, but the tense life of the local people didn’t concern him at all.

- What are you going to do if it would soon be the same here as in Dublin? - I asked him.

He was taken aback by the question.

- No, it is impossible!’ - was all he could reply. But I could read in his face that he was scared at the prospect...

Our country has lost nothing from Kostya’s emigration. Quite the contrary, the less of such Kostyas remain there, the better. But do Ireland and other countries gain by having them?

...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 that day I would interpret for a ‘Russian

⁵⁰¹ Cheburashka is a character of children’s literature, from a 1966 story by E. Uspensky. Cheburashka is a funny little creature, unknown to science, who comes from a tropical forest.

Gypsy.’ On the streets of Belfast there was no one else who looked even close like him. He has just arrived here and was going to ask for political asylum. He stood a good chance, being a Gypsy and not immune from prejudiced ethnic attitudes by some in post-Soviet capitalist Russia.

Any Gypsy from any country in West Europe, including Great Britain, can complain of discrimination; they are totally segregated there. Unlike in those countries, in the USSR and even earlier in the Russian Empire Gypsies have been considered our own and even loved (enough to consider the popularity of Nikolai Slichenko and his theatre *Romen*⁵⁰² or a male character Yashka in the film *The Elusive Avengers!*).

It is 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 a bazaar where they follow you and ask invariable questions like ‘Girl, can I ask you? (for money)’ or ‘Gild my hand, dear friend.’

There were some exceptions in Soviet times. Some Gypsies from settled families studied in our school and 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 to a Gypsy ‘about life’ on a suburban electric train to or from Moscow. But it was a rare case, in fact, they were rather secluded within their own circle.

That’s why I was interested in socializing with Arnold. While he was waiting for his solicitor he told me many interesting things about Gypsy customs and traditions. He intimated to me where I was from and what his local Gypsies were like - according to him, ‘so desperate that they cut outsoles off people’s boots in walking.’

Unlike English Gypsies, who are forced to live separately from the rest of the population, our Gypsies occupied a considerable region around a provincial centre in the years of ‘democracy’, ‘ethnically cleansed’ by themselves!⁵⁰³ By the way, not a single Russian complained about that...

⁵⁰² Nikolai Alekseyevich Slichenko (b.1934) is the head of the [Moscow Romen Music and Drama Gypsy Theatre](#).

⁵⁰³ Unfortunately, in the post-Perestroika period, many clans were into drug trafficking, devastating whole rural regions of Russia and building settlements of rich mansions there. They ultimately suffered themselves, as many of them and their children got addicted and died.

Arnold 'tested the ground' in the conversation with his solicitor: what would happen if he asked for political asylum, what kind of rights he would have, what he would be allowed and not allowed to do, what chances he had... Learning that after he asked for political asylum they would take his fingerprints, all the information about him would be registered in the National Computerized Card Index, and he might even be put in prison (since in Northern Ireland emigrants who ask for asylum are sometimes put into prison *preventively!*), he began 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 determine that? Simply because in good towns when people go out at the weekend, 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 thrift!...

Arnold didn't show up for the third meeting with his solicitor, who was finally going to get him to apply for a political refugee status. Not long before that he had confided to me that his sister was already living somewhere in England. He didn't want the authorities to know that. Most probably, he had asked his sister's advice, and she had told him to move to her place before the authorities took his fingerprints and possibly threw 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 met in Ireland, both south and north, and in other countries during all those years... A businessman from Chernigov trying to prove that his life was in danger by showing a small article from his local newspaper which said that his car had been blown up (what's *that* got to do with politics? -ask any Russian or Ukrainian familiar with this sort of people in the post-Perestroika reality). A family of long-haul truck drivers

from Chelyabinsk hiding from the 'revenge of the Chechens because the father of the family was fighting in Chechnya during the war' (is that the real reason for their revenge? Or was 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 had many relatives living in Germany and had already been deported from Denmark for some reason. A family of Uigurs from Kazakhstan with two adorable children, hiding abroad because of the unpaid debts of their father to their local mafia, who 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' Kostya, who doesn't know who Che Guevara is

Kostya realized very quickly that it is a lot harder to get a refugee status than to get married there. Most probably, he had gathered the required sum of money to pay one of the local women and now cheerfully pollutes Belfast streets with his useless presence, there being enough local hoods around as it is. He was hired as a security guard by a shop and had already spent six weeks on sick leave with a broken little finger; like most of that sort of people, Kostya wasn't a particularly hard-working individual...

But most of all I remember Vitaly from Ivano-Frankovsk. I had met him back in Holland, many years before. He could have easily become a science fiction writer or a script-maker for thriller movies. One way or another, Vitaly had convinced a Dutch acquaintance of his to send an invitation to Holland for him and his friend Andrei. Once they arrived in the Land of Tulips, they hid their passports underground in a secret place, gave themselves up to the authorities declaring that they were both ... Jews from Tajikistan (by the way, none of them had ever even been there!). They even claimed that 'cut-off pigs' heads had been laid at their doors, and so on. Andrei had such Slavic looks that they didn't believe he was a Jew, so he had to improvise that his mum was Estonian...

Until recently 'playing the Jewish card' was the most effective way for Eastern Europeans to stay in Holland. Because the Dutch appear to feel

guilt for betraying their own Jews to the Nazis during the war. Those 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 got homesick and exacerbated by the uncertainty...

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!). Back in Holland, he dug in his passport again and came back to the camp, where he got out of his tricky situation by claiming that during those 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 but to come back to the refugee camp. And they believed him!

When you listen to all these stories of 'political' refugees, you begin to ask yourself: what if the refugees from other countries are just as 'political' as ours? And what the hell is Amnesty International doing with all these fake claims?

Obviously, this state of things is nothing new: just have a look at those who were in reality the Soviet 'heroes' of 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 the anti-Soviet propaganda portrays to Western public opinion as innocent people convicted in the USSR because of their ideas and beliefs.

Black market trader Levinson. 27/28th of May 1975, a people's court convicted S. Levinson to imprisonment for black market dealings. It was proved that between May 1974 and February 1975 Levinson had bought in Odessa Platan shop 15 rolls of crimplene⁵⁰⁴, 6 rolls of knitwear, Japanese head scarves, and re-sold them at a speculative price. Levinson

⁵⁰⁴ Soviet name for polyester- material that was very much in fashion in the 1970s

did not have material needs, he worked and received wages, and his wife had a large amount of money on her savings account. Besides, Levinson received money orders from various countries....

Spouses Anna and Yuri Berkovsky from Novosibirsk received a one-year suspended sentence. They are on probation. But abroad their names are on the list of 'prisoners of conscience' and 'dissidents.' Anna Berkovskaya, 44 years old, a teacher, was a black market dealer. She had been recognized by witnesses and hadn't denied the indictment. 'We didn't have any financial difficulties,' -Berkovskaya said. - 'We just wanted to have some more money.' During a search of Berkovsky's flat a Walter pistol # 773211 was found, with bullets for it. The pistol belonged to Yuri Berkovsky who had 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 silks destined for sale never came to open sale in the shop: they were sold clandestinely, at increased prices. All in all 220,000 meters of silk was sold in that way, at 1.5 million roubles (in 1975 prices!). During that time Leviev received 77,500 roubles in bribes. Leviev bought and re-sold gold, was involved in smuggling and illegal foreign currency operations (...) During the search incidental to his arrest approximately 40 kilos of gold in coins and nuggets were confiscated, along with other valuables worth 2 million roubles...

Conman Koltunov. In June 1974 a people's court of Pervomaisky district of Chernovtsy deliberated the case of Albert Koltunov, 53 years old, who had already been imprisoned previously for similar crimes. While working as head of the local Sportlotto lottery office, Koltunov refused to pay prizes to several citizens, claiming that they had filled in their ticket incorrectly and, to get their prizes, would have to bribe some officials. Some easily conned guys complied with his demands and gave him 100-200 roubles 'for necessary expenses.' Koltunov took that money for himself. By doing so he compromised the work of a State institution, caused damage to the State and to private individuals... This conman is also portrayed in the West as a 'dissident' who 'has suffered for 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 at liberty: he has served his sentences for several previous offences. Previously he had been caught stealing building materials from the Repairs and Building Centre where he had worked. That time the heads decided not to bring the case to court and just fired him. Pinhasov got a job as a carpenter at Dagkonservy Company and continued to steal. This time he received 12 months of community service without imprisonment: he continued to work in the same place, but 15% of his wages for 12 months was collected by the State. When his punishment was served, Pinhasov moved to work... at the carpenter shop of the City Integrated Combine of Services. Working there, he began to steal and resell finished products of that company. Besides, he short-changed his clients and the State: while charging his clients certain sums of money, he indicated smaller sums in the receipts and put the difference into his pocket...⁵⁰⁵

So, what really changed during all these years? Well, a couple of things did change...

It's probably funny today to read about the black market dealer Levinson, who is the epitome of modesty by the modern standards of large-scale speculations in business. But the former head of the department store, Leviev, is a big fish even by them. He would have been a real 'respected businessman.' The kind from whom the 'oligarchs' are moulded.

The problem of today's Levinsons, Pinhasovs and Koltunovs is that, while in Soviet times the West would gladly grant them a political asylum-seeker status, because the West needed them as a proof of 'human rights violations' and 'lack of freedom' in the USSR, now that the USSR is no more, the West no longer needs them (with a reservation, though, that it does feed some, most ready to cast aspersions on modern Russia).

It is becoming more and more difficult for them to remain in the West: no matter how 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 in Russia for a Jew (a Baptist, a Chechen, an Armenian, a businessman) is!' But nobody jumps at them with fiery eyes to grab those proofs with both hands, as they did 30 years ago.

⁵⁰⁵ White Book: testimonies, facts, documents. Moscow, 1979

People of the scale of Leviev is quite a different matter. These are loved and respected in the West. The status of a political refugee will be given them on a golden platter. As long as they bring with them their stolen millions. Fortunately, thanks to the enforced Western-style 'democracy' it is permitted and even welcome to rob entire nations, while to confiscate the stolen stuff from modern Levievs... God forbid! That would really be dire 'human rights violation'...

...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?

When, in my euphoria, I came back to Holland from Curacao in September 1992.

I tried to block out the thoughts of what was happening at home at the time. In point of fact, my hidden feeling of guilt for my departure was too great, and it began to surge up inside me. That feeling wasn't caused by the fact that in reality Holland had proved to be different from what I had imagined: I was certain that in another couple of years, we would move to Curacao forever and my imagination already pictured our lives there, how I would help people like Jean...

Yet the worm of guilt kept gnawing at my heart, because I felt that if I hadn't left the USSR that cold November evening, there wouldn't have been such disastrous happenings back at home. That all the things that were taking place there wouldn't have happened. I consoled myself that one man, no man. How could a few have turned the tide of mass insanity? That insanity '*en mass*' had swept the country so suddenly, that it had got rational-thinking people deluded for a while: can people really make such an enormously gross mistake? Especially the Soviet people: the new historical unity of human beings, the most well-read and most politically conscious people on Earth?!

Yet, there was no more Soviet Union. And who knew what was going to happen there?

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 then on everything was going to be just fine. Another 500 days, and... Yeltsin promised that if he failed, he would lie down on the rails. One doesn't say things like that for nothing, does one?

The period between September and late December of that year - when it was already not just a wind, but a real hurricane of change at home - 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 the 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, hopefully, my remaining two or three years in Holland would pass as quickly as possible... How lucky I was that my husband wasn't Dutch! I'd probably have done away with myself, if I had been doomed 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, had lost all their life savings in the Yeltsin-Gaidar 'experiments.'

Factories came to be shut down, salaries were unpaid for months, people tried to survive by travelling to Turkey and Poland, buying cheap clothes there in bulk and re-selling them back at home: that new 'freedom of movement' was only undermining our own economy even more. We never had any traders in our family, and even then, in dire straits, none of my relatives considered joining those 'shuttles' even for a second. 'To stand on the market' (selling something) in my family had almost the same meaning as to be a streetwalker⁵⁰⁶. 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' didn't need economist-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:

⁵⁰⁶ Prostitute

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, as long as it is useful for society. We are not obliged at all to become programmers or sellers of Herbalife. '*Any work is necessary, any mother is important*'⁵⁰⁷ - 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 to me about were something quite abstract. For example, vouchers. In the beginning Mum was even glad that she would own shares of her factory (she even got some for me). 'Our factory is good, it's one of the leading factories of its kind: maybe they'll even pay us some dividends...'

Our naivety was of the kind of a pre-school child's who had got into the claws of an experienced paedophile and sincerely believed that the man would give him a sweet. As if we all hadn't studied Marxist political economy, as if we hadn't read books on the capitalist world: we could have at least recalled the conmen Miga and Zhulio selling shares in the children's book *Dunno on the Moon!* It was very remarkable that one of the first measures of the 'fathers of Russian democracy' was the abolishment of the People's Control!

Hastily and broadly they propagated among the people the idea that to live without working was not only possible ('*your money should work for you*'), but even the ideal of life. Day and night, non-stop, they declared it from TV screens: apparently, the propaganda took into consideration the fact that one of our favourite fairy-tale heroes was Yemelya the Lazybones from *The Pike's Will Be Done*. There emerged tens of thousands of such Yemelyas across the country dreaming of that sweet life in the style of 'just lie on your stove and eat white kalatch'⁵⁰⁸ bread.' Note, by the way, that nobody even mentioned the word 'capitalism' then! The 'reformers' were still afraid to call things by their real names.

⁵⁰⁷ Sergei Mikhalkov's *And What Do You Have?*

⁵⁰⁸ Russian traditional sort of bread

It seemed to many people that things were really being done justly: because each citizen got one voucher. That was equality. Sharikovs, to whom the Soviet power gave the chance to become human beings⁵⁰⁹, finally made it into the power echelons. And we still thought that they were human beings. Sharikovs' 'take it all and divide it' was realized in that voucher plan. Even though it had all been planned by a different kind of mind: by those who had been dreaming back in their childhood of burning their Soviet school, and, still beyond them, by foreign 'well-wishers.' And they trusted it 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 Roskomimushchestvo⁵¹⁰ Chubais, who carried out the privatization, each voucher was worth two Volga cars. But, as often happens, people didn't pay attention to the note in 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 that piece of paper, that to them became less useful than a toilet roll, at a price of a bottle of vodka...

I know a family who survived all that time on their granny's pension: mother, father, two children and granny herself. Despite the fact that both husband and wife worked. Their daily ration consisted of tea and bread. Even potatoes were served on special occasions. And later even 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, ladies and gentlemen, dear compatriots! You are free now, don't you see?...

⁵⁰⁹ Sharikov is a character from Bulgakov's novel *Dog's Heart*: a man made out of a dog

⁵¹⁰ Committee dealing with privatization in the post-Soviet period

For the first time in her life Tamarochka 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 have already set aside some money for my funeral. I just eat a bit of porridge and drink some tea, and that's it. It's more than plenty for me.

All of that added up to a real nightmare.

Imagine what I was supposed to feel, knowing all that, when another buoyant Dutch know-it-all well-wisher clapped me on the shoulder, congratulating me on the 'liberation from the horrors of communism' and approving, as all the West did, the execution of the legitimate parliament of our country by barefaced Yeltsin? CNN made live coverage of that shooting, almost choking with delight. Here's all that so-called 'democracy' for you!

But the realization of 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 the time, managed to get into their ranks.

I can say one thing: it was at this stage that my disgust for the cheerful coffee drinking dummies surrounding me in Europe became almost impossible to contain...

-I cannot say there's anything I really lack,

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 in different colours for me, - cheerfully croons the stupid Dutch singer, Rene Froger. -

- I cannot say there's anything I really lack.

I have no idea what pangs of love is,

Today I've bought myself a third video recorder,

Now I will not miss a single TV program!⁵¹¹

⁵¹¹ Dutch song Alles kan een man gelukkig maken (Anything can make a man happy)

Well, what can real people talk about with such creatures? They do not even know what love is. They seriously measure it by orgasms stimulated with the help of drugs.

My anger was exacerbated by the fact that Sonny did not let me tell them directly what I thought of them: that was not acceptable in a 'civilized democratic' 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?

So these are the people Sakharov looked up to as at some sort of semi-gods?

'In this regard, I believe in the Western man, in his mind, in his aiming for the great objectives, in his good intentions and in his determination' ⁵¹²

I do not want to be part of such a 'civilized' society, with apparent signs of mental retardation. I will not be part of those who presumptuously call their own small clique 'the world community.' I am disgusted with small intestinal joys of Rene, the implementation of which requires more and more blood from the 'non-white' world every year.

The more I got fed up with those 'aiming for the great objectives' (not to miss another sale, for sure!), the more I wanted to get away with Sonny to Curacao, where people at least knew the true value of life.

But the more I voiced my dreams to him, the gloomier he got, 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 utter, totally dumbfounded . - And what don't you like about your home? After all, you are sure to find work there...

-You do not understand what kind of life it is, when you have your relatives round your ears all the time, and they all want you to do something for them! - he blurted. - I do not want be bound by anyone or anything. I want to be free.

I tried to imagine what was so terribly wrong, 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 I would later hear several times a day:

-You came here yourself, nobody asked you to! You came here yourself, so endure it here.

This was the beginning of the end.

That autumn, for the first time ever, I was swept by deep dark depression. I used to think that depression was just a fancy synonym for the Russian concept of chondria (spleen). That people simply let it overcome them, out of weak character. And that was why I absolutely did not know what to do with the 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 on the train, missing the point of my destination, 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 make?...

None of my Dutch fellow students knew about my state of mind: I had already been given to understand that it was not acceptable there to share your problems with others. And that's why it became a hundred times harder.

All my conversations with Sonny started and ended in 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 the idea since reading the second volume of War and Peace, where Tolstoy described the death of the Little Princess in childbirth, finally surrendered. In the end, at least, I would have somebody to talk to!

But is that enough reason for motherhood?...

There was nobody whose advice I could ask on that question. And in November, it came finally that far. I got pregnant...

I can say straight away that it didn't make me feel any better. Even though Sonny was very caring, attentive and apparently proud of his forthcoming role.

They often speak about post-natal depression, but I have never read anything of pre-natal one. And that was exactly what I had, it was evident to me. All the nine months of my pregnancy my mood was gloomy in the extreme. I pondered on 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 went to a Dutch school, where instead of proper fundamental academic knowledge he or she would be taught almost from the first class to put condoms on cucumbers. Help! I do not want my child to grow up into a cynical *kaaskop*⁵¹³! Not believing in good in people, in human dignity, in interest-free friendship, in the fact that another world is possible!

During the pregnancy, I again saw the Dutch '*normen en waarden*'⁵¹⁴ 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 ninth 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*⁵¹⁵ who were not civilized enough yet. I had long felt sorry for Dutch women: they seemed so much more agreeable and intelligent than their men - but after that 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 the due day I was sitting in a park in Rotterdam at the Antilles counter during the Multicultural Festival called Dunya . Tall as

⁵¹³ Cheese head (Dutch)

⁵¹⁴ Norms and values (Dutch)

⁵¹⁵ Immigrants (Dutch)

a mile of Kolomna⁵¹⁶, Hans Dijkstal⁵¹⁷ walked past me (I think he was Minister of Internal Affairs then). Later, when I was asked by a journalist to give her an interview about my experiences in Holland, I almost barked out a refusal at her - 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 monthly paid your health insurance, you could not even give birth in 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 that practice is that the poor should not have any children. I noticed that the Dutch tend to cling to Malthusianism and social Darwinism, the concepts most broadly inculcated in them. Just scan through readers' letters in De Telegraaf newspaper 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 - they are trying to mystify in order to conceal the harsh reality. Ask them: if that is so, then why do you not do it somewhere in the woods?

No, it is always about finances. I could hardly even imagine that such Stone Age mentality and societal practices existed: what if something happened, and there was no doctor? And what about sterile cleanliness? And what about harassing your neighbours with your screams for hours on end, is that 'natural' too? In my opinion, it is just utter selfishness. But to think about other people, to take their interests into account - that sort of thing has never been taught in a capitalist society. Holland is no exception. If you meet someone who still cares about others, rest assured he is either a communist, a survivor of WWII, or a rare gem of a human being there.

...I was 'lucky': I had developed complications with my pregnancy. 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 had been hoping for a boy. I had to comfort him. The first day I felt lightness, I wanted to get up and

⁵¹⁶ Russian expression for very tall and skinny people

⁵¹⁷ Hans Dijkstal (1943-2010) - Dutch politician, from the liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy

run: I even went to the shower myself. Lisa was all right, although the delivery had been very long. She looked like a little Chinese, and I even suspected some influence on her by the fact that shortly before her birth Sonny and I had gone 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 given birth to me, she stayed with me in the maternity ward for 10 days! But such a luxury is quite unaffordable for the Dutch society. Unlike the state subsidy of 350,000 Euros for the '*discussion of homosexuality among migrants..*'. Well, every society has its own priorities.

... Surprisingly, after Lisa's birth my depression withdrew for some time. She seemed to instill a new hope in me. Maybe I just didn't have time for the 'blues', with all my newly emerging duties? For example, I had to get used to sleeping like Stirlitz⁵¹⁸: exactly for 20 minutes, when given the opportunity, and waking up 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 her birth; there would be just one person more in the family... Having a child does change your life drastically, 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, I still did not feel like a house-mistress, the eldest woman in the family, who, from then on would be called '*mami*'⁵¹⁹. It jarred on my ears 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: '*So, was that it? Will from now on my whole life be just this?*' It made me feel old.

The matter was also that my family back home: my grandmother, mother, Shurek, Tamarochka and even my deceased grandfather -

⁵¹⁸ Stirlitz - a legendary hero of the book (and film) *17 Moments of Spring* by Yu. Semenov: a Soviet intelligence agent in the Nazi Germany during the war

⁵¹⁹ Mother (Papiamento)

continued to be my real family, as was common with us. A 'nuclear' family-cell: wife, husband and child, as is customary in the West (where a husband and children are your family, but not your other blood relatives), was deeply alien to me. Such a model greatly limits your communication with your own older generation, if does not cuts it off altogether. 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 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 not only handy for their children, but good for the grandchildren in the first place!). I cannot imagine my grandmother, my favourite Bunny, to suddenly say to me:

-I want to live for myself! - and take off to some resort with the next door granny Niusya.

While that seemed strange to us, to say the least, it would be even more unacceptable to send your elderly parents to a nursing home. To us it 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 for 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 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 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?

...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 then on I already knew all the mysteries of life. Only one mystery remained unknown: my own death... For some reason it never occurred to me that there were still many mysteries of life in store for me: for example, becoming a grandmother. Or a sense of victory over the enemy...

So, three days after her birth, owing to certain processes in my body, which, of course, were completely new to 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 used to play loud music at night, not a Moroccan or Antillean, but a very ordinary Dutchman! - threw a party at home... I don't know what they were doing, but it sounded as if they kept kicking someone down the stairs every five minutes or so! That 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 to.*

Well, can you live in such a country? Where any hoodlum has his rights, and normal, ordinary people, who don't annoy anybody, don't have any?

Being a student and a mother is not easy in any country. In Holland you must sign your children up for a place in a nursery almost before they are born -no joking, there are long, long queues. As for the cost, it's better not even to speak of it. 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, a little more than an hour by train from our house. 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 took to travelling since childhood: all her early years were spent on a train! And her first flight on an airplane took place at the age of seven months... Under the circumstances, naturally, I had to quickly switch to bottle feeding.

When I learnt about 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 three months! True, one could extend it to four months - by working right up to the birth and taking the time of the pre-natal leave afterwards. Compare it with the Soviet Union, where the standard maternity leave was a year and a half, with monthly payments to the amount of about half the average salary, and if you could afford it, even up to 3 years (another 18 months without payments, but with keeping your place of work for you).

Now some rabid neo-liberal will cry out that '*the State isn't obliged to look after someone's children, and the employer - even less so.*' Darling, listen, you say that your State 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 indebted to you and to it for everything, for their living functions, even breathing, perhaps?

In a bourgeois society there is an abnormal system of values: people are forced to tighten their belts for the sake of the '*economic climate conducive to investment*' - which is a priori not designed to improve the living conditions for everyone, it only considers the several score of the bourgeoisie and elite. Our Soviet economy was there for the people, and jobs were created for them. Here we observe quite 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 mind and heart must be constantly laid...

For me, such economic development is meaningless. I cannot admire it, no matter what was invented under such a system, not even if it were a magic wand to promote the advancement of science and technology: what's the point of it, if those 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, people live in order to feed the monsters, known as '*performance*' and '*productivity*'?

If the outcome of all the turmoil, maltreatment and humiliation of people going on in modern Russia should be building a society like that which they have in the West, it is simply not worth suffering for the cause: not even for a single day!

...To the surprise of not just Señor Arturo, but of Sonny and Shantell as well, after Louisa had arrived in Holland, she announced to

Señor Arturo that she was divorcing him. After 25 years of marriage! Señor Arturo was a sorry sight. He had waited for her for a long time, sent her in Curacao small gifts bought with his benefits, dreamed so much of reuniting with his family... And not once during all that time had Louisa said a word to him about her plans. It turned out that during his departure and absence forced by economic conditions she had found herself a younger lover: he had been 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, with a face *unburdened by intellect*. He possessed an annoying feature of constantly giggling for no reason. It seemed 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...

Naturally, I took Señor Arturo's side and worried a lot about him. I began to dislike Louisa profoundly. But Sonny told me that I did not understand how difficult it had been for his mother when he had decided to emigrate...

Sonny himself was deeply distressed over 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 It's Not Easy of a South African singer Lucky Dube:

*'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 'in vogue'
then:

*'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...'*)

That song was sung by an old classmate of Omayra's. 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 had been doing his internship in Curacao, we finally saw him: live! The owner of that magical voice was quite an ugly-looking and miniscule shabby guy... At least it explained why he had such hangups. But Sonny was a good looking, young and smart guy. I could not understand it. Could it be a mere coincidence that he liked songs on such topics?

And his most favourite song since childhood was no better - it was Bohemian Rhapsody by Queen:

*'I'm just a poor boy
Nobody loves me
He's just a poor boy
From a poor family...'*

Meanwhile Sonny went for his last year of studies; 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, and 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 it had been so. I remember a local woman on a bus pointing her finger at Sonny as if

he were an inanimate object, and asking me, still hardly able to speak Dutch:

*-Spreekt meneer Nederlands?*⁵²⁰

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, do you see for yourself now that we can't live in such a country?

Sonny sent nearly five letters every day to different companies in search of a place - just for three months! - but to no avail. What else could he do? Had he studied so well all those years, despite all the difficulties, for nothing, and now he wouldn't even get a diploma?

In desperation, I wrote about that situation to my family: it's good that we are not in the habit of hiding the truth from each other, always pretending that everything is in order. My mother answered almost immediately: she arranged for Sonny's application for an internship with our local agricultural machinery factory, where some engineers were developing wind turbines. We were both beside ourselves with happiness; me personally, among other things, because I hadn't been home for five years already...

All that time I had been terrified to go home, having heard plenty of 'horror stories' from various foreign 'voices' and having read our emigrant newspapers. What if after that I would not be allowed to leave the country? What if I would be thrown into jail for ten years?

Now I just laugh remembering such nonsense. None of my relatives who worked in 'special', secret State establishments had been 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 have been 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 I had given them enough reason to start persecuting me 'for dissent' - if you believe the criteria of 'dissent' given by most of our home-grown migrants and their Western masterminds. 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

⁵²⁰ Does this man speak Dutch? (Dutch)

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', not even gave a rap of the knuckles, but began to quietly expostulate, without looking at me personally, why I was wrong!

And the political jokes that we all told? Nobody even laid a finger on us!

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 had probably known 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 persecuted not just for their 'different way of thinking', but surely for their actually doing something directed against the State foundations.* And that is quite different from just being a 'dissident.' Try and do something against the State in any country, even the most 'free' and 'democratic' as they claim themselves to be, 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 a profound change there. What would I meet in my Motherland? Had my family and friends changed?

Our departure day fell on Paris Commune Day⁵²¹. Sonny got his visa without any problem: including one for Lisa. We had already packed our suitcases. The University had no problem with my departure; I only had to take annual leave at my McDonald's: under the old manager less than a year before, it would have been also no problem.

But recently we got a new manager, Ed. He immediately disliked me for three reasons:

1) I returned to work at the restaurant, while his wife, who had given birth at about the same time as I, humbly stayed at home in his own kitchen;

⁵²¹ 18th of March. This date was widely known in the USSR

2) not only was I over 23 years old - which meant paying me the maximum salary, but also I had to be paid extra for working there more than a year, for the experience;

3) I did not put on a pasted smile for the whole eight-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.

Until one day he could not hold it in anymore:

-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 temple⁵²². Who could see that phoney smile in the kitchen? And why did I have to say that everything was 'fantastic', if it was just normal - no more and no less?

But the propagators of American culture to the unenlightened feel they 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 they represent the Great Civilization and that they are missionaries, participants in the Crusade against the 'uncivilized world' that still has the nerve to be something different, to speak different languages, even write its own books and shoot its own movies that are aimed at a certain intellectual development.

And again it calls back to my memory our immortal movie 'Kindzadza!': 'Patsaks, what are you doing here? And why don't you wear your muzzles? Pe-Zhe has ordered all patsaks to wear muzzles and smile. Like this.'

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.

He jumped at the chance, when I asked for the 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

⁵²² A gesture meaning 'a bit crazy' in Russia.

that a year earlier, when I had gone to Curacao). But Ed was determined: at last he had an opportunity to find someone cheaper.

-Write a letter of resignation! - he sang to me in the sweetest tone of voice. -And when you come back, you can apply for a job again.

He thought I was stupid enough not to realise there would be no way back: after all, 'these allochthons, they are so dumb!' But of course I realised that perfectly well. Why take back an employee, even a good one, when you can find another, much cheaper one?

Somehow the Dutch tend to consider 'non-European' peoples dumber than themselves. I was deeply offended when Ed, in his racist hauteur, 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 examinations!), and in the philology department at that! My average grades were even higher than those of many Dutch students. That was really too much. I sent him that letter, handwritten by me, as I sarcastically added, 'in good Dutch', 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 revenge, a tempest in a teacup. It made me feel content for a while, but, of course, I couldn't possibly really change anything in that system.

Sometimes I recall 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... Mohammed once showed me a volume of Lenin in French in our back room and proudly announced that he was reading it. People like Ed do not read anything save comics...

...Around the time of our departure there occurred a very pleasant, not to say earth-shattering, event... Even though it did not begin so pleasantly.

In early February, I heard on the radio a name that had been smoldering in my heart and re-kindled a blaze in it again. Bobby Farrell! My hands began to shake, and the plate 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 had not been at home when I had inquired about him...

I was so excited that could not help being on tenterhooks the whole day. The news 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 that?...

... I had not seen my idol for many years, and I had no idea what he looked like then. 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*⁵²³ accustomed to the looks of the Chudo-Yudo monster. I felt the same way: a second later he was the old Bobby to me!

His wife - the one he was going to burn - was a dazzling beauty, very self-confident, but not impudent. 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 had known that language before she learned Dutch. And Bobby... now I could clearly hear his Antillean accent: that 'I', soft and cute in all weathers: 'daddy cool.' ...⁵²⁴

Bobby and his gorgeous wife had been reconciled and were telling the public what had happened between them, something they both believed would never happen again. I also wished to believe it. It was good to know that your hero was finally happy! The Dutch public, though, didn't believe it, they groaned and whooped, unable to understand how

⁵²³ *The Scaret Flower* is a fairy-tale written by S. Aksakov, published in 1858. Its plot somewhat resembles that of *Beauty and the Beast*.

⁵²⁴ One of the characters in *Karlsson on the Roof* used as a compliment a phrase: *Your nose is so cute... It is cute in all weathers!*

Bobby's wife was no longer afraid of him. But I was able to understand it quite well: Bobby was Bobby!

A few days later, impressed by the program, I wrote a letter to both of them - without even indicating the precise address. Lelystad was not such a big town: it would get to them anyway, I thought. I re-wrote the letter three times: I wanted to get it across to them 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 had been 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 the computer, I was watching TV, when the phone rang. But it was not the elephant on the line, like in Chukovsky's fairy tale⁵²⁵; it was a young woman with the already familiar accent.

-It's Bobby's wife speaking. We've 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 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 - 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!'

At the point about that 'better future' I wanted to disagree with him - but I didn't dare to. 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 that and asked:

-Bo ta papia papiamento?⁵²⁶

⁵²⁵ 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!...'

⁵²⁶ Do you speak Papiamento? (Papiamento)

I got flustered:

-Un tiki...⁵²⁷

-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 the time I was thinking feverishly what else I could ask him while I had the chance and finally mustered the courage to ask if I could get to his concert, Sonny suddenly said:

-Te aworo!⁵²⁸ - 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-thirsty than ours in the Caribbean! - Sonny said.

...On a self-made wall, dedicated to Viktor Tsoi by his fans in my hometown, I saw giant handwritten letters:

*'Vitya! You remember how we wanted change? You know what, it finally came, f** it!...'*

The scream of the soul of an ordinary resident of central Russia, far from the Moscow tokenism of 'chic-gloss-and-glamour..'.. To the residents of my town Muscovites were like aliens. However, in Moscow there are plenty of miserable people too. Although they're not as conspicuous as gangsters and thieves of various sorts: from 'soldiers' to 'oligarchs.' And prostitutes of various sorts: from strippers to broadcasters...

A sense of unreality swept over me when for the first time in my life I was called 'Mistress.' In Sheremetyevo airport. I remember, I even turned around twice, looking, who was the mistress 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 'Mistress'? I have no slaves or serfs, and I have never 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:

⁵²⁷ A little bit (Papiamento)

⁵²⁸ Bye-bye! (Papiamento)

‘citizen’, ‘woman’, ‘man’, ‘Grandma,’ ‘Grandpa,’ ‘girl’, ‘guy.’ And ‘comrade.’

And the streets.... the streets had become as if they had been through a war!

Collapsing balconies of beautiful houses from the era of the ‘personality cult’ 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. Sparsely met kids, incredibly thin and pale (when I grew up, in the years of ‘stagnation,’ we were all chubby-cheeked!). Enticing signs 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 daylight: there is no work! There are practically no buses or trolleys: instead there are many private taxis with boards on the windshield ‘number 5 trolleybus.’ Any sort of a car will do for a taxi: from a country ‘jeep’ to mini-buses, or 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 looked like India. But it didn’t shock anyone. As it didn’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, those poor people obviously have such a ‘good’ life at home, that they have no other options but drag their whole families such a distance and beg...

The town has become flooded with ‘people of Caucasian nationality⁵²⁹’; previously there were only men in the market, but now they bring with them women and children. Locals refer to them quite calmly.

-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 there was a mini market. We were guarding

⁵²⁹ Common term for people from the Caucasus in the post-Soviet Russia

our house from them, and they were guarding their melons from us! It was like a circus.

There is complete and utter confusion 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 had attacked Hitler, not he had attacked us!

- But Tamara, you lived at 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 could see utterly wild scenes: for example, women urinating in a city park, while their boyfriends tenderly held their hand... Or kids of about 10 years old busily discussing whether they were right in America to imprison Mike Tyson when he had 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 pronounced to his mother:

-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 the radio and TV screens - sheer delirium: presenters of news programmes, literally translated from Western broadcasters (there is no money left for Russia to have their own, proper journalists!), who remind me of the magical abracadabra from the novel that Shurek had written for me in my childhood: *'And then the chepurysla's began to chooh..'*.. They all speak too fast and seem not to understand what they are saying themselves. I wouldn't be surprised if they really didn't.

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 any our ethnicities, but by some moral mutants among us, picked out by the West and used as puppets for the plunder and undermining of our country!

It reminded me of the hero of the Jamaican film, *The Lunatic*, Busha McIntosh, who worried that his parents' grave in the village cemetery is being defecated on by local street goats and cows... It was exactly the same feeling that I had in post-Perestroika Russia! Only those 'goats' and 'cows' are called by a euphemism '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 without falling into a depression - even in the short time that I was there! - was to lock myself up within four walls, among friends and relatives, and stay out of the streets as much as possible and especially, God forbid, not to go to Moscow!

But that was not the solution.

All that could not be get rid of by simply closing our eyes and imagining that we still live in the Soviet Union. That was what some of my relatives and friends did. For example, one former colleague of my uncle lost at least 30 kilos and became a vegetarian and a follower of Tolstoy, speaking out for 'a world without violence.' My God, but they were 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?

To let the Berezovskys of all nations party on the Cote d' Azur at our expense?

To repeat, like a baby-kid from the movie *Mama* - 'what could we do, oh, what could we do?'⁵³⁰

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 had never been meant for so many dwellers.

Mum's snoring could be heard from the kitchen where she slept. She had to go to work in the morning.

We had already been there two months. Two weeks after our arrival Sonny started attending his practical courses. Until then he had been adjusting himself 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

⁵³⁰ *Mama* (Rock-n-roll Wolf) (1977)- Soviet-Romanian musical fairy-tale movie

that time of the year one should put on 'three pairs of socks' instead of the usual one. It referred to the really unpredictable weather when all of a sudden days of thaw might 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 car of their company, met us at the airport.

The first thing that really impressed me after those five 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 were five years after all, nothing one could do about that...

Arkadiy, the driver, was not much older than I. He was a true native burgess, a rarity in our time. A very intelligent person, who spent much of his spare time reading, or rather 'swallowing up' books, as they say here, mostly on history and politics. All the way he was discussing with my mother and me Yeltsin's personality and policy. He spoke quietly, but his remarks were so scathing and point-blank, that sometimes it seemed that my ears would simply burst.

In the Soviet days Arkadiy, like my mother, had been a certified engineer, and obviously the idea of 'serving a master' and an 'owner' had remained as alien to him as to me. He lost his job when 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 it turned out to be a very risky undertaking indeed. Many of his fellow drivers even used to have an axe under their seat with the view to sometimes suspicious and downright scary customers they 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 ingratiating. He could 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 had always known as an extremely kind, hob-nob and responsive fellow, could all of a sudden start feeling

like a kind of master and should be displeased that Arkadiy did not feel it as well.

-I wish you read less and took a better care of the car! - he angrily snapped at Arkadiy. That came so unexpected that I almost thought I had misheard. Could Shurek, who at the age of 17 had spoiled his own eyes by secretly reading under the blankets during the night, while the others were sleeping, could have ever said such a thing? In the Soviet days when he was the chief economist at a big factory, he would not have talked in such a way even to a cleaner!

Indeed, something had happened to the people during all those years...

Arkadiy didn't even look at him, pretending that he hadn't heard anything and simply continued his narrative about things he had read.

Like most of the sensible, reflective, inclined to thinking men in the post-Soviet era, Arkady was slowly killing himself by alcohol. 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 that kind tortured him practically day and night. For example he remembered his business trips to Azerbaijan or Estonia in Soviet times, the wonderful people with whom he worked on applying various kinds of electronic machines and other hi-tech devices there, the bright memories of serene and happy life. What true miracle that life seemed in post-Soviet times, and how all of us just rued we had been unable to fully appreciate it earlier!

To tell the truth, thoughts of that 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 we were torn by. 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 smooth and beautiful landscape, stretching almost all the way from the airport to our town. Now, however, one could see an interminable row of all sorts of kiosks, tents, stands and mini flea markets. The former big modern milk-cow farm by the road had been turned into a car spare-parts shop. God only knows 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, short of hanging down from tree branches in the forest. A more absurd view could hardly be seen or even imagined. To top it all, a most incredible mix of 'new Russian' brands of pop-music and '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 such that any more or less sensible person would blush with shame 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 not very different from what he had grown 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 feel pity for him.

And still, there was a lot of stuff that was a novelty to Sonny.

At the market he was horrified by the Kuban tomatoes of the variety called 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 decided to try our vodka for some reason. 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 that I didn't warn you,- I just said. After all, a Western man is accustomed to freedom, and I will not intervene with 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 having listened 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 Mamai⁵³¹ has passed through! - she asked, noticing the traces of Sonny's doings on the kitchen floor.

I started to explain to her what had happened, while Sonny was groaning from the bathroom:

-Do not speak Russian, it grates on me...

After that, he never even touched vodka. Even when my aunt's husband poured it into his shot glass, with the traditional 'Do you respect me?'

...When I arrived home, for the first time after five 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, wishing to see how 'opulent' we were! Friends and strangers all believed that I had 'made it in life'; they were interested in seeing someone who came from the 'free' West so much extolled in post-Soviet Russia. And some might think it could be useful for them, too...

But their perceptions of life in the West were quite distorted, 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 neck⁵³²) asked me about the Dutch with some respect in his voice.

⁵³¹ 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

-What? - I didn't understand. And when I did a second later, it made my eyes pop out: I remembered empty Dutch churches, their doors opening barely once a week, for the Dutch elderly and for foreigners.

-Well, but we were told...

...Later, they stopped coming. They lost interest when what I was telling them didn't confirm the tales, which they perversely stuck to (well, one must believe in something!). And 'new Russian' Grisha was not the only one who had fallen prey to such delusions. There were many real victims of the 'free market' among them. They were shocked when I told them frankly that life under capitalism was like the child's verse: *'if you pull out the tail, the beak gets stuck; if you pull out the beak, the tail gets stuck.'* That all the strikes in 'free' societies were like the work of a squirrel running in a wheel: the growth of wages does not and never will keep pace with the ever rising prices, and people will have to continue striking to the end of their day - and still without avail. I did not slander; I just described it as it actually was: no 'rivers full of milk flowing between the shores of custard', but endless bills coming by the post: you barely had time to pay one, when another was already waiting in your post office box! In the USSR we only had two bills: rent and electricity, and they were so minuscule that no one had to fear that they couldn't pay all the bills that month! And what about the churches in Holland that provide drug addicts with drugs? But the falsehood was inculcated so inexorably, that on hearing the truth, those robbed by Gaidar and Chubais preferred to close their ears and even began to stamp their feet: 'Shut up! It just cannot be!'

Because if that were true, it would mean that they had wasted all the time tightening 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 that it was we who began the war against Hitler... and that all Moscow schoolgirls dream of

⁵³² A Russian joke: a New Russian comes into a jewellery shop to choose a golden cross for his golden chain necklace. He wants the biggest one possible. In the end he sees a cross on top of the nearby church: -Take off that gymnast (meaning Jesus); I am buying this one!

becoming prostitutes... And even Aum Shinrikyo⁵³³ has his own hour-long prime time transmission on that radio of yours!

It was the same ostrich-like reaction as that among people in the West, when you tell them something that runs contrary to what they have learnt from their media.

It is not true that Tsvangirai⁵³⁴ did not participate in the second round of elections in Zimbabwe, because the 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 that! 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. - Mother 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 to 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 I know an example of the head of the district administration summoning all his workers, showing them his big fist and saying:

⁵³³ Aum Shinrikyo is a [Japanese '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.

⁵³⁴ Morgan Tsvangirai (b.1952)- pro-Western Prime-Minister of Zimbabwe

- Make sure 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, all the ballots at our polling stations have been numbered in pencil...

Did your BBC not tell you about this? Nor CNN did? No? Strange, strange...

No Mugabe could even dream of such elections. But the West didn't give a damn about those 'irregularities.' Probably because Yeltsin was a politician *of the Tsvangirai type*. He was also going to hide in Western embassies in case of need. As in 1991...

Sonny did not care about all this. His soul didn't ache for our country. He just came there for his practice.

Probably Sonny felt himself in Russia like Gedevan Alexandrovich of Kindza-dza! felt on the planet Pluk: he, too, could not help thinking that he was 'the first Georgian cosmonaut'⁵³⁵. Every day, Sonny wanted to walk about the city, and his favorite place was just a thing that I hated: the local market, swarming with Chinese and Turkish junk of dubious quality. And I, frankly, did not want to go out at all, not just because I was tired of caring for our young child and always wanted to sleep. I also did not want to see what had become of my town.

There was no feeling of freedom, only a sense of anarchy, like during the Civil War. The sort of anarchy, where anything was permitted, but not to all. And people seemed to have made up their mind to paint the town red - only not to think about the terrible future. Yeltsin's Russia was a perfect illustration of what would have become of our country, if in the past the popular rebel hero Stenka Razin⁵³⁶ had succeeded in coming to power. The one that used to say: 'I came to give you freedom', while hurling princesses into rivers⁵³⁷. 'Sway, my arm! Itch, my shoulder!' No, this comparison is not quite appropriate: after all, Ataman Razin robbed the merchants, not the elderly, children and workers...

⁵³⁵ In the sense that Sonny was the first man from Curacao in Russia

⁵³⁶ Stepan (Stenka) Razin (1630 -1671) was a [Cossack](#) leader who led a major uprising against the nobility and Tsar's bureaucracy in South Russia

⁵³⁷ 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 prince into the river

My feelings for home, which I had missed so much, were mixed. When I was in the house, among my family and did not turn on television or radio, I felt like I really was at home. But as soon as I went out of door, and my face was hit with the dust of the streets, not swept since the end of the Soviet Union, my ears were filled with the sounds of klaxons and anti-theft devices on cars, emanating from a parking lot, resembling the sounds of amusements at the Dutch funfairs (for the sake of this they had felled the nearby park!), and the sounds 'umpa-pa' of the domestic pop music, I felt sick. Add here the Chupa Chups reminding me of Chemistry and Life⁵³⁸ and the tent camps where they sold all sorts of rubbish in bright wrappers (the place was suitably named by people 'Field of Miracles'⁵³⁹). Goats grazing on the graves of my ancestors, had been put into flesh...

How could I possibly explain it to Sonny? He could not understand why I felt so disgusted about numerous kiosks, referred to as 'supermarkets', with their vapid names like Lady Madonna or Deimos⁵⁴⁰ (did its owners know that that meant 'horror'?). They reminded me of post-war co-op stores in the countryside, where women's panties, canned herring and fresh fruit were laid alongside with each other on the same shelves. But in the capitalist Antilles or Jamaica people were used to street vendors that had now suddenly become role models for us. What an outrage!..

Sonny did not understand what exasperated me as we looked at teenagers roaming the streets with empty, zombie-like, eyes, drinking from beer cans on the go, and why I felt so much pain at seeing old people selling their awards and medals on the street and burrowing in trash bins: early in the morning, so that no one could see it, ashamed of what they were doing. Although it was not they who ought to have been ashamed...

Sonny did not know that a few years before these same young people had enjoyed sports, reading and doing research in libraries, engaging in creative activities (dancing, music, art, etc.), working in students' stroyotryads (construction teams), going on tours, helping

⁵³⁸ Chemisrty & Life - popular scientific magazine in the USSR. Here it refers to all sorts of chemical additives to these sweets.

⁵³⁹ Field of Miracles - Russian name for Wheel of Fortune TV game

⁵⁴⁰ One of two Mars' moons

farmers with harvesting, etc. Their faces were happy, intelligent and determined.

Old people rested 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! - city park, enjoying their well-deserved rest. For Sonny all he saw around him in Russia at the time was a normal state of affairs: nobody owes you anything, for example, if you are old and haven't saved 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 the USSR without any savings. And that many of those people had actually made savings, but those savings had been stolen from them overnight - so far from the promised well-being in '500 days', the reform contrived by 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 had all been no strangers to each other, but congenial people, and that I had grown up with that idea. He just did not understand how it could be. And I was getting more and more hurt that he was so insensitive. That was not what I had imagined my husband to be like...

Later, when we got 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 absurdity than this. Does he think I would have married him, in the first place, if I were somebody apt to be 'ashamed' of such things?

It was very sad that he had such a strong inferiority complex. If only Sonny had ever hinted to me at how he felt, if only he had asked me about it! But Sonny was silent and kept it all to himself.

Speaking about the skin color, frankly, I was a little flustered at how our people would meet him. To my surprise, they 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 towards him and tried to do their best for him. Almost like during the Moscow Festival of 1957! Only once he was approached by a policeman on the street for a check of his documents. With a triumphant face (*'I'll get that African!'*), hoping that something would be wrong with

Sonny's registration, the policeman obviously expected to get something 'as a reward.' But once Sonny's Dutch passport was in his hands, he almost saluted to him and returned his passport without demur. Oh, how we laughed!

Just then we heard that there was an African called Jimmy G. in Russia, who performed hip-hop music in Russian. He had a song, very well suited for that occasion: *'I am the district policeman... Have they already come to you? Then come with me!'*, which represented such a realistic image of the post-Perestroika 'guard of order', that it seemed he was about to jump out of the player and turn to you:

'Where are your papers? Do you have a Russian Visa? Please show me your registration. This looks like a forged one... Yeah, this one has already expired!... Where do you come from? You have a very familiar face... I've already heard that... You think I am a bad person? I am just doing my job!'

This song became Sonny's favorite.

People tried, of course, to guess who he was. Sometimes they took him for an Indian, sometimes for an African American. Every time he came into the local park with me, the DJ immediately began to play on the park radio Leonid Agutin⁵⁴¹'s song Dark-Skinned Guy. At first I thought it was a coincidence. But no, that song (with rather inane lyrics, by the Soviet standards), was repeated consistently once 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 apprehensive, but there's no reason to be:
It's an ordinary guy, just a little bit darkish;
And somewhere further south people are still darker,
Where there are palm trees, and bananas, and agates
And there is nothing strange here, this is not a dream:
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 to the terminal stop. I remembered our factories in Soviet times: lively, crowded, with workers waking up and

⁵⁴¹ Leonid Agutin (b.1968) - popular Russian pop-singer

getting into the streets early - in time for the beginning of the first shift, and at around 7 a.m. streets were already bustling with people, just as they were in the evening, after work. In some plants they even had three shifts. But now the streets were full of people all day long, and the plants themselves were almost dead. Officially that one was still working, but the wages were now so low, and even so, delayed for many months, that all the young people had left the factory. Only the veterans living out their working days before the retirement and working pensioners remained there.

The Design Department, where Sonny was to have his internship, consisted exactly of such old, good Soviet professionals. They assumed a somewhat parental attitude towards him there: 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' slogans: in the workers canteen you could still order a full meal for a ridiculously small sum. The meals were cooked from the products grown on the plot that belonged to the plant (also a relic of the Soviet past): it was also just barely in use... For Sonny everything was new and interesting. The only thing he hated was the factory toilet: for the sake of savings, they had cut the cleaners' jobs in the plant...

It was so gratifying to meet people who were still interested in their own profession, rather than 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 those walls. After talking to the older engineers, I did not want to go back into the streets, where in dingy stalls they were selling cigarettes out of a pack, by one - to children... Those engineers worked on their factory premises quietly and without complaint, and developed their projects and inventions, not even knowing whether they would be implemented. Not counting on huge rewards for it. Sometimes even without knowing whether they would be paid that month at all. They just could not live without work! For them, it would be unworthy of a human being.

I had, of course, acted as Sonny's interpreter, though I was not very familiar with all kinds of electrical terms. We had to carry with us a heavy technical dictionary. At the time Sonny and I talked not in pure

English, but in a strange mix of English and Dutch words and phrases with some admixture of Papiamento. So, my brother Petrusha even had to ask:

-What language are you speaking?

I got to know them- Petrusha and Andryusha - for the first time then: they were my half-brothers on my father's side. I do not know who had told them that I had arrived, but they came to us with a huge bouquet of roses - and that was spring! I even felt embarrassed.

Petrusha held forth on nature, constitution and history of Venezuela, neighbouring Curacao, by which he surprised Sonny unspeakably. But Andrei said little, only smiled, most probably, to himself. Petrusha was 22 years old, and he had just enrolled into the post-graduate school: the same one, where our father had studied in his time. Andryusha was 20 and still a student. They were both well-read, cultural, Soviet-style old-fashioned, in a best sense of the word, guys.

At first I felt very shy 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. He tried to speak Spanish to Sonny: he had learnt it some time before when he was preparing to go for work in Nicaragua, but that had never materialized...

Having talked to my father's wife, the mother of Petrusha and Andryusha, I quickly realized why my father and she were still married and why he and Mum had been 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, the boys shared a bedroom. Father's family were living in a large and bright co-operative apartment from the Soviet era, which he had bought for his family, saving money received for summer work in a construction crew (stroyotryad) with his students. With a glazed loggia, that apartment on the 9th floor commended a nice panorama of the town.

- Help yourself! - said Alexandra Semenovna. -It's too hot today, and I thought you probably won't be particularly hungry, that's why we have only fruit here.

There were really only watermelons on the table. Quite unexpected! How unlike an average Russian family!

I asked how my Granny Stenka, Dad's mother, was. She lived out of the town, and to get there was not so easy.

- Granny is still working! - responded Petrusha enthusiastically. We felt by those words that out the two of them he was Grandma's pet. - We'll go to visit her when it gets just a little warmer and the roads dry out.

All my relatives from my mother's side took to Sonny at once. He instantly became their favourite, and they quickly stopped paying any attention to his skin colour. 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 blurted out, confident that he still did not understand Russian:

- Oh, 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 sh***!

He even managed to find 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 lay the table as best they could for us. So there were plenty of delicious dishes, despite the economic hardships.

Most of all Sonny loved to visit my second cousin: the already known to you Grisha and his parents, those who used to come to 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, while I still treated him the same way as back in my childhood.

I did not realize how much Grisha had changed as a person. Or maybe he had not changed, but finally showed his true face, like many other people, including film directors, writers and actors, whom we had adored so much just recently... But originally it seemed to me that he had

only changed his material status. Most probably because I thought that I had known him inside out since childhood and had always loved him very much. To me, he was like an elder brother that I had never had, and that's how I really felt about him.

I had also loved Aunt Zhenya since childhood: no wonder I was named in her honor! She hadn't changed a bit, just got retired on pension. Aunt Zhenya was a simple, good woman, but with a fiery character, typical of my granddad's family. 'I'll give you a proper whack!' - in her mouth it was not an empty threat, as was well known to her husband. I guess Zhenya Komelkova from the film would have become the same type, if she hadn't been killed at just 19 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 went off. His traces were lost. The children were taken charge of by their stern granny, my great-grandmother. Then the war broke out. 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. 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, swarthy-faced - either because her father was a Cossack, or because she was born in Uzbekistan, where her parents had worked before the war. And she loved fashion, which our grandfather could not stand. He even curtained with newspapers our large mirror from her.

However, she only got married when she was almost 30. If asked why I did not go to the dance-hall in the park, I have always given the example of her husband as a reason, since, in my view, only such drones as he showed up there.

Uncle Tolik was not a bad person, just a terrible bore. He was born in an old town-dwellers' family of Russified Nogai Tatars⁵⁴², like Prince Calaf in the fairy-tale Turandot by Carlo Gozzi⁵⁴³. It was one of those families in which they all had a flair for music and a gift for playing the

⁵⁴² Nogai people live in modern Dagestan

accordion, and so he pestered Grisha in childhood, forcing him to attend a music school. Grisha started with the accordion and then switched to the guitar, and then... - to boxing, and later - karate...

Uncle Tolik did not like his son's hobbies. He wanted Grisha to graduate, to become engineer and nagged at him for every C day and night. Uncle Tolik himself worked at the plumbing factory. At one time he had served in the Army in Germany and in evidence pronounced two words in German: 'schnaps' and 'fraulein'⁵⁴⁴. He was very attached to my grandfather and always looked forward to the following holidays: when they would once again get together for a celebration.

When we arrived in our town, my grandfather was dead already, and Uncle Tolik was looking for a suitable companion to have a drink with on holidays. Introduced to Sonny, he immediately decided that the latter was such a man. But Sonny, who had already tasted vodka once, did not yield to his provocations...

When Uncle Tolik drinks, he behaves like Popandopulo from Weddings in Malinovka:⁵⁴⁵

- Why, oh, 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 of his and try to keep away from him at such moments. But Sonny had grown up in a society where not just kissing and hugging, but sometimes even close friendship between men was interpreted unequivocally. I wish you had seen at what speed Sonny fled from my uncle, hoping to escape from his kiss in the toilet!

Ever since my childhood I had felt that there was some undercurrent in uncle Tolik, something morbid. It just had not manifested itself, because he himself had not known about it. And suddenly I

⁵⁴³ Turandot (1762) is a [commedia dell'arte](#) play by [Carlo Gozzi](#) after a story from the Persian collection [The Book of One Thousand and One Days](#).. Carlo, Count Gozzi (13 December 1720 - April 4, 1806) was an [Italian dramatist](#) from Venice, known for his fairy tale plays. Turandot is well-known in Russia in the version played in Vakhtangov theater in Moscow

⁵⁴⁴ Vodka and girls (German)

⁵⁴⁵ Wedding in Malinovka - Soviet musical about life in the Ukraine during the Civil War. Film version of it was produced in the 1960s

discovered that I was right: what had lain dormant, came out in full view. It turned out that the old man was now locking himself for hours in Grisha's room, watching all the porn videos he could get hold of, and sighed:

- Oh, I what a pity I did not know all of this in my youth! What I could have done to you, mother...- he turned to Aunt Zhenya... who immediately gave him a whack: our Aunt Zhenya would not tolerate such 'experiments'!

It is good that he had lived his whole life in the USSR! I am deeply convinced that the less filth a man faces in his immediate life, the less he discovers in himself dirty inclinations and begins to think about all kinds of rubbish. When a man is spiritually pure by his upbringing, he simply would not get in his mind many of the ugly perversions and mental distortions that 'freedom' helpfully shoves people right into their noses under the slogan of 'join us!' Join in the circle of maniacs, rapists, paedophiles and other perverts! Of those who see in other human beings only things to meet their own low needs! Paedophilia in Britain seems to have become a national sport already, along with cricket.

I do not agree with those who claim that all the new converts 'would still have been like that' without having learnt all these things. It's just like saying that a drug addict would still have become a drug addict, even if nobody would have ever given his first drug to him. This is sheer nonsense.

Yes, life is not perfect, but we must always strive for high ideals, rather than indulge in primitive needs and physical drives.

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', and because 'it's the natural state of the garden..'.. And, indeed, social being determines one's consciousness.

...When Grisha was a kid, they lived on a nearby street close to our old house. In the morning Mum went to school past their yard, and Grisha rushed to meet her - a swarthy, plump, sleepy little boy, with Asian black eyes - and joyfully shouted down the street:

- Nadya! Nadya is coming!

He loved her and Shurek a lot. He was sincere, kind, sympathetic... Who could have ever thought then that he would grow up into a 'tough

guy'? So much so that, if someone bothered me in the streets of my hometown, the only mention of his name would be enough to make the offenders pale in the face and set them babbling, like the hero of Andrei Mironov in *Ordinary Miracle*: 'It was wrong on my part.... sorry, I've just flared up. Please consider my proposal to be an terrible mistake...'⁵⁴⁶, etc.

I remember him as a teenager: the same dark-eyed, vigorous, he was always addressing me as an equal, not like a silly baby, even though I was eight years his junior. We exchanged records of pop bands, and I admired his Korean friends and karate. The only thing I did not like about Grisha was that his tastes changed all too often: there was no permanence, no respect for his own yesterday's idols. Now I think that this fickleness is probably a very important character trait to make a 'New Russian.'

...Mum has her personal theory of the New Russians' origin. And of other self-styled 'elite' in untidy, but expensive pants, who sometimes wipe their noses on the sleeves of their chic 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 not a single normal person among them. Everyone suffers from some deformation: he may either have an ugly appearance like Berezovsky, or be a sluggish unsporting softie with a pretty face like Nemtsov. It may also be just a bunch of former school-losers and goons, who were rejected by teachers and peers: the latter simply had not realized 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 complexes caused by their own defects. Look at the handsome and intelligent men like Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. Just look at the high forehead of Lenin...

Sometimes I think she exaggerates: the childhood injuries can't run so deep, can they? And why should one feel hurt just because they were not endowed with something by Nature? However, the more I look around, the more I agree with her...

⁵⁴⁶ Words of Minister-Administrator from this play by Ye. Schwartz

For example, Grisha. A tough guy - with a 'gymnast' on his neck. An idol of my childhood: so beautiful and athletic. Well, not a great intellectual, but not everyone should be born professors!

Grisha was a normal, nice person, if a bit harsh-tempered. That is how I have remembered him since my childhood (he is eight years older than I). But now I can hardly recognize him.

I saw an arrant wardrobe (Russian for a big, strong man) 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 then has had digestion problems. 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 '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 Afghanistan and he served in the engineering units near Moscow. The 'demobs'⁵⁴⁷ didn't bother him - he was a famous karate guy. Karate had just been 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 have learnt everything before and was about to become a well-known couch himself, when he was mobilized.

His 'sensei'⁵⁴⁸, 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 bird he was.

⁵⁴⁷ Older soldiers from the 1980s onwards were often bullying the younger ones

⁵⁴⁸ Sensei - teacher (Japanese)

That was the last straw, after which I lost all confidence in anything what Amnesty wrote - including information 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 old-fashioned father kept nagging at him: for him, a person without a university degree was an underachiever...

Later Grisha finally managed to obtain a degree. In Physical Education. He was kind of lucky - the new society of 'sharks and gudgeons' provided for him the opportunity to 'grow up to the full stature' and become one of the richest people (at his level, of course) in our region. All that happened just because the criminalized authorities of the Gorbachev era had a demand for the former athletes to build up 'mafia squads' and squeeze dough from the newly-formed cooperatives...

That is how his 'initial capital' was obtained. By the way, many former athletes hadn't wished to engage in that monkey-business, but they had little choice.

I had already known all about Grisha from hearsay, but I still pictured him as a nice guy. After all, we had grown up together. I had never put on airs, despite the fact that I was an A-student, while he was rather a low achiever. We had never discussed school at all. I had never thought of myself as 'better' or 'smarter' than him. It had simply never occurred to me that those things mattered to him and that even had been the cause of psychological trauma of his childhood. That he was still trying to revenge, 'to show himself' to his former university mates, whom he was calling 'woeful little engineers.'

Grisha-the-Wardrobe was the first visitor coming joyfully to see me when I came back to 'my sweet home' after staying away for five 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 anthropomorphic creatures call themselves. He started to list all his purchases from the past years and specify how much each of them had cost. Though I didn't ask him about it at all - I was simply glad to see him.

He was surprised to see how little impression all his brag 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 tried a different way: he started to list 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 have seen in Dubai, at the Rio carnival, in Thailand... His maximum was something like 'after a cool beer-party we rode camels with guys.' As for his Thailand relaxations, he preferred not to tell me about them at all - it must have 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. I tried to explain to him that students did not buy houses in the Netherlands (except, maybe, for the princes - the members of the royal family) and that I did not really need 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 'poor.' So he lost any 'commercial interest' in me.

I call it 'commercial', but perhaps I should explain that by that time Grisha had already no other interests - human or 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 to them about. While in the beginning he had considered me as a 'helpful' if only because of my new country of residence - what if he could use me for something?, - later he realized he was mistaken. Thus every next visit back home I saw him less and less frequently.

Of course, one wouldn't call our life with Sonny 'rich.' However, for some period we were really happy together. And not starving at that. It would be difficult for us to explain to Grisha that all his 'prosperity' was for nothing (moreover, it involved putting one's life at risk, the fear of getting a bullet into one's stomach any day). Yes, I'd like to have

travelled more at that time. But certainly not for racing camels with drunk gangsters! Nor for visiting Thailand brothels with minors. As for two cars, a dog of an expensive breed, a wife to be kept at home, and two apartments - those things were just ridiculous to us.

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 comprehend that.

However, people of that kind have so much frustration and hate for those who are different. For ones they would never be able to comprehend owing to their poor level of development as humans, owing to their total lack of spirituality. The examples are available - just look at the pages of the 'new Russian' mass media:

'The woman that never existed

Lyubov Orlova [a famous Soviet actress of the 30s, one of the legends of our cinema] played a young lady, who found her love and married him. 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-looking one? Why did she happen to be so appreciated and famous?... She had honest eyes, her voice was weak, though pleasant, and 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 made a considerable effort, but you'd never be able to think of the first conjugal night with her! That was exactly a must for the official star of the 30s. As well as for the women pictured in the propagandist Soviet posters.⁵⁴⁹

No need any comments here.

I don't even mention how much the confounded bourgeois liberals are pissed up about Vladimir Ilyich Lenin - even now, when he had long been dead. They are not shy to disgrace themselves by calling him 'a full idiot' when he was struck by apoplexy. And at the same time they accept the fact that for so many years our country was ruled by a real 'idiot', Yeltsin, a spineless puppet, suffering from alcoholism. I'm quite sure that they were the ones to re-elect him, because Yeltsin was 'one of them'

⁵⁴⁹ This is an actual quote from an article in Komsomolskaya Pravda

and the years of his ruling enabled the ignoramuses and pipsqueaks to make their way in life.

But Lenin remains a threat for them. He is beyond their comprehension. And they are so scared by his very name, that still wet their pants at the sound of it.

People like Grisha never reflect on the fact that they just 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 tombstones⁵⁵⁰, comparable in size and grandeur to the Statue of Liberty. And white elephants in their cupboards as tokens of Philistinism.

Once Grisha spilt the beans. He inadvertently let slip what he was so badly frustrated about. I have mentioned that we had never discussed his below-average school progress before. But on one occasion he literally exploded and related to us how much he had hated those who did well at school, those 'crammers.' To him, there was no other way to get A's, but cram.

- Just look at them, where are they now? Filthy engineers! And look where I am...

I was indeed looking at him, shocked. Mum had told me that C-students 'envied' us, but I'd never realized how really traumatizing that school experience could be for them. I had never been in the habit of drawing distinctions between people according to that principle; moreover, by best school-friend Alla was no A-student either... Another matter is that I was simply bored in the company of most of my classmates, as we - in all honesty! - had nothing to talk about to each other.

So have they thought all those years good students were just too 'stuck-up' to mix with them? And do they think it's time for revenge now?

- 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, aren't you? - said I.

It was at that moment that I confessed to myself what I pretended not to have noticed all the time: *my* Grisha, open, kind, sympathetic and ready to come to help anytime, was gone. A total stranger was sitting

⁵⁵⁰ Tombstones of Russian mobsters are usually huge and very pompous

there before me, a monument to his own idolized ego. A Pagan Idolische from the Russian epic tales. He was so alien to me, that if, God forbid, a 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 into 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 it happen?

Future generations may 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 Yengibarov⁵⁵¹, with all his touching humanism, once put it: ' People, do not offend anyone... You'll hurt someone, but what if he is a future Mozart? And your offence may thwart his ability to 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 are all those highly-educated and well-read intellectuals, those broad-minded humanists gone? Is it possible to turn so 'dumb' in just 10-15 years?

All is simpler. Those educated ones have always been out there, and still are; it's just that in their places an *army* of 'Grishas' have been put, finally getting where they would have simply never been admitted to in the Soviet times, and not because of their nationality or status, but because they PROFESSIONALLY misfit commanding and authorized places, as 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 a Dutchman.

Aunt Zhenya complained quietly that Grisha's friends 'exchanged girlfriends' just outside of his cottage. 'But isn't it so *humiliating* for those women!' - she would say now and again. I understood her quite well, and couldn't help thinking that Dutchwomen have already forgotten that word...

⁵⁵¹ Leonid Georgievich Yengibarov (1935 - 1972) was a [Soviet clown](#) and [actor](#). He also wrote short stories.

Grisha, however, did not participate in those swinging parties, for he had his own sort of fun: snowmobile wolf-hunt, for example. 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 native country before: shots. I ran up to the window. Just opposite our house, next to the bank, there stood my 'gangsta bro' shooting pigeons, obviously from boredom. It was daytime, there were people in the street, children were playing on the play-ground, and 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 realise into what abyss my country had slid, what my people had 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 stay in the kitchen cooking borsch and minding her business.

In fact, Grisha was like most Dutchmen about that, the only difference being that he spoke it out quite frankly. When I returned, he had been married for two or three years. His wife Kira, a full-lipped blonde from a Ryazan village, was just the kind. She was quite content with her life - minding her business and staying at home was quite all right for her. All she needed was money. No questions, no asking to take her on a trip abroad, where he used to go 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 about her grandmother, who had said their *barin* (landlord) before the Revolution was exceptionally good. He even let them cut firewood in his forest.

- In *his* forest? Wow, how nice of him! Was it he who had planted it? - I wondered.

*'The old barin had been ill all summer,
And died in the dead of the night.
He'd never shouted or yelled for no reason,*

*Always tried to keep us pleased.
For Easter we had nice kulich,
And he'd give us good presents too.
We'd lovingly call him 'our Kuzmich',
But now we've got a different one - woe!
Oh, the life's turned really bad,
Let's have some more vodka,
And a pickle, please, pass it to me,
Let's drink to the one that's dead,
Let's drink to the new who's come,
Let's make a few dance steps
And talk of life some more...'⁵⁵²*

I guess Yeltsin was also brought up by a grandmother with a slave mentality. Such grandmas also voted for him 'from the heart'⁵⁵³, as one of them explained 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, you think that such an election is better than the single-party one, right? Pray tell me how...

Something I kept wondering about was where all those ignorant people came from, and where they had been hiding before. 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 top-quality At Noon on a Weekday⁵⁵⁴). Never watched Global Perspective with Kaverznev and Ovsyannikov, Documentary on Air with Robert Rozhdestvenskiy⁵⁵⁵... Where had they been all the time?

⁵⁵² Old Barin, song of the group Lyube

⁵⁵³ That was the slogan of Yeltsin's election campaign - Vote with your heart

⁵⁵⁴ A request concert during Soviet workers' lunch break

⁵⁵⁵ Popular Soviet TV programs

My friends and I studied at the same Soviets schools as Chechen Wahabbis (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 individuals were probably concerned with some nonsense. It brings to mind Alla Pugacheva, who had blamed the Soviet power for not having been allowed to say the word 'arse' in public.

Uncle Tolik was one of such people. It was the Soviet government that had given him a *free* apartment; his salary had been *bigger* than that of 'those engineers' (yet he wished his son to become one); he had had *free* leg surgery performed several times; his son, attending a *free* musical school in his childhood, finally got higher education for *free* (at a second go)... And now, as a retiree, uncle Tolik stayed at home, watching Western porno, consuming imported beer and crayfish, bought with the money his son had got for *racketeering*, and cursed the Communists with all his might. What beasts, indeed! 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 crayfish he's got for dinner!

Uncle Tolik was sure that the beer, crayfish and caviar had been bought with his pension money; aunt Zhenya did not have the heart to tell him that there had been *no* pension for four months already. Surely, not everybody's son is a don in this kingdom of democracy to be able to feed his relations well...

When I came for a visit then, we had lots of such fools in post-Perestroika Russia. People still refused to give in to despair; many of them still believed they would become millionaires in no time, carrying boxes of frozen chicken legs, known then as 'Bush's legs'⁵⁵⁶, from one corner to another to sell them more expensively, and would then 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 foreign. Almost like Sanka Brovkina in the book about Peter the Great

⁵⁵⁶ George Bush-Sr. was then the US president

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, he teaches them *politesse*, and me too. He tells us so many things! Every night I see myself dressed in a crimson *bostroka*, dancing a *minuuet*, 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 here in Moscow!’⁵⁵⁷

But, to my surprise, even among good hard-working people, who were still producing something, there were many who didn’t yet 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 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 happier than others about the newly-acquired freedom to raise prices, as their profits literally soared.

To my surprise, 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, being an Aquarius.

- It’s all right, as long as Vladislav Andreyevich is director of our factory, it won’t get closed. And I won’t get sacked.

- And what then? Vladislav Andreyevich is not that young already...

- Still, he’ll be there to 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, from the inflamed and festering wound. And even dying, it continued to emit light

⁵⁵⁷ Quote from A. Tolstoy’s novel Peter the Great

and humanity. It was like dying Eva Saint-Claire⁵⁵⁸, 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 the time being.

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 ten years more.

Factories were closing down, people were becoming 'shuttle' traders or taking on other half-legal jobs, some turned to religion and others ruined themselves by drinking, and Vladislav Andreyevich was developing his manufacture. He built new flats 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 ran a kid club with ten different hobby groups 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 expense. The new houses were equipped with water-lines and sewerage, gas-stoves were mounted. The factory paid a salary to the music school teacher, specially hired 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 it was all upside down now, at

⁵⁵⁸ Little heroine of Harriet Beecher-Stow's Uncle Tom's Cabin who died at the age of 5 from tuberculosis

the peak of *Yeltsinism*, in the era of financial pyramids, newly-made sleazy commercials, inane soap operas, when people suddenly became wolves to each other and parents taught their kids to elbow their way to the counters in shops, pushing everyone else aside. It was the era when the only new establishments were pubs, when cinemas were closed down, and a few remaining ones showed such slop of the world cinematography that one couldn't help wondering in which gutter they had picked it up.

Now Vladislav Andreyevich's running of his plant was called the '*setback of the accursed 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 Perestroika and afterwards as well, and never an apostate. During Perestroika and especially during the first years of Yeltsin 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 would 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 indeed is a great example to show that the role of a person in history is limited!

...Sonny had finished all he could at the factory too early. The old engineers had no idea what other 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 called '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. Then teaching foreign students became commercialized, fee-paying. Cameroonians figured out it was a lot cheaper for them to study in Russia than in France. Since our University education was still of high quality, most of the Cameroonians would not return home upon getting their diplomas, but immigrate to France, where they as a rule were able to get in the local health care system almost at once. They earned substantially 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 for the West...

I was attached to one of those Cameroonian groups: twelve guys and one girl, with a strange name - Delphine. When my new students learnt that my husband was black, they were all steamed up. Not only did they recognize Sonny as their own, but also somehow looked up to him as 'our person from the Western World.'

Soon all of them 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 Mum's, who hastily disappeared in the kitchen to start the tea and 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', 'good for nothing' without him and other things to that effect. Delphine would get angry and break up with him, but he followed her vowing that he'd change and that he loved her, and they would 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 - through humiliating and torturing others.

...I was looking for the USSR traces everywhere, and finding them made me very happy. It used to give me the hope that the world had not gone 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 improved. I looked at seemingly the same streets and people that I had known before - and thought I had been right that I hadn't stayed there to work and live. When you face the dirt in a country you have no connections with - like Holland - it doesn't hurt you so much as in your own one.

People in Moscow were passing by any human misery 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 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 the 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 resuscitate my Grandpa. When he 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 and yet absolutely strange city and the song from the Soviet movie 'Charodei' ('Magicians')⁵⁵⁹ came to my mind:

*'...But, you know, I don't need this go-go brave new world
Where people don't need each other any more.'*

And no yacht of my own, no helicopter, no football team, either foreign or Russian, would ever substitute for the cordiality of the Soviet people.

... Sonny and I also went to Moscow in order to visit his classmate from Enschede, a Dutchman named Sjaak (Sjaak is a Dutch version of the French name Jacques), who at the time was also 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 hospital with appendicitis. Alex, Lyuba's husband - the guy

⁵⁵⁹ Soviet New Year film (1981)

who until recently had considered himself a Latvian nationalist - was in Moscow. He stayed there with some distant relatives, but at that time they were out of town. During the day Alex was 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 Red Square was very close to it (not to mention GUM, which might be very interesting to Sonny).

I was shocked to see an armed guard standing at the door of my Institute: what or 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 our IDs, but I felt very awkward anyway. 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 rifle⁵⁶⁰, that was really too much! So, is the abundance of armed men guarding private and state property the sign of freedom, so much glorified by the West? 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 advertisements - and *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 that 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.

- 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 was also 'of a different origin', laughed. I looked at the whole company with undisguised

⁵⁶⁰ Man with a Rifle is the name of the classic Soviet film about the Revolution (1938)

astonishment. I hadn't mentioned anybody's origin, had I? Nor attempted to hurt anyone. I simply made a mistake, because the girl looked like my friend. Why be so rude?

Just a few years before those very same people were beside themselves to be registered as Russians - though for most of us it did not matter what their nationality was, according to their passports. Has the idea that they are the *chosen ones* suddenly hit them on the head? And I had been so naïve as not to believe it, when people told me things like that happening... Moscow was turning more and more disgusting.

Red Square really impressed Sonny, unlike GUM. It wasn't just that in Moscow 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 flea markets in unthinkable quantities were out of the question); it must be some high-quality thing for everyday use, which you could have easily found in GUM just a few years before.

But it was absolutely impossible to find anything, just *anything*, made in Russia in Moscow now. Even finding the locally-produced food was a problem, while in our hometown there were a lot of Belorussian-made goods. Moreover, Moscow salespeople were even proud of that, asking Sonny to buy the things he wouldn't have bought in Holland. The Dutch *kaasschaf* (cheese-cutter) was defined here as a pancake spatula. When we explained to the saleswoman what in fact it actually 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 cajole us into buying a bottle of liquor, named after Sonny's native island, calling it 'Blue Kurako' (with the stress on 'a') and insisting, it was *exactly* how it should be called, Sonny exploded.

- Cu-ra-cao! Cu-ra-cao! I, - he poked himself in the chest with his finger, - was born there, I'm a native of that land, you understand? And now you teach me how to call my island! First you learn to pronounce it, then sell it!

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, maybe I could show you round? - 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 seeing the last time I was there a totally neglected 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 Institute of Africa put it in order? I myself can do it, if they let me enter the place!

Eleonora Alexeyevna politely expressed her indignation, 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, not to mention the news of private plots of land finally given to the Institute employees?

We were walking about the town, when Nikolay Sergeyeich - the professor - started his story. Myself being a historian by education, I could not help marveling at the scope of knowledge of that professor of Physics, who knew everything about his native city! He poured on 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 Sergeyeich paid no attention to Mayakovsky's 'Foam'⁵⁶¹, which filled the streets of the city. He spoke of Moscow as if it remained unchanged - sublime and bright, a bubble with life, so mighty and invincible⁵⁶², 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.

⁵⁶¹ Foam is a satirical play (from the 1920s) by Mayakovsky; the word foam here meaning petit-bourgeois public and tastes

⁵⁶² A line from the Soviet song *Moscow in May*. Music: Dm. and Dan. Pokrass. Lyrics: V. Lebedev-Kumach 1937.

There he was, the real Soviet man, well-read, educated, inquisitive, interested in everything, with great detailed knowledge of the subject. So much unlike the Western-type 'professionals' with no real scope, but great ambition to discuss the spheres they know 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 walked about the town so much that our feet ached. Eventually, Nikolay Sergejevich 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 had achieved their high positions in life by working hard, rather than 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 detached from such mundane things.

I understood him quite well about this point. I do not mean to claim 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, for instance, who will win the election in 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 remark in earnest: 'Couldn't you have written it *during the weekend?*'

Sonny looked over the battered furniture and very plain curtains, and I understood that Grisha the Wardrobe had impressed him a lot more than the professor. The more time passed, the more I realized how little Sonny and I actually had in common. And I so much wanted him to know the way we used to live, to understand my nostalgia - and 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 would very often stop buying *exactly* the advertised thing. I got especially mad when they advertised sanitary pads and the like. When I first saw a commercial of this sort, I blushed: something so intimate, never mentioned in the presence of men, was impudently put on display! And for what? It was the thing people would buy in any case, not something like a car, a sofa or a fire-insurance. I had a feeling of being stripped in public. I promised myself NEVER to buy any of the *advertised* brands. And the hypocrisy of liberalism apologists showing their 'want not - see not' motto on us! As if you are warned when they're going to show it next time, and what good film they are going to kill in the middle! By the way, even in the 'civilized' *tolerant* society I wasn't the only one expressing disgust at this invasion 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 his despair when he once sent me to buy *Pringles*. 'Yeah, but what is it?' - I asked, confused, - naturally, I had to know what it was to be able to look for it on the right shelf in the shop!). And, no matter how hard he tried to convince me 'to start my own business', I had absolutely no desire to. You do not have to turn your life into a business, right?

The very idea had never appealed to me. I'd already seen enough export/import businessmen, including his friend Wensley, with a stack of shining credit cards, continually escaping from 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 for my own shop/restaurant/shoe cleaning desk (a voluntary-compulsory thing under capitalism)? 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...

So the feeling that Sonny and I had too little in common would not leave me. Finally, I decided I have to talk to him about it. Calmly, of course, no scenes. Something had to be done about it. The happy feeling of being with him, despite all the difficulties of the first two years of our marriage, started to fade away soon after our return from Curacao... Depression would come and go in tides, but happiness had left once not to

come back again... Yet I conceded that it might be normal. Maybe that's what the marriage is all about?

Having said good-bye to Nikolay Sergeevich, we went to Alex. Knowing that in the 1980s- early 1990s he had supported Perestroika, 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 shares⁵⁶³, which, according to him, were to bring him fantastic treasures. I only winced. But he didn't notice it. He was too busy denouncing his former fellow countrymen - the Latvians - whose independence he had staunchly defended not so long ago. Even though he was born in Riga, was fluent in the Latvian language and had 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 the Kursk region, he lived in Moscow, and 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 about each other's life during the six months of their staying apart.

At the talk-show, people started to attack and blame Lyuba. But she is a stubborn girl: if you tell her that two times 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: my parents are in Germany and my brother is in Israel. I even liked people recognizing me in the street.

⁵⁶³ Russian biggest and most notorious Pontzi-scheme company of the 1990s

We stayed up late at his place. But 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 neighbouring towns in our region. We went there by bus. So, it's not true 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. It seemed to me that life there remained unchanged, and there were a lot more traces of socialism there; to Sonny, because there he could still buy something actually made in Russia. Besides, the farther away from Moscow, the more high-quality interesting things we found in shops. (For example, toys for Lisa - Russian-made, rather than Chinese. Or poster wall paper with real Russian landscapes, not palms.) But each time we visited Russia later, we had to move farther and farther from Moscow for these short day trips...

Our most favourite town in Russia was Kaluga, with its silver rocket pointed at the sky next to the Tsiolkovsky⁵⁶⁴ museum on 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, rather than his, country, but because he thought patriotism and love for one's own land were just empty 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, Mum happily told us that Lisa had made her 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 'Peoples' Friendship':

-Nadezhda Ilyinichna, how is our Peoples' Friendship?

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](#).

Lisa was dark-skinned, with curly hair, a 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, when Lisa was playing next to the TV-set, they showed a Pierre Richard⁵⁶⁵ film, an episode, where the bad guy threatened the good guy. On seeing it, Lisa, who didn't seem to have paid much 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 Stenka, 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 militia chief... If I were you, I'd take a bus instead.

But the way she spoke of the father was nothing new to 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 shouted as were descending the stairs.

I worried, remembering Mum's stories of what a 'liar' and 'monster' my Grandma was. I also remembered how much I tried to avoid meeting her as a small girl. What was it going to be like, meeting each other after all those 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 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 it 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.

⁵⁶⁵ Pierre Richard (b. 1933)- famous French comedian

When my Ukrainian Grandpa was alive, he worked at that plant as the director's driver. That director and my Grandpa had been inseparable during the Great Patriotic War too.

When the wind came from the plant's side, the air smelled badly. 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 after greeting us, was to kiss all the three of us 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 five minutes Sonny was already relishing the dishes cooked by my Grandma: dumplings, stewed cherries, potatoes fried in sour-cream and chicken (is it *not* rabbit?..). He loved everything. Mum used to call her lazy and clumsy, so I was really surprised at how delicious everything turned out to be. But when I told Mum about it afterwards, she was skeptical:

-Surely, she asked someone to cook for her!

Mum's attitude was really incorrigible.

I sat at my Grandma's, slightly dizzy from her self-made fruit wine and felt sad. That was because she had just told me one thing - even though I hadn't asked her about it.

-Zhenechka, it doesn't matter what happened between your parents, you and me *are relatives*.

I hadn't seen her for so long - and was almost happy about it! In fact, I hadn't known her at all -never mind Mum's stories! And I would never know Grandpa Petro any more... Yet, to have given them up seemed so easy- just as 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 then that 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 had 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 the Volga region natives' blood in me... 'Enzi-brenzi, I'm from Penza...' Wondering, Grandpa Kolya was looking at me from the photo with his calm Slavonic eyes.

And Sonny was looking at me from the other side, thinking I had just got a bit tipsy...

On our way back I asked my father to take 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... I hoped bathing bridges at the river could hardly have been of interest to any of the reformers.

Grandpa and I would usually leave home at ten, 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 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 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 right before the bridge and walk along an almost round bank to '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 neck-deep hanging on to the poles and jumping on the steps. 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 two 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 on the water. 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 nudged Sonny. 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 that place too! To be more accurate, the bridges fell prey to some very practical business people, namely, 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 dear to my heart. He was bound to understand me a lot better after the trip! But Sonny was looking at it all and probably thinking I was telling him fairy-tales about the past. It was 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 went back, I felt depressed. At the crossroads Sonny suddenly stopped: he heard someone speaking English. It turned out to be some Protestant-sect missionary 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 profoundly 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 bastard 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...'*⁵⁶⁶ - 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 out town for the Grand Prix.

I was very confused at the coming meeting. The thing was I hadn't told Volodya about my marriage, that is, I had 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 had proposed and I was quite distracted, 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 understood my feelings by then!). I also asked him 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 had obviously enjoyed my attention, it was clear! It had helped

⁵⁶⁶ Phrases from an English-Russian conversation book for the US Army produced in the early 1980s

him to achieve success in his sporting career. Would it have influenced Volodya in such a way, if he hadn't liked 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 those 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 tell my husband about it 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 had become the last USSR champion, that, thanks to Mum's director Vladislav Andreyevich, the old velodrome had been brought back to life, and Volodya had signed up with the factory to become his sponsor. It was Mumby the way, who had 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 three-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 indispensably 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 the 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 would 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 were both 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 adequate and calm till they reached the entrance door... Then Mum told me in a whisper what he had 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 the sort had ever happened in all the 23 years I had spent in the USSR, and not only with any of my relatives, but also with any of my acquaintances! Never!

So, Mr. Gorbachev, 'erotica *is* art', isn't it? '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 now 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? Your 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 had happened to her. He even thought himself guilty, because it was he whom she had 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, a real accent, - he laughed unnaturally.

God, had I really changed so much? It seemed to me that Volodya had changed a lot more than I.

Volodya had put on some weight, but the main change was not even this. It wasn't that he turned from boy to man, either. It was just that his shyness, his best charm, had disappeared completely. I guess the post-Perestroika *bathroom wash-ups* were not without their impact. In any case, meeting him brought back the memories of the not-so-distant past, the time which you could still touch... The time, when life was so different from this kingdom of gangsters, where each day was like a sledge-hammer blow on the head.

Sonny and I visited his parents. Sonny knew about Volodya, but not all *that*, of course. How could I have admitted to him what I didn't admit even to myself yet? And what was there to admit, if there was nothing between us, not even a most innocent kiss on the 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 Volodya and I *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 squat and awfully-smelling dog Arnold 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 was already 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 all about it. She just shrugged, advised me not to take him too seriously; besides, nothing really bad happened, and not to go to the velodrome because of that small incident would be just stupid: it would be so interesting there!

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

Mum never took other people's feelings too seriously. In that 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 felt sick at heart. And, as it turned out, not without reason...

...Volodya and I had '*our song*.' That 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

'Every night you can hear the serenade -
It is him, it is him, it is him.
And a letter slides down from the balcony
To the ground, to the ground, to the ground.
Who is, who is this guy with a guitar,
Whose song is burning now in my blood?
Who is, who is this guy with a guitar?
Oh, this is I, telling you of my love.'
On hearing that song, my heart would start racing.

And now imagine, five years on, and not just some five years - a whole epoch had passed away within those five years - everything was suddenly as before. This very same song was played out - as if the vulgar Perestroika-type new hits had never appeared. He was circling the track to that 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 brought 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 had never left abroad? Wouldn't the USSR then still have existed? If those like me had never left it, thus betraying it?*

⁵⁶⁸ Song of Igor Sarukhanov from 1988

But I hadn't known that it needed me, I tried to justify myself. I hadn't felt I was needed. And my inner voice would reply at once, no, it was not the Soviet Union that 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 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 of mind, 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 Perestroika and Yeltsinism.

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 Sonny and his present-day co-brothers. 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 songs, with the words like, '*and if there is still God in this world, God is a woman and not a man*'⁵⁶⁹; then the 8th of March was not that pretty sweetish holiday of 'spring and love', but the day of the Working Women, the human-being. (*The Day of Love*, by the way, was the name of a blasphemous film with mass rapes, shown in new Russia, which didn't even surprise anyone among the 'reformed' Russians.)

⁵⁶⁹ The song *To Beloved*, Music by E. Kolmanovsky, lyrics by Ye. Yevtushenko, sung by Muslim Magomayev.

Gorbachev and Yeltsin managed to restore the Domostroy⁵⁷⁰ in the country, queerly combining it with the lowest and the dirtiest of the Western bawdry. The woman turned into *a thing, a product* - just as in the West (Engels was absolutely right!), only in still more overt forms.

Mum, it's not about Volodya, it's about the USSR! What would life have been like today, if all that had 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. But even if he had seen 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 swear 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, that you couldn't be yourself, speak your mind even at home, which you had safely done all your life in the 'totalitarian' society. That your 'breadwinner' decides on your future, that all that matters to you and all you do, is met with the same reaction: 'Shut up, I don't want to know about it!' or 'That wouldn't bring profit...'

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 had just made that discovery: before that moment, I used to think all marriages were more or less the same, like Gogol's 'why not live *somehow?*'). But Sonny, of course, only got offended. He wasn't mature enough to give that point a thought, and reflect on what we both could change. Instead, his inferiority complex overpowered him. I think I had better simply have said

⁵⁷⁰ 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)

nothing. If I had 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 a rage.

I think I couldn't really object to that. Our country had indeed stopped being normal a few years before!

Soon after that Sonny started to get things packed to go back to Holland. He had to write the graduation thesis, but it was impossible due to technical reasons. But I didn't want to leave at all. Just the very thought that I would 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 panic. 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 would be as it used to be - and I was dying to return there again! - and that feeling lasted right till the election of 1996...

Back then I still naively believed that the elections had a potential. It was already absolutely clear that one '*couldn't live like this*'⁵⁷¹ anymore. Even when, seeing Sonny off to Moscow two years before that, I had seen Varshavskoye Highway lined with kilometres of people standing: the conned investors of AO MMM financial pyramid... Sonny thought those were spectators trying to get a ticket to some rock-concert...

In those two years the number of such people had multiplied. Banks and the pyramiding firms went bankrupt in a flick. 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 had kept them safe from all those cheats and conmen, checking the information before publishing it, *did not exist anymore*. From now on, the media were allowed to publish all kinds of false information - if only the clients paid them well enough for it.

A note at the door of our post-office read: '*The December 1995 children welfare payment starts tomorrow*.' And it was the summer of 1996! Seeing that, what person of sobriety and reason would '*vote with the heart*' for Yeltsin, on his last legs, convulsing in a boogie-woogie on each TV screen in the country?

⁵⁷¹ Reference to a documentary film of that time, *We Can't Live Like This* by S. Govorukhin

And I was so sure that we had a lot of sensible people!

I didn't know then that the election in a 'free democratic society' is a 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 had 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 should never come back.'

I looked at Anyuta enjoying her *fantastic present* - wearing her husband's sisters' old clothes and constantly complaining that there wasn'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 each next visit my home city was a more and more sorry sight. Now, after that 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 the 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 writings, and they were painted over every day, but at night they would re-appear.

My first reaction after that election was a strong disappointment in people. Were my Soviet people, my countrymen 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 had sat all the time in some Soviet-studies centres abroad. (Well, after all, that's what they are getting paid for!)

This election was, in fact, *a carte blanche to Jack the Rippers*. Many of those who 'voted with their heart' did not live to see the next election - precisely because of their choice. It is then that I dolorously

abandoned the hope of returning back home, having become an eternal refugee. Well, my dear compatriots, we'd better go our several ways *now* that 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 will never believe that Yeltsin had really won the election. That could only have been possible if the vote of each *New Russian don* and *Anyuta-the-second-hand* counted as ten votes of normal people.

But back to 1994... When Sonny went back, 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.

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?⁵⁷²

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...

It is the place where our old house stood, where I grew up and spent the first happiest 17 years of my life, and five seasons of summer holidays.

... I was already in Holland when my Grandma and Shurek got an apartment in their ownership - still under the Soviet law, and probably among the last ones to get it free. Grandma was happy because, as she

⁵⁷² Hans Kloss was the name of the main character from the film *Stawka wieksza niz zycie* (*More Than Life at Stake*), a very successful [cult 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](#)

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, as was the case with the old house (the received flat was with all amenities, centralized).

By law, once you got a new apartment, your old rundown house was to be demolished to clear site for a new house (I remember Tamarochka looking for a bulldozer operator); but by the time Grandma and Shurek got their apartment, there had been 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 take down the house. Me neither. It was sort of 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 too - and the house was simply locked with the shutters closed...

Our neighbours at the 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*⁵⁷³, you'd understand her: the elderly characters there had the same attitude to their old house, which they refused to sell as firewood. *Even if you cannot have your old home, you can't bring yourself to sell it.* It's difficult to put it in words. I think, it's a very deep feeling one imbibes with the mother's milk, prohibiting you deals like this, like the biblical commandment 'thou shalt not steal' and 'thou shalt not kill.'

This is *our* commandment, rather than the capitalist one, you know. A capitalist would sell his own mother, if the price is high enough, and not suffer from the remorse; if he still had it, he would convince himself that it would be even better *for her*... For Sonny, not only my home, but his own one, didn't mean anything - he would happily exchange

⁵⁷³ Soviet comedy film of the early 1980s about life of two Belarussian war veterans and their families

it for one in some 'prestigious' neighbourhood... And if he could sell it, the only thing that would worry him is not to sell it too cheap! When he saw the photos of our old house, he wondered how the five of us could live there all together, it probably being stodgy.

But in all my dreams about the house, we were all there, including Grandma, Tamarochka, Grandpa. And even though the whole world might be falling apart, even though there are *constructions* and *re-constructions*⁵⁷⁴ going on, there forever we'd stay.

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 had the heart to go there - but for my school friend Alla Kolesnikova. I hadn't seen her for many years. In the meantime, she had got married, given birth to a son and... had been left a widow. Her mother, 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 at a nursery school and take up the job of counter-controller at the same company where her husband used to work as an electrician, only not to be thrown out of the company's block of residence 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 it 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*

⁵⁷⁴ Play on words, 'reconstruction' actually spells 'perestroika' in Russian, the same as notorious Gorbachev's Perestroika.

jumping all around our garden, I swayed. I don't know what I looked like at that moment, but Alla got scared.

- Zhenya, what's 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 grass-grown ditch, I saw something metallic, dimly glistening. It turned out to be the old oven door, ripped from the stove, which I had been never able to 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 close to 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 it was 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. *Not to touch what is not yours* - even if it looks abandoned - this is *my* principle of defining a civilized person, rather than the number of foreign cars and estate they own. 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 of or tag a lift, break the windows in somebody's house - just because there's no light there in the evening, or rip the planks off park benches for my own 'home needs.'

And what the 'freed individuals' had done to our playground 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!

Some of our people still have strange illusions that 'there', in the West, things are somehow different... Nothing of the sort, capitalism is the same colour everywhere. Why, even the Irish PM says: '*In my end of Dublin, if you park things too long, they usually get vandalized!*'⁵⁷⁵ No, it *could be* and *was* different only in the USSR! And it *could have been* different today: for communism to revive and work, each of us had to change from the inside, to become a *new human*, and to stop pointing the finger at others. It isn't so plain impossible, if you come to think of it. What do district councils and Politburo have to do with it? Have *you* ever tried living as a *real communist* - before asking from socialism benefits 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 to me. It was unbearable 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 school pupil... The proof that nothing you plant gets wasted! And really, how beautiful it was, compared to what surrounded it!

Looking at it brought me back to life. No, it's not over yet, 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 the baton on to them, to tell them the truth about the Soviet Union.

... Long time ago, in my second year as a student, quite ignorant of what my relationship with Said had led to, I was going back home from Moscow for a holiday weekend. The electric train was so crowded that I was literally standing on one foot on the train anteroom floor: 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!

And though it was really impossible, the people really tried to do their best.

- What's wrong, dear? - somebody's worried face asked, looking over me, - please, give her some water...

⁵⁷⁵ Words of Bertie Ahern

But nobody happened to have any water with them. Then one of the people took out a fresh cucumber, a 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 have lost forever. This is what the 'free democratic society' lacks, where asking you if you need help is almost considered a violation of your freedom to faint and die. 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 is now quite different from what it was 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 ample 1970s?*), the fact that a 'trip abroad had to be confirmed by a Party District Council', and that there was 'a deficit of red caviar.' People now seem to have grown immune to these formerly hypnotizing hysterical claims.

Why is it that not so long ago Leonid Ilyich and other *Lenin-type leaders*⁵⁷⁶ 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 older 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 that 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'⁵⁷⁷ blame the former leader of the great country for having just quite a modest cottage (that remained property of the state, by the way) and enjoying a bit of perks with his job, it makes me want to laugh sardonically in 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', for fear of being ostracized.

⁵⁷⁶ This term was used in the 1970s for the Politbureau members

⁵⁷⁷ From S. Marshak's Mister Twister children poem

People were brainwashed that it was in bad taste, that if you liked the life in the 'stagnation period', it meant you 'lacked the motivation and initiative', that you were 'lazy', that you still preserved the 'Soviet slave mentality' etc., etc.

But today our real feelings can no longer be quelled. We are going to voice them, no matter what the 'influential people', gobbling their pineapples and chewing at their grouse⁵⁷⁸, would say. Those thieves and impostors who remind me of Yefim Kopelyan's character from *The Elusive Avengers* movie, angrily scolding the 'unreformed' peasant who had refused to give him her only cow - in return for his promise of giving her twenty later.

Our contemporary's heart cry: *'But suddenly a horrible thing happened: it turned out that our time has nothing to offer compared to the stagnation period, except for winged sanitary pads and chewing gum....'* That's exactly right, you have nothing to offer compared to it, except for sanitary pads! And was it really worth it, destroying the country and humiliating the people?!

That's what was I thinking about when I was leaving Moscow. I also 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 have cast into dirt to the swine. Thinking we'd have plenty of those pearls - in other shells. But those shells all turned out to be empty...

...Yeltsin is said to have avenged for his grandfather. Isn't it just the time for us to avenge for ours?

(To be continued in Part 2, BELFAST & Part 3, WILLEMSTAD)

⁵⁷⁸ An allusion to Mayakovsky's lines:

Gobble your pineapple,
Chew at your grouse,
Your last day is coming,
You bourgeoisie louse.